Handing Over
Handy metaphors for the communication of intent

Introduction

Abdication of responsibility: Disassociation and abandonment?
Proportion: Disproportion vs Appropriateness?
Transparency: Deceptiveness vs Openness?
Judgement and Culpability?
Involvement: Disengagement vs Engagement?
Justice: Unfairness vs Fairness?
Possession: Distribution vs Recuperation?
Application: Incompetence vs Competence?
Relationships: Conflict vs Care?
Handy?
Transference and Transmission?
Mudras: an embodied pattern language for sustainability?
Finger signs and finger notation

Introduction

It is curious how many processes within the international community are associated with the hand, gestures of the hand, or associated metaphors. Especially problematic is the combination of:

- hand-wringing and hand-washing (in response to humanitarian disasters)
- hand-waving (to the multitudes) and glad handing (potential supporters)
- hand-shaking (in confirmation of agreements there is no intention to keep)
- heavy-handed responses to contestation
- reliance on an invisible hand
- failure to extend a helping hand
- out-of-hand programmes (overbudget, out of control, etc)
- policy-makers and figures of authority caught red-handed in abuse of power
- empty-handed multitudes whose needs are not effectively addressed by summit gatherings

In discussing hand etymology, the Electronic Textbook of Hand Surgery notes that:

Words relating to hands are intertwined with an extraordinary number of phrases and descriptions in the English language. This makes it difficult to search the internet for hand related topics - a search for "hand" also retrieves handicap, handmade, handy, handbook, etc. The same ubiquitous multifaceted presence in English is true for each of these words: finger, thumb, nail, palm, hand, wrist, elbow.

The special interest of metaphorical use of the hand is the key role that it plays as an operational interface with reality (a perspective echoed in Hindu and Buddhist understandings of mudras). Metaphorically its uses explored below offer a unique sense of existential immediacy and intimacy (as familiar as the back of the hand) -- emulated to some degree by the widespread use of "virtual hands" in software applications. The experience of the subject, as controller and coordinator of the hands, is thereby centrally positioned in the moment.

This period is characterized by widespread conflict over geographical territory and zones of influence, as well as with respect to the
territories of schools of thought and belief -- typically associated with various efforts to occupy the moral high ground. Of particular relevance is the tendency to grasp -- to "get one's hands on" -- the territory occupied by others, and then to be unable to hand it over, or hand it back, under appropriate circumstances. The action of the hands in grasping and failing to let go -- essential to the ability of humanity's ancestors to move through the trees -- offers an ideal simple model of the mental challenges of attachment and detachment necessary for humanity's ability to evolve any further..

Abdication of responsibility: Disassociation and abandonment?

The following two cases are illustrative of the ("buck passing") tendency to hand over responsibility to others, whether unnamed or unmandated -- otherwise termed the abdication of responsibility.

- **Hand-washing**: When someone "washes their hands of" something, this is effectively a declaration of unwillingness to take responsibility for it or share complicity in it. Matthew 27:24 gives an account of Pontius Pilate washing his hands of the decision to crucify Jesus: "When Pilate saw that he could prevail nothing, but that rather a tumult was made, he took water, and washed his hands before the multitude, saying, I am innocent of the blood of this just person: see ye to it." In a number of religions hand-washing is associated with purification.

There is a marked tendency of leaders to function like Pontius Pilate and dissociate themselves from human tragedy in order to maintain the purity of their position. They seek to avoid getting their hands dirty by becoming involved in problematic situations. The considerable importance attached to hygiene, specifically hand-washing, could be understood as indicative of a disproportionate emphasis on avoiding involvement in dirty situations by which one might be tainted. Compulsive hand-washing is seen as an unconscious metaphor for this understanding.

- **Hand-wringing**: Understood to be an excessive measure of distress in response to situations about which a person is unable, or unwilling, to act. Like hand-washing, this is an affirmation of non-responsibility.

Hand-wringing is typical of the actions of the world's leadership in response to problematic situations -- accompanied by diplomatic hand-wringing usually involving one or more of their number (cf Thomas Wagner, *Secret British government memos show Blair hand wringing over Bush's Iraq war plans*, *Information Clearing House*, 18 June 2005; Ron Jacobs, *What Do We Owe Iraq? Hand Wringing and Warfare*, *Counterpunch*, 3 June 2006). It is especially characteristic of religious leaders in relation to religious conflicts, especially those involving their own religions.

