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**ON THE USE OF MUDRĀS IN
DUNHUANG'S BUDDHIST RITUALS
DURING THE 9TH TO 10TH CENTURIES**

HENRIK H. SØRENSEN



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CONTACT:

Principal Investigator: Prof. Dr. Carmen Meinert

BuddhistRoad | Ruhr-Universität Bochum | Center for Religious Studies (CERES)

Universitätsstr. 90a | 44789 Bochum | Germany

Phone: +49 (0)234 32-21683 | Fax: +49 (0) 234/32- 14 909

Email: BuddhistRoad@rub.de | Email: carmen.meinert@rub.de

Website: <https://buddhistroad.ceres.rub.de/>

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ON THE USE OF MUDRĀS IN DUNHUANG'S BUDDHIST
RITUALS DURING THE 9TH TO 10TH CENTURIES

HENRIK H. SØRENSEN

Abstract

This short essay is devoted to a survey and discussion of the Dunhuang manuscripts which feature drawings of *mudrās*, gestures or hand-seals (Chin. *shouyin* 手印), i.e. ritualised hand gestures employed in Esoteric Buddhist rituals. There are three known examples of manuscripts featuring such *mudrās*: the long roll of P. 3905, the manual of P. 3835, and the set of line drawings of OA 1919,0101,0.83*. These three manuscripts form the basis of the present discourse, including an identification of the textual sources for these sets of *mudrās* and a discussion of the use of *mudrās* more generally in the Esoteric Buddhist context of Dunhuang during the 9th to 10th centuries.

1. Introduction

Buddhist hand gestures (Skt. *mudrā*; Chin. *yin* 印, *shouyin* 手印, *yingqi* 印契) form an integral part of Esoteric Buddhist ritual practice, and as such are as important as the spells and visualisations they normally accompany. Hermeneutically speaking, *mudrās* represent the body-aspect of the three mysteries (Chin. *sanmi* 三密), the other two being spells for the speech or voice-aspect, and visualisation for the mind-aspect. During the middle of the Tang Dynasty (618–907, 唐), especially in the wake of the appearance of the so-called three Ācāryas, i.e. Śubhākarasimha (637–735), Vajrabodhi (671–741), and Amoghavajra (704–774), Esoteric Buddhist practices became increasingly important in Chinese Buddhist ritual performances beyond sectarian formations.¹ As part of this trend the use

¹ For the case of Chan Buddhism, see Henrik H. Sørensen, “The Meeting and Conflation of Chan and Esoteric Buddhism during the Tang,” in *Chán Buddhism—Dūnhuáng and Beyond: Manuscripts, Texts, and Contexts*, ed. Christoph Anderl and Christian Wittern (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2020), 135–173. See also Henrik H. Sørensen, “The Presence of Esoteric Buddhist Elements in Chinese Buddhism during the Tang,” in *Esoteric Buddhism*



of *mudrās* also found their way into the mainstream tradition, although often in a manner that was less stringent doctrinally.²

Manuals and collections of these hand gestures have been preserved in Japan, including a number of fairly old examples dating from the middle of the Heian period (794–1185, 平安時代). These manuals, which we may surmise were for the most part based on Chinese sources, provide a good idea of the ritual contexts in which *mudrās* were used including their manner of conceptualisation outside of their original scriptural and sectarian contexts.³

Data and information on the use and typologies of *mudrās* naturally abound in the primary sources of Chinese Esoteric Buddhism, but virtually

and the *Tantras in East Asia* (hereafter EBTEA), ed. Charles D. Orzech, Henrik H. Sørensen, and Richard K. Payne (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 294–303; and Richard D. McBride, “The Impact of Translated Esoteric Buddhist Scriptures on Chinese Buddhism,” EBTEA, 307–315.

² Such as the cases that concern Esoteric Buddhist elements in the works of Yongming Yanshou (904–976, 延壽禪師) of the Fayan Chan school (法眼宗), or that of Chengguan (737–838, 成觀) of the Huayan school (華嚴宗). For a discussion of these, see Wang Cuiling 王翠玲, “Yongming Yanshou de xiuxing xilun: Yi you guan chao mu er ke de tuoluoni wei zhu 永明延壽的修行析論: 以有關朝暮二課的陀羅尼為主 [An Analysis of Yongming Yanshou’s Practices Focusing on the Morning and Evening Services from the Perspective of His Use of Dhāraṇīs],” *Zhongzheng daxue wenxue shu niankan* 中正大學中文學術年刊 [Year Book of Zhongzheng University’ Department of Chinese Literature and Art] 18 (2011): 247–272 and; Henrik H. Sørensen, “Fazang on Dhāraṇīs: In Search of Traces of Spell-lore in the Huayan Buddhist Tradition of the Tang,” unpublished paper, Beijing 2016.

