

BODY & ENERGY

Mudras & Bandhas

The seals and locks of hatha yoga, from the Hatha Yoga Pradipika and the Gheranda Samhita to safe daily practice



मुद्रा

mudrā

YOGIDE

Free sample

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Before you begin

Walk past the ghats of Rishikesh at dawn and you will see them everywhere, often without noticing: a sadhu sitting by the Ganga with thumb and index finger joined on his knees; a woman at the aarti with palms pressed together before her heart; a student on a rooftop lowering the chin to the chest at the end of a deep breath. These are mudras and bandhas, the gestures and locks of yoga. Some are as simple as a greeting. Others are among the most guarded practices of hatha yoga, which its own texts insist must be kept secret and learned from a teacher.

This book is a practical and honest guide to both. It explains what the words mean, what the classical texts actually say, how to practise the gestures and locks that are safe to learn from a book, and which practices belong only to the history of yoga or to the direct guidance of a teacher.

It rests on three commitments.

First, the sources are real. The verses quoted come from the third chapter of the Haṭhayogapradīpikā (15th century), entirely devoted to mudras, from the third chapter (or "lesson") of the Gheraṇḍa Saṃhitā (17th or 18th century), which lists twenty-five mudras, and from the Śīva Saṃhitā. Renderings are either our own paraphrases from the Sanskrit or passages from translations in the public domain, named with their edition and year.

Second, tradition and science are kept apart. The texts promise that the great mudras destroy old age and death, cure consumption and leprosy, and make poison act like nectar. We report these promises because you cannot understand hatha yoga without them, but we never present them as medical facts. Very little modern research exists on mudras and bandhas; where we say something about the body, we tell you what is known and what is not.

Third, safety comes before progress. Several practices described in the old texts are dangerous or involve bodily interventions. This book describes them as part of the history of yoga and gives **no instructions** for them. The practices it does teach end with clear precautions.

This book is not medical advice.

If you are pregnant or have recently given birth, have high blood pressure, heart disease, glaucoma or a detached retina, a hernia, a prolapse, an ulcer, have had recent abdominal, pelvic, eye or neck surgery, a neck injury, epilepsy, or are menstruating with heavy or painful periods, read Chapter 14 before practising the bandhas and the great mudras, and ask your doctor. Stop immediately if you feel dizziness, pain, palpitations, a headache or faintness.

A note on the texts and their numbering

- Haṭhayogapradīpikā (HYP), compiled by Svātmārāma. Verse numbers follow the English translation by **Pancham Sinh, Panini Office, Allahabad, 1914** (Sacred Books of the Hindus), in the public domain. Some editions shift verses by one or two numbers.

- Gheraṇḍa Saṃhitā (GS), dialogue between the sage Gheraṇḍa and Caṇḍa Kāpāli. Numbers follow the translation by **Srisa Chandra Vasu, 1914–1915** (Sacred Books of the Hindus, vol. XV), in the public domain. Vasu often numbers groups of verses together (for example "6–7"); we keep his grouping.
- Śiva Saṃhitā, translated by **Srisa Chandra Vasu, 1914–1915**, same series. Its fourth chapter treats the mudras; we refer to it in general terms.

How to use this book

Chapters 1 and 2 explain what mudras and bandhas are and what we know about their safety. Chapter 3 teaches the hand gestures, which anyone can practise. Chapters 4 to 6 teach the three bandhas one by one: learn them in that order, over several weeks. Chapters 7 to 10 cover the great combined mudras of the HYP and the inverted "reversing" mudra. Chapter 11 presents the mudras of the eyes, tongue and face. Chapter 12 explains, without instruction, the practices you will meet in the texts but should not attempt. Chapter 13 gives a progressive programme and sessions, Chapter 14 all the precautions.

Pronunciation

Sanskrit terms appear in their common spelling (mudra, bandha, jalandhara), and at their first important appearance in scholarly transliteration (IAST: mudrā, jālandhara) and often in Devanagari (मुद्रा). A line over a vowel lengthens it; a dot under a consonant marks a retroflex sound; c is said "ch"; ś and ṣ are close to "sh". Mudrā is said "moo-draa", uḍḍīyāna "ood-dee-yaa-na".

Chapter 1. Mudra and bandha in the tradition

The words

Mudrā (मुद्रा) means a seal, a stamp, a sign. A king's signet ring was a mudra; so is the imprint it leaves in wax. In Indian ritual, dance and iconography the word came to mean a symbolic gesture of the hands: the Buddha touching the earth, Shiva's raised palm granting fearlessness, the hand gestures of Bharatanatyam. In hatha yoga, it means something larger: a "seal" made with the whole body, the breath and the attention, designed to hold and direct prāṇa.

Bandha (बन्ध) means a bond, a binding, a lock. The bandhas are muscular contractions at three points of the body (the pelvic floor, the abdomen, the throat) which, in the hatha view, close the gates through which prana escapes and force it into the central channel.