Recent examples of abdication of responsibility include Hurricane Katrina (cf *Katrina: an abdication of responsibility*, 2 September 2005), Darfur, and the Middle East conflict (cf *Lebanon: the world dithers*, *Guardian*, 18 July 2006; modified in the online edition to read "the world looks on"). Both hand-washing and hand-wringing tend to be accompanied by unctuous appeals for action by others made by those claiming moral authority.

Proportion: Disproportion vs Appropriateness?

Emphasis may be placed on contrasting responses to a problematic situation:

- **Heavy-handed**: In this case action is taken -- through use of the "iron hand" (or fist). Typically however any responsibility for disproportionate use of force -- heavy handedness -- is placed upon the victim for having evoked the forceful response (cf *EU: Israeli operation in Lebanon 'disproportionate'*, 13 July 2006).

- **Light-handed**: This may be contrasted with heavy handedness as an exercise of a more subtly skilled approach -- a light and delicate touch. This may however be seen as "a mere slap on the hand" and as such inappropriate as a remedial response to the challenge. Alternatively the light touch may be perceived as "too little, too late" (cf Jacob Kellenberger, *Geneva: Too Little, too Late for the Victims of Darfur*, *Yemen Times*, 17 September 2004; Richard Luscombe, *Bush seen as doing too little, too late*, *Guardian*, 3 September 2005; Tina Susman, *Too little, too late in Darfur? Newsday*, 7 May 2006; Richard A. Kerr, *Climate Policy: Too Little, Too Late, at the Climate Talks*, *Science*, December 2000, 290, . no. 5497)

Transparency: Deceptiveness vs Openness?

Emphasis may be placed on the degree of transparency evident in any relationship or transaction:

- **Under-handed**: In this case there is a measure of effort to deceive, whether more innocently in demonstrations of sleight of hand, or more deliberately through processes of manipulation. There are frequent accusations of underhanded campaign practices in politics -- "dirty tricks" -- extending to political appointments (NOW Outraged by Bush's Underhanded Appointment of Pryor, 20 February 2004). Deception may be considered acceptable practice -- *caveat emptor* -- as in many forms of marketing where the buyer is not fully aware of the downside of the transaction and may have been led to believe otherwise. A degree of secretiveness may be described in terms of a "closed hand" approach.

- **Open-handed**: By contrast, with any "closed" approach, transparency and generosity may be emphasized -- open-handedness. Apparent open handedness may however itself conceal more devious stratagems.

**Invisible hand**: As a contrast to both the above, emphasis may be placed on an invisible or hidden hand, in three potentially benign variants:
• **Hidden hand of God**: The doctrine of providence as described by R. C. Sproul (*The Invisible Hand, 1997*) is the stress on God's government of the universe (see also *God's Invisible Hand: The Life and Work of Francis Cardinal Arinze, 2006*). *Opus Dei* has been portrayed in the *Da Vinci Code* as the hidden hand acting on behalf of the Catholic Church in the furtherance of God's work.

• **Invisible hand**: In the marketplace where an individual, acts for his own good, an invisible hand tends also to promote the good of that community. The originator of the term, Adam Smith (*The Wealth of Nations, 1776*), believed that the invisible hand was that of God. (cf John Kay, *Invisible hand or chaos*, Financial Times, 8 December 1999; Kevin A. Carson, *The Iron Fist behind the Invisible Hand: corporate capitalism as a state-guaranteed system of privilege*, 2002; Anthony Pym, *Guiding the Guiding Hand*). According to George Lakoff, the invisible hand metaphor makes use of the notion of force and the very general metaphor that "control is the exercise of force by the hand".

• **Hidden hand of government**: Intelligence agencies, like the CIA, are recognized to have an additional function to act as the "hidden hand" of government by engaging in covert operations, some of notably questionable intelligence. [more]

In all such cases, any theories as to the operation of "the hand" rely more on hearsay, or an act of faith, rather than on rational explanation. Again responsibility is handed over to an intangible power.

**Judgement and Culpability?**

Beyond deception, as indicated in the case of under-handedness, notions of culpability and malicious intent may also be indicated through metaphors of the hand.