³ This material is overwhelmingly dominated by ritual manuals relating to the Shingon school (真言宗) of Japanese Buddhism, and much of it can be found in the *Taishō shinshū daizkyō—Tozō bu* 大正新修大藏經—圖像部 [Iconographical Supplement to the *Taishō tripitaka*] (hereafter TZ.), reprint: Taibei: Xinwenfeng, 1999, vol. 8. The material that was transmitted to Japan originated for the most part from Buddhist temples in the region of the twin capitals of the Tang, for which reason it appears as somewhat more formal in organisation and therefore also more orthodox. For a modern manual, see *Fojiao shouyin tu shuo* 佛教手印圖說 [Buddhist Mudrā Charts Explained], ed. Shi Yunshui 施雲水 (Taibei: Changchun shu shufang, 1999). See also *Mikkyō daijiten* 密教大辭典 [Comprehensive Dictionary of Esoteric Buddhism], ed. Maysunaga Shōdō 松永昇道 et al. 6 vols (reprint: Taibei: Xinwenfeng, 1978), 33–65 (index section). One may also consult E. Dale Saunders, *Mudrā: A Study of Symbolic Gestures in Japanese Buddhist Sculpture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960). Note that all of this material has been transmitted within East Asian Buddhist contexts, and as such would probably have differed somewhat from that of the Indo-Tibetan tradition. For a study of one set of *mudrās* deriving from the later Indo-Tibetan tantric tradition, see Moriguchi Mitsutoshi, ‘Vajradhatu-mukh’akhyana- deguri-vidhih III,’ *Journal of Esoteric Buddhism* 1988. L126-L106, doi:10.11168/jeb1947.1988.162_L126.

no pictorial renderings of them have survived. Given that these *mudrās* were primarily transmitted via the Esoteric Buddhist tradition in Tang China, one may see the Japanese material on *mudrās* as a reflection of Chinese tradition, but of course while bearing the salient cultural differences and certain local developments in mind. To date, only one such early collection of *mudrās* has been identified outside the Dunhuang material, and that is the single manuscript of the *Suxidi yigui qiyan* 蘇悉地儀軌契印 [Mudrās for the Ritual Proceedings of the *Susiddhikara*] (TZ. 8, 1–26), a collection of illustrated *mudrās* dating from 864 (成通五年).⁴

The present study is devoted to an investigation of the three surviving manuscripts from Dunhuang that feature listings of *mudrās*, i.e. P. 3905, P. 3835 (1), and OA 1919,0101,0.83*. The primary purpose is to account for the *mudrās* in these manuscripts, i.e. identify which they are, the textual sources on which they are based, their uses, i.e. their ritual settings, and finally to make a broader attempt at contextualising the use of these hand gestures by the followers of Esoteric Buddhism in Dunhuang. This will also include an attempt at elucidating some of the byproducts that the transmission and lore on *mudrās* occasioned.

Before proceeding any further, a word of caution concerning how we should deal with the depicted *mudrās* would be appropriate at this point. The actual number of manuals or instructive manuscripts with *mudrās* is in fact very small, and as stated above only three sets have been identified among the Dunhuang material. In a few scholarly discussions of *mudrās* a number of additional cases have been reported, most notably the manuscripts P. 2012 and its companion P. 4009.⁵ However, the two latter manuscripts, and their line drawings, are not of the same order as those in the three manuscripts to be studied here. The former manuscripts were obviously meant to instruct readers on how to form the relevant *mudrās* for their designated ritual procedures, while the latter cases are primarily instruction relating to iconographical purposes, namely for the depiction of deities in *maṇḍala* settings. This means that the depicted *mudrās* in the latter material are of an entirely different order than those which are meant for instructing ritual performers.

⁴ Presently in the collection of the Tō-ji (東寺) in Kyoto.