The two words overlap. The HYP lists the three bandhas among its ten mudras, and the GS does the same among its twenty-five. A bandha is a kind of mudra; a great mudra usually contains bandhas.

Why mudras exist: the hatha view

The third chapter of the HYP opens with the reason for all that follows. In our paraphrase:

- **HYP 3.1.** As the lord of serpents supports the earth with its mountains and forests, so Kundalini is the support of all yoga practices.
- **HYP 3.2.** When the sleeping Kundalini awakens by the grace of the teacher, all the lotuses and all the knots are pierced.
- **HYP 3.3.** Then the central channel (suṣumnā) becomes a royal road for prana, the mind becomes free of its attachments, and death is held back.
- **HYP 3.5.** Therefore, to awaken this goddess sleeping at the entrance of the great door, the mudras must be practised with care.

You do not need to share this cosmology to practise the bandhas. But it explains why the hatha texts give the mudras so much importance: they are the tools that, combined with pranayama, are meant to move prana out of the side channels (iḍā and piṅgalā) into the central one, and to awaken Kundalini, the coiled energy imagined at the base of the spine.

The ten mudras of the HYP

HYP 3.6–7 list ten mudras that, it says, destroy old age and death:

#	Mudra (HYP 3.6–7)	IAST	In this book
1	Great seal	mahāmudrā	Chapter 8
2	Great lock	mahābandha	Chapter 7

#	Mudra (HYP 3.6–7)	IAST	In this book
3	Great piercing	mahāvedha	Chapter 9
4	Sky-moving seal	khecārī	Chapter 11 (text only)
5	Upward-flying lock	uḍḍīyāna bandha	Chapter 6
6	Root lock	mūla bandha	Chapter 5
7	Net-holding / throat lock	jālandhara bandha	Chapter 4
8	Reversing seal	viparīta karaṇī	Chapter 10
9	Thunderbolt seal	vajrolī	Chapter 12 (history only)
10	Stirring of the power	śakti cālana	Chapter 12 (history only)

HYP 3.9 adds that they should be kept secret, "as husband and wife keep their dealings secret". This insistence on secrecy runs through all the hatha texts. It reflects a teaching that was transmitted from teacher to disciple, adapted to each student, and not meant to be learned from a page. We respect it in our own way: by teaching from the page only what can safely be learned from a page.

The twenty-five mudras of the GS

GS 3.1–3 list twenty-five mudras:

1. Mahāmudrā (great seal)
2. Nabho mudrā (sky seal)
3. Uḍḍīyāna (upward-flying lock)
4. Jālandhara (throat lock)
5. Mūlabandha (root lock)
6. Mahābandha (great lock)
7. Mahāvedha (great piercing)
8. Khecārī (sky-moving seal)
9. Viparītakaraṇī (reversing seal)
10. Yoni mudrā (womb seal)
11. Vajrolī (thunderbolt seal)
12. Śakticālānī (stirring of the power)
13. Taḍāgī (tank seal)
14. Māṇḍukī (frog seal)
15. Śāmbhavī (seal of Shambhu, Shiva)

16–20. The five dhāraṇās (concentrations on earth, water, fire, air and ether)

1. Aśvinī (horse seal)
2. Pāśinī (noose seal)
3. Kākī (crow seal)

4. Mātaṅginī (elephant seal)
5. Bhujāṅginī (serpent seal)

GS 3.4–5 attributes the teaching to Shiva speaking to the Goddess, and again insists that it must not be taught to everyone. Several of these twenty-five are described in Chapters 3 to 11; others are mentioned in Chapter 12.

Hand mudras: a different family

You may be surprised to find that the hand mudras most people associate with yoga (jñāna mudrā, cin mudrā, añjali mudrā) are absent from these lists. The HYP and GS mudras are seals of the body, breath and gaze. Hand gestures belong to other streams of Indian tradition: ritual worship (pūjā), the tantric traditions, iconography, classical dance, and the meditation teaching of later and modern schools. They are no less authentic, but their sources are different, and we say so in Chapter 3.

The promise and the reality

The HYP says of the great mudras that they destroy consumption, leprosy, colic and the effects of poisons (3.16–17), banish wrinkles and grey hair (3.29, 3.81), and conquer death. These are the words of a medieval text written in a world where physical practice, alchemy and spiritual liberation were not separate. Read them as you would read a sacred poem. No study has shown that any mudra cures a disease, and this book never says so.

What the texts teach that remains entirely practical is this: the mudras are practised **after** a foundation of posture and pranayama, **gradually, with a teacher**, and **in moderation**. HYP 3.31 says that people who are well instructed should begin "little by little, first".

End of the sample

Thank you for reading this far. We hope these first pages already help your practice, and that they show how the rest of the book is built: clear steps, texts quoted with their source, nothing invented.

The full book has 39 pages.

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