The use of "hand" has been important in naming covert terrorist organizations, possibly as an extension of its use in connection with "invisible hand":

• **Black hand**: This was used as the name of the Serbian secret society, otherwise known as *Unification or Death*, that was implicated in the assassination that triggered World War I. It trained guerrillas and saboteurs and arranged political murders [more]

• **Red hand**: The Red Hand Defenders is an extremist terrorist group formed in 1998 and composed largely of Irish Protestant hardliners from loyalist groups observing a cease-fire; it seeks to prevent a political settlement with Irish nationalists by attacking Catholic civilian interests in Northern Ireland.

Variant forms of culpability, and responses to it, are indicated by other uses of "hand":


• **Fingering**: This is used to refer to the process of informing on someone held to be involved in some reprehensible, typically criminal, act. Those who do so may be termed informants or informers. The use of "finger" presumably relates to pointing out the guilty party in a police line-up.

• **Light-fingered**: This refers to use of nimble fingers, especially for stealing or picking pockets.

• **Nailing**: This term may be used with respect to identifying and capturing criminals (cf *Nailing the war-criminals*, Economist, 1999; *Nailing criminals with IT*, Guardian, 2004). However it more probably relates to metaphoric use of carpentry hardware -- a term derived from the original anatomical usage.

• **Palm greasing**: This is the art of slipping money to someone in a decision-making position in such a manner as to facilitate an action or a transaction. It may be used as a descriptor of payment of "commissions" to facilitate transactions, possibly under circumstances defined as corrupt (cf *Against palm greasing*, SpinWatch, 2006). There are many different beliefs on how this should be done -- especially when it is more innocently associated with tipping for privileged service. It may then be done openly or discretely. [more]

Judgement of culpability or approval may be expressed through phrases such as thumbs down or thumbs up.

**Involvement: Disengagement vs Engagement?**

Extensive use is made of the distinction between "hands on" and "hands off" as an indication of degrees of involvement or detachment:

• **Hands on**: Typically this is used to indicate either a literal use of the hands in some practical undertaking, or else a figurative use of the term with reference to direct involvement of some kind in the practical aspects of an initiative (cf J. Engelbreton. *Hands-on: the persistent metaphor in nursing*, Holistic Nursing Practice, 2002; Jonathan Miller, *Hands on is the best way to learn*, Guardian, 30 January 2006). It carries the sense of "concrete" action in contrast with "talking about" doing, theorizing about it, or recommending it. Use may also be made of the expression knuckling down to indicate such involvement.

• **Hands off**: This may refer positively to an ability to stand back and allow others to get on with an undertaking in which they are (more) competent rather than interfering. But it may also refer to a degree of disengagement that many may consider inappropriate -- as in the description of the USA's "hands off approach" to the Israel-Lebanon crisis (*United States to Israel: you have one more*
Emphasis may be placed on the "hands" currently responsible for a situation as in:

- "In their hands" (cf *Humanity's core principle is not safe in their hands*, *Guardian*, 30 April 2005; *Our future in the hands of the selfish and pampered*, *Guardian*, 4 May 2004)
- "They handed him over to government"
- "It's out of our hands"
- "Having a hand in it"
- "Dying at the hands of a mob" (cf *Former leaders who face justice at the hands of their people*, *Guardian*, 30 June 2004)
- "Throw in their hands"
- "They were tying my hands" (cf *They were tying my hands*, *Guardian*, 30 March 2004)

Especially controversial uses are to be seen in the following distinction, especially when the first is deliberately confused with the second (in so-called *grooming* processes):

- **Laying on hands**: The practice of laying on of hands by a person of authority is found in religions throughout the world in varying forms. It may be used as both a symbolic and formal method of invoking divine influence, such as in baptisms, healing services, and ordination of priests. It is particularly evident in faith healing. It may be associated with transmission of tradition.

- **Laying hands on**: Here the phrase is used as a secular gesture of intimacy susceptible to a variety of interpretations. It may imply unwelcome body contact ranging from seizing a person's arm to restrict their movement, a degree of violence (punching, etc), or gestures interpreted as sexual harassment (fondling, patting, etc). In cultures that favour body contact in gestures between friends of the same or different sex, the significance attached to such gestures may be quite different.