⁵ A discussion of these illustrated manuscripts can be found in Amanda Goodman, “The Ritual Instructions for Altar Methods (Tanfa yize): Prolegomenon to the Study of a Chinese Esoteric Buddhist Ritual Compendium From Late-Medieval Dunhuang” (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2013), 31–32, 87.



2. *Mudrā Collections in Dunhuang: The Three Sources*

Although Esoteric Buddhism proliferated in Dunhuang during the second half of the Tang, under Tibetan rule in the eight and ninth centuries, and under Guiyijun (851–1036?, 歸義軍, Return-to-Allegiance Army) rule—as documented in a fairly substantial number of scriptures and paintings, including both those for display in temple halls as well as the wall-paintings in the Mogao Caves (Chin. Mogao ku 莫高窟)—relatively few examples of handbooks or collectanea featuring actual depictions of *mudrās* have been identified. Among the few we do have are the important cases of P. 3905 (fig. 1),⁶ P. 3835 (1) (fig. 2),⁷ and OA 1919,0101,0.83* (fig. 3).⁸ Let us now look at these three important manuscripts, and try to learn what information they may divulge to us.

2.1. *P. 3905*

This manuscript, which is the longest and most comprehensive of those found at Dunhuang, features *mudrās* of three ritual cycles pertaining to three different forms of Avalokiteśvara, including those related to Ekādaśamukha (52 *mudrās*), Cintāmaṇicakrāvalokiteśvara (16 *mudrās*), and Cundī (14 *mudrās*).⁹ This means that all the *mudrās* are associated with the overall cult of Avalokiteśvara underscoring the importance of this bodhisattva in Dunhuang during the late medieval period. Each of the *mudrās* is either represented with a drawing or an image in which the gesture in question is being shown. This feature is shared by all three manuscripts under discussion.

⁶ See *Catalogue des manuscrits Chinois de Touen-Houang*, Fonds Pelliot chinois de la Bibliothèque Nationale (hereafter CMCT), vol. 4 (Paris: École française d'Extrême-Orient, 1970–1995), 392.

⁷ CMCT, vol. 4, 320–321.

⁸ For an ultra-rudimentary description of this manuscript, see Roderick Whitfield and Anne Farrer, *Caves of the Thousand Buddhas: Chinese Art from the Silk Route* (London: British Museum Publications, 1990), 94–95, pls 73AB.

⁹ Incomplete set.



Figure 1. Section of manuscript with set of *mudrās*. Dunhuang, 10th c. P. 3905, BnF.

A comparison with the relevant literature reveals that the first set of *mudrās*—which in fact is shared by all three manuscripts—derive from Atikūṭa’s (fl. early to mid-7th c.) translation of the *Ekādaśamukhadhāraṇīsūtra* as found in his compendium of Esoteric Buddhist scriptures, the *Dhāraṇīsammucaya* (T. 901.18, 812b–825c) dating from the middle of the 7th century (T. 2153.55, 379b).¹⁰ The printed version of this *sūtra* reveals that there is indeed a total of fifty-two *mudrās* in the complete set (T. 901.18, 816c–824b). This listing matches that of P. 3905 with the exception of the first four *mudrās* that are missing from the manuscript. However, when compared with the listing in P. 3835 which features the first ten *mudrās* of the *sūtra*, we have in fact documentation in the Dunhuang material of the complete set. Moreover the unidentified

¹⁰ For some reason, the author of the entry in the French catalogue failed to identify this rather important source. Cf. CMCT, vol. 4, 392. The *mudrās* appear as an appendix to the original *sūtra* (T. 901.18: 816c–825c). For a discussion of the *Dhāraṇīsammucaya* and its importance in the formulation of the early systematisation of Esoteric Buddhism in China, see Ronald Davidson, “Studies in Dhāraṇī Literature III: Seeking the Parameters of a Dhāraṇī-piṭaka, the Formation of the *Dhāraṇīsamgrahas*, and the Place of the Seven Buddhas,” in *Scripture, Canon, Text: Context Essays Honoring Lewis Lancaster*, ed. Richard K. Payne (Berkeley: Institute of Buddhist Studies and BDK America, Inc., 2014), 119–180.



mudrā drawings in OA 1919,0101,0.83* confirm the list as well.¹¹ There might be minor discrepancies with regard to illustration and description, but over-all the *mudrās* we have here follow standard representations, something which can be verified when comparing them with other East Asian *mudrā*-manuals. This does not necessarily mean that the sets of *mudrās* we find in the Dunhuang material are identical with the manner *mudrās* were depicted say in India or in the Southeast Asian cultures, but it indicates that the transmitted templates for *mudrās* in East Asia, were relatively uniform, at least in the material from the late Tang and until printing ‘froze’ them in fixed formats.

Given that the second set of *mudrās* in P. 3905 directly refers to Cintāmaṇicakrāvalokiteśvara and the Lotus Family (Chin. *lianhua bu* 蓮華部), it goes without saying that one should look in the relevant material relating to this bodhisattva for the source of these *mudrās*. The author of the French catalogue has also followed this line of enquiry, but chose to single out the *Padmacintāmaṇidhāraṇīsūtra* (T. 1082.20) translated by Śikṣānanda (fl. late 7th to early 8th c.) as the scripture in question.¹² A cursory glance at this version of the *sūtra*, however, reveals that it does not feature any description of *mudrās*, nor does it mention their use. Śikṣānanda’s translation of the *Padmacintāmaṇi-dhāraṇīsūtra* can therefore not have been the source for the set of *mudrās* in P. 3905, that much is clear. So which source are they from? As we have already agreed that we must look for a source relating to the cult of Cintāmaṇicakrāvalokiteśvara for the *mudrās*, would it therefore not be self-evident that we should look at one of the other versions of the *Padmacintāmaṇidhāraṇīsūtra*? And lo! A closer look at Amoghavajra’s ritual manual, the *Guanzizai pusa ruyilun niansong yigui* 觀自在菩薩如意輪念誦儀軌 [Ritual Proceedings for Invoking Cintāmaṇicakra-valokiteśvara Bodhisattva] (T. 1085.20) reveals that this text (or a derivative of it) is the actual source for the *mudrās* in the Cintāmaṇicakra

¹¹ When comparing the *mudrās* of *Ekādaśamukhadhāraṇīsūtra* in the *Dhāraṇīsamuccaya* with the later translation by Amoghavajra (T. 1069.20), one finds the entire ritual program have been greatly expanded, which means that the accompanying set of *mudrās* were augmented as well.

¹² Cf. CMCT, vol. 4, 392, and 320–321.

class similar to those found in P. 3905.¹³ While the sequence of the *mudrās* in the Dunhuang manuscript follows closely that of the ritual manual, there are some lacunae in the former, i.e. slightly fewer *mudrās* all told. Even so, given that none of the *mudrās* in the *Ritual Proceedings for Invoking Cintāmaṇicakrāvalokiteśvara Bodhisattva* survive anywhere else in the form of drawings from the medieval period, our Dunhuang manuscript is a unique source for documenting the transmission and circulation of such *mudrās*, even to the limits of the Sinitic world of that time. As such, the *mudrā* compendium of P. 3905 represents Indian Buddhist material that was transmitted from the Chinese heartlands and back towards the West in a case of reverse transmission.

Although the *Ritual Proceedings for Invoking Cintāmaṇicakrāvalokiteśvara Bodhisattva* is in all likelihood the source for the second listing in P. 3905, there are other sources which feature many of the same or comparable *mudrās*. Prominent among these is Vajrabodhi's *Guanzizai ruyilun pusa yuqie fayao* 觀自在如意輪菩薩瑜伽法要 [Avalokiteśvaracintāmaṇicakra Bodhisattva's Essential Methods of Yoga] (T. 1087.20). This ritual text features a number of the same *mudrās* as in P. 3905 but places them in a somewhat different order. It is clear that this is not the text on which the *mudrās* in the Dunhuang manuscript were based. Another ritual text is the *Dubiao ruyi moni zhuanlun shengwang cidì niansong bimi zuiyao lüefa* 都表如意摩尼轉輪聖王次第念誦祕密最要略法 [Abbreviated Methods for Invoking the Highly Secret Supreme Essentials for Excellently Displaying Cintāmaṇicakra, the Holy King] (T. 1089.20). This features a group of *mudrās* that partly corresponds to those in P. 3905, but fewer than the above-mentioned *Ritual Proceedings for Invoking Cintāmaṇicakrāvalokiteśvara Bodhisattva*.