Other symbolic uses of "hand" may be used to affirm or confirm a degree of engagement:

- **Hand waving**: This gesture is typically used by a person of authority in response to greeting and applause by a mass audience. It affirms a relationship, but the degree of direct involvement is of course minimal. It may be formalized in various forms of salute.

- **Hand shaking**: In contrast there is the use of a handshake in personal greeting or in confirmation of an agreement -- or of extending the hand of peace or the hand of friendship. This may signal a binding agreement, possibly as a pledge stronger than any written contract (eg "he gave me his hand"). A firm handshake may be considered a signal of the strength of any agreement or of the sustainability of mutual confidence.

- **Glad handing**: This phrase refers to the process, intermediate in involvement between the previous two, whereby a person (typically a politician) "works a crowd", shaking hands with those in reach. It may however also be extended to mean recompensing people in some way for their support -- similar in some respects to "palm greasing".


It is appropriate to note two quite distinct uses of "hand" that are considered symbolic of a form of disengagement:

- **Shaking hands**: The physical trembling of the hands, notably associated with Parkinson's disease as a progressive degenerative disorder, may be considered as signalling the onset of disengagement from life

- **"One hand clapping"**: The sound of one hand clapping is the basis for one of the best known Zen koans. Reflection on this koan is claimed to point to a paradoxical condition of detached engagement with reality.

**Justice: Unfairness vs Fairness?**

The pair of hands is variously used as a figurative indication of balance or justice, or their absence. This is most evident in the use of the term even-handed as an indication of appropriate balance -- implying justice dictated by reason, conscience, and a natural sense of what is fair to all.

In presenting significantly distinct alternatives, much use is made of "on the one hand", but "on the other hand". This is the subject of a well-known joke:

President Harry S. Truman once said he wanted an economist who was one-handed. Why? Because his economic advisors would typically give him economic advice stating, "On the one hand.....And on the other...." (cf Jeff Thredgold, *On the One Hand: The Economist's Joke Book*)

As a substitute for "on the third hand", computer hackers may use the expression "on the gripping hand" -- a phrase derived from a well-known science fiction story.

In contrast use is made of cultural prejudices distinguishing the two hands:

- **Right-handed**: Throughout history being right-handed was considered normal (the Latin word dexter meaning "right") and associated with skill. Hence many positive connotations became associated with right handedness: skilful, diligent, dextrous, deft. A valuable assistant, on whom there is heavy dependence, may also be described as a "right hand man". In esoteric traditions, the right hand path is understood to be that of righteousness -- focusing upon the worship of one or more deities and the observance of strict moral codes [more].

- **Left-handed**: By contrast being left-handed (deriving from the Latin word sinister meaning "left") is traditionally associated with
wickedness in many cultures. In esoteric traditions, the left hand path is understood to be that of evil -- focusing on forms of religion which value the advancement of the self over other goals [more]. In some cultures the left hand is impure given its preferred role in ablution.

A particular sense of unfairness is indicated by figurative use of the phrases:

- **Elbowing**: This may be used as an indication of improper use of force to ensure precedence.
- **Out-of-hand**: Consideration of an alternative may be rejected "out of hand", namely without fair and proper consideration
- **High-handed**: This implies a tendency to high disregard for others, extending into domineering patterns of behavior
- **Back-handed**: This phrase may be used, in the evaluation of involvement in an undertaking, to signify a pejorative judgement effectively presented as one of appreciation.

### Possession: Distribution vs Recuperation?

The ability of the hands to give and take is extensively used in a figurative sense:

- **Handing out**: Here the implication is one of distribution of goods (as with the charitable allocation of relief packages) -- or allocation of tasks, through orders. It is notably used in the dissemination of tracts of any form -- with the communication elaborated at some originating central point. It may also be descriptive of persuasion (cf BAA fights Ferrovial with £750m hand-out Guardian, 23 May 2006)

- **Handing in**: Objects may be handed in in situations ranging from amnesty on possession (eg knives or small arms), to questionnaires, signed petitions, or examination papers. Here the gesture is initiated by those in possession of such objects, the recipient being some central collecting point -- typically a mandated authority.