The *mudrās* in the third and final section of the manuscript would appear to have derived from Vajrabodhi's translation of the *Cundādevīdhāraṇīsūtra* (T. 1075.20, 175b–177a).¹⁴ This translation is

¹³ In this connection it is also interesting to observe that Bodhiruci's (d. 727) slightly later translation of the *Padmacintāmaṇidhāraṇīsūtra* from 709 (T. 1080.20) features twenty-four *mudrās* together with accompanying spells, several of which are identical to those found in P. 3905. Even so, Bodhiruci's translation was to all purposes and intents not the source for the *mudrās* that circulated in Dunhuang in connection with the worship of Cintāmaṇicakrāvalokiteśvara.

¹⁴ Translated in 723 (T. 2153.55, 372b).



significant in its use of the term ‘contract’ (Chin. *qi* 契) for *mudrā*, in contradistinction to the standard term ‘seal’ (Chin. *yin* 印, or the less common Chin. *yinqi* 印契), that are otherwise seen in most of the manuscripts of Esoteric Buddhist scriptures found at Dunhuang. The fact that both designations are found within the same manuscript shows that those who copied the Buddhist scriptures were not concerned with issues of uniformity or standardisation, but only strove to reproduce a given text in as faithful a manner as possible.

Here it is also interesting to observe that a note at the beginning of this version of the *sūtra* states that it “derives from the *Da lianhua jingang sanmeiye jiachi bimi wu zhang'ai jing* 大蓮華金剛三昧耶加持祕密無障礙經 [Scripture on the Great Lotus Vajra Samaya Empowerment of the Outmost Secret without Obstruction].”¹⁵ This may refer to a large-scale compilation of sutric materials relating to the cult of Cintāmaṇicakrāvalokiteśvara, which—as far as we can tell—is no longer extant. Perhaps it was a compilation similar to the monumental anthology of Amoghapāśāvalokiteśvara-related texts that constitute Bodhiruci’s thirty rolls long *Amoghapāśākalparājasūtra* (T. 1092.20)?

2.2. P. 3835 (1)

The *mudrās* provided in this section are only ten in number and are related to Ekādaśamukhāvalokiteśvara. They match both the set of P. 3905 and that of OA 1919,0101,0.83*. This set of *mudrās* appear as the introduction to a small booklet of Buddhist scriptures and liturgical pieces and also features a line of a spell in Tibetan script, indicating that its owner had some degree of proficiency in Tibetan.¹⁶ There are also a pair of *bījas* or seed-syllables, *Om* and *A* clumsily written. This would place this small manual within the Tibetophone Buddhist community of Dunhuang during the 9th century. In contrast to P. 3905, this manuscript features an incomplete set of ten numbered *mudrās* only. They all derive from the *Ekādaśamukhadhāraṇīsūtra* as stated above. However, why this set of *mudrās* precedes a copy of the *Padmacintāmaṇidhāraṇīsūtra*, or whether some sort of ritual connection between them was intended, is not immediately clear. It is possible that the Ekādaśamukha-related *mudrās*

¹⁵ T. 1080.20, 188b.

¹⁶ The Tibetan text reads: *Namo ratna tra* [...], and is the opening part of a lengthier spell. It is not directly unrelated to the *mudrās*, and neither are the two seed-syllables. Thanks to Jan-Ulrik Sobitsch for his translation.

were inserted as a replacement for those of Cintāmaṇicakrāvalokiteśvara, or perhaps there was a section in the booklet before the *mudrās* that has been lost? These are questions which we cannot answer on the basis of our present knowledge, but as a case of ritual blending it would surely not be the first of its kind in the Dunhuang material.



Figure 2. Section of manuscript with set of *mudrās*. Dunhuang, end of 10th c. P. 3835 (1), BnF.

Appended to P. 3835 (8a) is a drawing of a hand resembling a *mudrā*. However, it is not meant as a representation of a *mudrā per se*, but is a hand-chart showing a set of ‘power points’ referred to as ‘eyes’ (Chin. *mu* 目) in the palm of the hand.¹⁷ These magic points in conjunction with the chanting of spells are meant to avert a variety of dangers including those posed by wild animals, demons, poisons, etc.¹⁸ Although set into the

¹⁷ Hand-charts with ‘power-points’ similar to this example are also known from the Esoteric Buddhist traditions of East Asia. However, in those cases, the charts are directly related to the lore on *mudrās*. Cf. *Fojiao shouyin tu shuo*, 6–7. See also the chart on the ‘Specific names of the Ten Fingers’ in TZ. 8, 298–299.