Strategic initiatives may be designed in terms of getting **hands on** resources, as noted by Andrew Lawless (The Smoking Gun? Oil in Iraq as a motive for war, Three Monkeys Online, May 2004):

> This level of profit brings out gigantic corporate greed. The companies are ready to go to virtually any lengths to get their hands on these resources.

Different connotations are associated with actual possession of an object:

- **Handing back**: In this case the implication is a sense of rightful ownership being associated with the recipient to whom the object is returned. A notably example is the retribution of cultural artefacts collected by museums and requested back by their country or people of origin.
- **"In the hand"**: Variants of this phrase may be used to indicate possession of an object or ready access to it ("bird in the hand", "in the palm of one's hand") (cf Tehran's triumphalism plays into hands of US hawks, Guardian, 12 April 2006; Tough response may seem inevitable but could play into Tehran's hands, Guardian, 11 January 2006)
- **Empty-handed**: This phrase points to failure to acquire anything as a consequence of a transaction, notably where "winner takes all". The deprived tend to leave the negotiating table "empty-handed" -- possibly obliged to continue to live hand-to-mouth.
- **Full hand**: This phrase may be used with reference to having all necessary resources to accomplish a task or reach an objective --- not in contrast to those who are empty handed.

Change of possession may be described as **changing hands** (cf Power changes hands in Italy, Guardian, 12 April 2006), whereas the locus of control may be defined in terms of having the **whip hand** (cf Whip hand, Guardian, 8 April 2006)

Ability to actually achieve or retain possession of an object may of course be severely constrained in the case of the **handicapped** with their inherent disadvantages. The appreciation of the object possessed or "handed out" (and of any associated act of charity) may be conditioned by whether it is **second hand**, namely pre-owned.

### Application: Incompetence vs Competence?

Given the role played by the hands in tool-making, figurative use of "hand" is made with reference to the skill in performing a task:

- **Unskilled**: Terms such as ham-handed and cack-handed may be used to indicate lack of skill in undertaking a task.
- **Skilled**: "Keeping one's hand in" refers to the necessary practice to become or remain proficient -- and is of particular significance in the martial arts. The phrase "hand crafted" may be used to imply a degree of attentive skill in the fabrication of an object.

Having a **steady hand**, or "being in good hands", may be valued in governance as much as in hand crafts (cf Gerhard Schröder: the Chancellor with the 'Steady Hand'). The phrase "green fingers" (or "green thumb") is used with reference to gardening skills.

Whether deliberately or inadvertently, with or without skill, situations may be significantly **mishandled** (cf Scott Atran, Mishandling Suicide Terrorism, The Washington Quarterly, Summer 2004; Laurie Mylroie, Mishandling Terrorism: the law-enforcement mistake, National Review Online, 23 January 2004)

Various expressions may be used to indicate application to a task:

- **Focused effort**: Terms such as single-handed or one-handed may be used to indicate a (heroic) level of unassisted application to a task that would normally be expected to require the involvement of others.
- **Unfocused effort**: By contrast, the phrase out-of-hand may be used to indicate an undertaking that is not properly controlled or
coordinated, whether over-budget or delayed -- for example "They cannot handle the project". A related sense is associated with difficult to handle situations -- "The child is quite a handful".

Relationships: Conflict vs Care?

Given the role of the hands both in fighting and in protective care, their figurative use is not surprising

- **Hand-to-hand**: This is typical of a certain style of combat (mano el mano in Spanish), with or without the use of hand weapons, or figuratively. Curiously, usage of hand gestures (mudras) is made in the Eastern martial arts (cf Wayne Muromoto, Mudra in the Martial Arts, 2000; and the Kalaripayattu in Kerala)
- **"Arms"**: It is not surprising that weapons of any kind, as an extension of hand weapons, are described as "arms". Again such weaponry may be entirely figurative. One traditional view is that the gods abhor "weapons that leave the hand" -- javelins, bows and arrows, slings (to say nothing of modern projectile weapons and missiles) -- held to be "cowards' weapons".

By contrast, the "hand" is also used as a figurative indication of care:

- **Taken in hand**: A mentor may take a novice "in hand" in order to provide guidance into an appropriate understanding of the complexities of a task or a set of circumstances.
- **Helping hand**: People challenged in some way may be offered a helping hand (or "be given a hand") to enable them to overcome their difficulties and "get on their feet". This is typical of many voluntary service activities, as in "hands across the sea" (cf Hands across the sea, Guardian, 7 September 2005). The phrase *hand-holding* may take the form of an extension of being "taken in hand".
- **Hand-in-hand**: This phrase is used as an indication of mutuality and mutual care -- and idealistically as the long-term outcome of a romantic encounter.

Such care may be extended to a description of collaboration:

- **Joining hands**: As used by Jonathan Steele (Join hands to combat terror, Guardian Weekly, 21 July 2006): Terrorism cannot produce a solution. But for the two governments to react by doing nothing new also makes no sense. They should join hands in combating terror while negotiating on Kashmir's underlying issues far more seriously.
- **All hands**: As used by Roger Protz (All hands to the pump, Guardian, 3 December 2005)

As an exemplification of relationship, unquestionable agreement may be expressed with use of the phrase *hands down* -- in contrast to *hands up* as a symbol of disagreement and perceived threat. Also of interest is the suppression of meaningfully dynamic relationships under the influence of a *dead hand* -- whether an authority, tradition, or the past. A curious associated use **mote meyn** (from Old French mortmeyn, literally "dead hand") refers to land held by something other than a physical person (such as a corporation, church or foundation) implying an ownership free from the vicissitudes and limited duration of ownership by natural persons.

**Handy?**

Given the emphasis in this exploration on the role of metaphorical use of the hand for the communication of intent, it is somewhat ironic that "handy" is a German pseudo-anglicism for a mobile phone.


**Transference and Transmission?**

Given the tendency to grasp and retain possession, notably signified by use of the hand, of particular interest is the manner of letting go - or ensuring that possession is appropriately transferred to another, or effectively used by oneself. A traditional image is that of the monkey with its hand grasped around a desired object inside a jar, and unable to gain the hand out with letting go of the "prize". Such possession may relate as much to tangible objects as to intellectual property, knowledge and know-how, mindsets or the upholding of values.

- **Handing on**: Here the emphasis is typically on some due process of transfer -- the *handing over* of possession or control (in contrast with its use, noted above, with respect to the abdication of responsibility), central to the independence of many countries and the decline of colonial policies. This may be learnt early in a game or subsequently applied in the rotation of functions on an organization board. It may be associated with retirement. As with "handing down", it is also used in relation to the handing on of sacred tradition (Paul Flanagan and Robert Schihl, *Paradosis: Handing On Divine Revelation, 2004; Paradosis and its Noetic Base: towards a spiritual statement of tradition in Orthodox thought*)

- **Handing down**: In this case the concern is to a greater degree with one of legacy -- typical of dynastic succession and an effort to preserve an understanding or mode of action for the future. It is notably associated with passing on a tradition -- with its transmission through disciples.

In both cases there is a degree of concern for the proper communication of intent -- whether that intent is finally respected or not. This concern is reflected in the significance attached to *gestures of the hand* in various religions. As noted by Weston La Barre, these range from the gestural system developed by the monks in Benedictine Monasteries (while practicing silent asceticism) to the sign language of
Mudras: an embodied pattern language for sustainability?

Use of the hands for communication is perhaps most notable in the mudras common to Hinduism and Buddhism -- and their variants across South-East Asia. Specific positionings of the fingers in one or both hands are there notably considered as a means to maintain the natural order and healthy distribution of the traditional "five elements" (pancha tatvas). Any disturbance, disorder or deficiency in these elements, or the consequent disease or imbalance, could thereby be rectified and cured by appropriate practice of suitable mudras (cf Some Yoga Mudras for Balancing the Five Vital Elements; Emma I. Gonikman, Taoist Healing Gestures for Self-Therapy, 2003). Ritual gestures are believed to engender a reaction in the mind of the practitioner, evoking powers of a higher order in order to intensify concentration.