¹⁸ Cf. CMCT, 4, 323.

manual, which otherwise deals mainly with ritual practices of the Esoteric Buddhist variety, this chart is not directly related to the lore of *mudrās*, but rather to the correlation between bodily points of power and the use of spells. We should therefore consider it a tool for personal protection, but not as part of the standard use of *mudrās*.

2.3. OA 1919,0101,0.83*

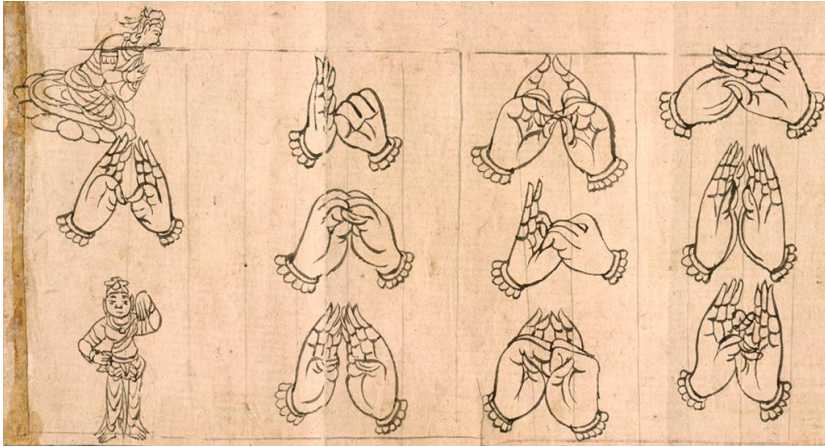


Figure 3. Section of manuscript with set of *mudrās*. Dunhuang, late 9th c. OA 1919,0101,0.83*, BM.

This manuscript is finely executed but lacks any trace of annotation. It features a total of forty-nine *mudrās* and related line drawings of figures similar to those seen in the two previous manuscripts. This means that it includes nearly all the *mudrās* relating to the ritual provided in the *Ekādaśamukhadhāraṇīsūtra*, and as such they are identical with those in both P. 3905 and P. 3835 (1). In other words, OA 1919,0101,0.83* is another copy deriving from what was essentially the same source. Its drawings deviate slightly from those in P. 3905 in execution and conception.

A comparative table of the *mudrās* in the three manuscripts is provided as an appendix at the end of this essay. It shows how the respective sets of *mudrās* relate to each other. However, despite the evident

correspondences which document that the monks (?) who copied them were relatively faithful in their adherence to the material copied from, there are a few instances where the *mudrā* sequences are not matching or entirely linear. Nevertheless, the discrepancies are quite minor and do not significantly alter our perception that all three manuscripts derive from a common source of sorts. Such a source could be a more complete *mudrā*-manual, possibly featuring several cycles of *mudrās* similar to the sets provided in P. 3905. Only in the case of P. 3835 can we be more or less certain that the abbreviated sequence of *mudrās* it features was intentional.

3. *Mudrās in the Esoteric Buddhist Scriptures Produced in Dunhuang*

It is clear that the transmission of lore concerning the use of *mudrās* would primarily have been conveyed through the canonical Buddhist scriptures. Secondly, as the three manuscripts under review here reveal, drawings of *mudrās* were divorced or extrapolated from their original scriptural sources and turned into specific manuals or lists for practical use. Since the use of *mudrās* is one of the hallmarks of both Esoteric Buddhism more broadly defined, as well as specifically Tantric Buddhism, and instructions in their use were chiefly transmitted in writing which obviously leaves room for error (as indeed many cases indicate), we must surmise that oral instructions would have accompanied their transmission from master to disciple.

In order to give an idea of the extensive *mudrā*-related material conveyed by the Buddhist scriptures in Dunhuang themselves, we should look at these in a bit more detail. While it is not the place here to make a survey of the numerous Buddhist scriptures featuring the use of *mudrās*, a few illustrative cases shall be given in the following.