This points to the possibility of using a set of familiar hand-related metaphors as a means of communicating a systemic sense of sustainability and its challenges -- with implications both at the individual and the collective level (cf Psychology of Sustainability: Embodying cyclic environmental processes, 2002). Metaphorically, the set of mudras is then effectively a set of "hand models" -- a personalized (and embodied) micro-mapping of sustainable system dynamics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mudra</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dhyani Mudra</td>
<td>gesture of meditation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vārāka Mudra</td>
<td>teaching gesture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dharmachakra Mudra</td>
<td>gesture of turning the wheel of the teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bhūmisparsha Mudra</td>
<td>gesture of touching the earth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abhaya Mudra</td>
<td>gesture of fearlessness and granting protection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Varada Mudra</td>
<td>gesture of granting wishes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utpādodbhava Mudra</td>
<td>gesture of supreme enlightenment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mudra of Supreme Wisdom</td>
<td>gesture of supreme enlightenment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anjali Mudra</td>
<td>gesture of greeting and veneration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vajrapradama Mudra</td>
<td>gesture of unshakable confidence</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The popularity of any particular mudra tends to be region-specific. For example, the Vajra (or Chi Ken-in) mudra is popular in Japan and Korea but rarely seen in India; the Varada (Wish Granting) mudra is common among standing statues of the Buddha, particularly when coupled with the Abhaya (Fearlessness and Protection) mudra.

A traditional Kerala text, Hastha Lakshana Deepika, recognizes 24 basic mudras (chatur vimsati mudras) and over 300 combined gestures used in Kathakali -- a form of Indian dance-drama (cf G. Venu, The Language of Kathakali: notations of 874 hand gestures, 2000). This rich and intricate gesture language of mudras is considered equivalent to speech. It forms a complete vocabulary common to any story and which describes concrete objects, expresses an emotional situation, or relates an incident in simple words (Marg Kathakali: The Aesthetics of Communication, 14, 1; Subashini Pathmanathan, The role of Mudras in Indian dances, 2004). The gesture language not only serves the purpose of communication, but also imaginatively interprets poetic meanings, sentiments and dramatic actions; it is believed to offer a mirror of the life, moods and passions of the gods and demons conceived in the human image [more] more

There is an interesting possibility of a close relationship between the set of mudras (based on subsets of the 10 digits at the origin of counting and mathematics), combinatorics and number theory -- notably in the light of the primary role played in number theory by the Indian mathematician Srinivasa Ramanujan. Of particular interest is the probability with which the primary mudras are identified in relation to those of lower probability -- or the relationship between sequences of mudras and interesting mathematical series of numbers. This suggests the possibility of a theoretical model of gestural communication as a structured coding system for insight. One approach to elaborating such a coding system for gestures is through the mathematical theory of permutations and combinations through which the number of subsets selectable from the configurations of a single hand can be calculated as: 1+10+10+5+1= 31.

Finger signs and finger notation

The relation between numbers and finger signs in many cultures is helpfully summarized by Claudia Zaslavsky (Excerpts from World Cultures in the Mathematics Class, International Study Group on Ethnomathematics (ISGEm) Newsletter, 6, 1, November 1990). Finger signs were necessarily vital to arithmetical calculation in antiquity -- from which the term "digits" derived (Eva Matthews Sanford, De Loquela Digitorum, The Classical Journal, 23, 8, May 1928, pp. 588-593) as well as finger notation (J. Hilton Turner, Roman Elementary Mathematics, The Classical Journal, 47, 2, Dec. 1951, pp. 63-74 and 106-108).

The transition to modern notation, the introduction to Europe of the Hindu-Arabic positional decimal system for writing and manipulating numbers, as articulated in 1202 by Fibonacci (Laurence E Sigler, Fibonacci's Liber Abaci: a translation into modern English of Leonardo Pisano's Book of Calculations, 2002) and reviewed by Serafino Cuomo notes that:

Multiplication, and later division, require the "keeping in hand" of numbers (today's "carrying"); both come across as very physical operations involve memory, writing, and the fingers (which function as an extension of memory)... At the beginning Fibonacci refers to the subject at hand as a scientia, yet throughout the book he talks of ars. The scientia in question is in effect profoundly practical because it has to be achieved through exercise... "for science by practice turns into habit; memory and even perception correlate with hands and figures, which as an impulse and breath in one and the same instant, almost the same, go naturally together for all; and thus will make a student of habit."
Given the possibility of extending the pattern language methodology of Christopher Alexander (A Pattern Language, 1977) to psychosocial patterns (cf 5-fold Pattern Language, 1984), the set of mudras is worth considering as a pattern language with the particular advantage of having been successfully adapted to popular dance and theatre -- itself associated with the dramatized martial art of Kalaripayattu in Kerala. Also of relevance is the two-person Pushing Hands variant of T’ai Chi Ch’uan and Pa Kua Chang, through which practitioners become acquainted with the principles of what are known as the “Eight Gates and Five Steps,” enabling them to handle the variety of problematic situations involving an other. In the metaphysical vision of ancient Japanese esoteric Buddhism, mudras constitute the patterns of change, whereas mandalas define the essential structure (Thomas Kasulis, Japanese philosophy, 1998 Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy). In the rituals of Hinduism mudras are part of a system which employs both body and mind, and makes the former express and emphasize the intentions of the latter [more].

Also of potential interest is the relationship of mudras to “five-element theory” and practice (in China and Japan), as fundamental to an enhancing cycle, an exhaustive cycle, and a destroying cycle in feng shui, qi gong, medicine, and the martial arts (cf The Book of Five Rings). It would be ironic if such five-foldness proved to be a cultural bridge between both seemingly disparate disciplines and between the seeming differences between East and West -- notably in the light of isomorphism between the hand, Leonardo da Vinci’s Vitruvian Man, and the problematic significance attached to the pentagram in esoteric traditions.

A number of these issues are brought together in an exploration by Dennis Goldwater (Evolution through the Dimensions of Time and Space, 1998-2005):

Our species understands the stages in the cycle of evolution as dimensions. Our species, with its 5 senses and its 5 fingers per hand, has evolved to the awareness of 5 dimensions of time and space... The existence of each of the dimensions of time and space can be comprehended by the mind only in relation to a simultaneous awareness of the existence of a corresponding dimension of space or time. In other words, space and time are understood by the mind in terms of 5 dimensions, each of which is a dimension not of space alone or of time alone, but of space-time: We live in a world of awareness of 5 dimensions of space-time.

Because everything in nature follows the same cycle that is evolution, if we could discover any one avenue by which to better understand the stages in the cycle of evolution, we would better understand all manifestations of the cycle. I have developed an extremely simple, yet extremely powerful model of space and time, wherein I explore in detail two such avenues of understanding, the evolution of finger signs and the evolution of the languages of our species.

Finger signs are relationships among the fingers that mankind progressively recognized that enabled our species to become aware of and to symbolize the dimensions of space-time on the body. [emphasis added]

In his complementary exploration of language, Goldwater notes:

The grammar of Chinese guides its speakers to develop a single, unified model of nature, known as the Dao. The Dao is the Chinese model of the 5 stage cycle of evolution. Each of the stages of the Dao is explored in great detail, and is compared with the corresponding stage for the speakers of English. This includes the Chinese symbolism on the fingers of their awareness of space on the earth and time in the heavens (day, month, year) as their ancestors successively evolved to the awareness of each of the 5 dimensions in the cycle of evolution. The symbolism behind the concepts of the Dao, Yin and Yang, the Ba Gua, and the 5 Elements is discussed in great detail. [see also finger representation of Tao]

Conclusion

Hand gestures are of course a common support for dialogue -- and may even be a significant justification for face-to-face dialogue, especially as sign language between the hard-of-hearing. There is a strong case for reviewing which forms of interaction between people, or peoples, are conditioned by metaphors of the hand -- and which ones are not (and why). Given the challenges of meaningful communication in contemporary society, it is worth considering whether (in metaphorical terms) many are effectively "hard-of-hearing" and could indeed benefit from a sign language based more systematically on the hand.

The future of the planet is highly dependent on the ability of humanity to develop its skills in letting go and handing over -- in order to be able to hand down an enriched inheritance to future generations -- rather than an impoverished one (perhaps then to be described as a "pre-loved, hand-me-down planet" ?). This skill is as necessary in relation to territory, to biodiversity and to cultural diversity, as it is in relation to acquired and traditional wisdom.

What is the sound of one hand clapping?

In a koan, the self sees the self not directly but under the guise of the koan...
When one realizes ("makes real") this identity, then two hands have become one.

The practitioner becomes the koan that he or she is trying to understand.
That is the sound of one hand.

(G. Victor Sogen Hori, Translating the Zen Phrase Book, Nanzan Bulletin 23, 1999)
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