A classical example in the use of *mudrās* and how to form them in the course of the ritual procedure can be found in the *Shi e'gui shi bing shui zhenyan yin fa* 施餓鬼食並水真言印法 [Method of Mantras and Mudrās for Feeding the Hungry Ghosts Food and Water] (Beijing 767).¹⁹ This seemingly incomplete ritual text does not feature any illustrations of the *mudrās* to be used, but it does give detailed textual instructions on how to

¹⁹ See also the related *Sanshi fa* 散食法 [Method for Scattering Food] (P. 3861 (4)).



form them in conjunction with the appropriate spells and visualisations.²⁰ It is easy to imagine that some explanations orally or otherwise would have been given from master to disciples when such texts and their rituals were being transmitted.

Another example can be found in a so-called prayer text (Chin. *yuanyuanwen* 願文), the *Jietan sanshi huixiang fayuan* 結壇散食迴向發願 [Binding the Altar, Distributing Food, Transferring Merit and Giving Rise to Prayers] (S. 3427R° (2)). A note in this liturgical text refers to the manner in which the spell-master (Chin. *zhoushi* 呪師), i.e. the ritual specialist, makes use of spells and *mudrās* for self-empowerment (Chin. *jiachi* 加持, Skt. *adhiṣṭhāna*) when performing his rituals. This clearly documents the fact that *mudrās* were commonly employed together with spells in local performances of Esoteric Buddhist rites, even though the text in question is not specific on the matter.

In connection with the use of *mudrās* in the performance of Esoteric Buddhist rituals in Dunhuang, it is also noteworthy that the large-scale ritual work, the *Jingang junjing jingangding yiqie rulai shenmiao mimi jingang jie da sanmeiye xiuxing sishier zhong tanfa jing zuoyong weiyi faze—Da Piluzhena jingang xindi famen mi fajie tanfa yize* 金剛峻經金剛頂一切如來深妙秘密金剛界大三昧耶修行四十二種壇法經作用威儀法則 大毘盧遮那金剛心地法門秘法戒壇法儀則 [The Lofty Vajra Scripture, Vajroṣṇā of All the Tathāgatas, the Deep and Wonderful, Secret Vajradhātu, Great Samaya, the Scripture for Cultivating the Forty-two Kinds of Methods [for Setting up] the Altar Employing the Awesome Methods of Ritual Proceedings, The Mahāvairocana Vajra Mind Ground Dharma Door, Esoteric Dharma Precepts Altar Methods of Ritual Proceedings; hereafter *Altar Methods of Ritual Proceedings*]²¹ refers

²⁰ Later ritual manuals concerning the same rite feature elaborate illustrations of the *mudrās*, as well as detailed technical instructions on how to form them. Cf. eg. *Yuqie jiyao yankou shishi yi* 瑜伽集要餓口施食儀 [Collated Yoga Rituals for Feeding the Burning Mouths], in *Jiaying dazang jing* 嘉興大藏經 [Jiaying Tripiṭaka], B047.19, 201a–212c. For an introduction to the ritual for feeding the hungry ghosts, see Charles D. Orzech, “Esoteric Buddhism and the Shishi in China,” in *The Esoteric Buddhist Tradition. Selected Papers from the 1989 SBS Conference*, ed. Henrik H. Sørensen (Copenhagen, Aarhus: Seminar for Buddhist Studies, 1994), 51–72.

²¹ For a modern, punctuated and edited version of the related manuscripts by Hou Chong (侯冲), see Fang Guangchang 方廣錫, *Zang wai fojiao wenxian* 藏外佛教文獻 [Buddhist Textual Material Outside the Canon], New Series, vol. 11 (Beijing: Zhongguo renmin daxue

throughout to the use of *mudrās* together with *dhāraṇīs* implying that they form an integrated and staple part of the many rites propounded in this scripture. Even so, there is not a single instance in the entire text where instructions in the forming of *mudrās* are actually given. There are two viable explanations for this anomaly. Either separate instructions in the use of corresponding *mudrās* were provided, possibly in oral form, or otherwise the unknown author of the *Altar Methods of Ritual Proceedings* was referring in an unspecific manner to *mudrās* that may have been well known to the prospective practitioners of the rites set forth in the text. But unless further materials are brought forth, we shall probably never be able to solve this issue in a satisfactory manner.

Finally, we have the way that *mudrās* are used as ritual symbols placed in the peripheries of drawings of altar-layouts (also appearing in *maṇḍalas* and amulet prints). One noteworthy example can be seen in OA 1919,0101,0.172. There we find the outer border filled with a blend of images, ritual symbols, and *mudrās*.²² Among the latter are also those of feet.²³ When used in this form, the *mudrās* provided in the illustrations are often seen to reflect the particular Buddha family (Skt. *kula*) for which a given rite is to be performed, or otherwise the category to which the invoked deity belongs. However, in those cases the *mudrās* take on a somewhat different function as static seals or symbols of power, similar to a ritual tool such as thunderbolt (Skt. *vajra*) or trident (Skt. *trisūla*).

Extant examples of Chinese printed and written spell-amulets often feature an outer border or margin with a series of ritual symbols and/or depictions of proper *mudrās*, this material is rather important to our understanding of the development of these hand gestures. Especially so since these may in fact be the earliest extant examples we have outside of those preserved in Japan that post-date the mid-9th century. Since these early spell-amulets are not the primary focus of this essay, I shall forego the opportunity to dwell on this otherwise interesting topic at great length

chubanshe, 2006), 22–231. A discussion and criticism of Hou’s edition can be found in Amanda K. Goodman, “The Ritual Instructions for Altar Methods (Tanfa yize),” 21–25.

²² *Shirukurodo dai bijutsu ten* シルクロード大美術展 *Grand Exhibition of Silk Road Buddhist Art* (Tokyo: Tokyo National Museum, 1996), 219, pl. 231.

²³ This is a feature which is rarely encountered in the Chinese material but is well-documented in later Tibetan iconography and imagery, as for instance seen in certain lineage-*thangkas*.



and limit myself to a few observations of relevance to the *mudrās* from Dunhuang.

In the course of the past seventy years a number of primarily printed but also drawn spell-amulets have been excavated from tombs in various parts of China.²⁴ A special characteristic of the examples dating from the late Tang and Five Dynasties (906–978, 五代) period is that they all feature a border with ritual implements and illustrations of *mudrās* in a band constituting the outer rim of the composition. Here it is of course the *mudrās* that concern us. In some examples *mudrās* are absent in the depictions of ritual implements and symbols, whereas in others they are there. In a number of cases we even find that the outer border of the spell-amulets features *mudrās* only. A recent case of such a printed amulet shows a complete set of *mudrās* in the print's outer rim to be used in invoking Mahāpratisarā (fig. 4).²⁵

²⁴ A survey of this material can be found in Katherine R. Tsiang, “Buddhist Printed Images and Texts of the Eight-Tenth Centuries: Typologies of Replication and Representation,” in *Esoteric Buddhism at Dunhuang: Rites and Teachings for This Life and Beyond*, ed. Matthew T. Kapstein and Sam van Schaik (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2010), 201–252. See also the examples provided in Su Bai 宿白, *Tang Song shiqi de diaopan yinshua* 唐宋时期的雕版印刷 *Studies on the Block Printings and Woodcuts of the Tang and Song Dynasties* (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1999), 191–192, pls 7a–d. More recently Paul Copp in his study of the *Uṣṇīṣavijāyadhāraṇī* has also touched upon these spell-amulets, but dealing primarily with those of direct relevance to his topic. Cf. Paul Copp, *The Body Incantatory: Spells and the Ritual Imagination in Medieval Chinese Buddhism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 11–114, 130–132.

²⁵ Cf. Su Bai, *Tang Song shiqi de diaopan yinshua*, 192, pl. 7d. This amulet was found in a Tang tomb near Xi’an in 1975. For more details, see the extended discussion in Guo Xiaotao 郭晓涛, “Shaanxi Fengxiang Tang mu chutu tuoluoni jing zhou de tuxiang jiedu 陕西凤翔唐墓出土陀罗尼经咒的图像解读 [An Interpretation of the Iconography of the *dhāraṇīsūtra* Excavated from a Tang Tomb in Fengxiang, Shaanxi Province],” *Zhongguo guojia bowuguan guankan* *Zhongguo guojia bowuguan guankan* 中国国家博物馆馆刊 [Museum Journal of the Chinese National Museum] 8 (2017): 86–100. A similar print, also featuring the Mahāpratisarā spell, surfaced on an auction in Beijing last year (2019). It features the same outer border of *mudrās*. It does not appear to have come from Dunhuang, but rather in the central provinces of China. Cf. Lot 2044, last accessed May 5, 2020. <https://auction.artron.net/paimai-art0087212044/>. This underscores the observations made above, that in some of these prints a set of *mudrās* relating to the worship of the deity have replaced the various ritual symbols we see in other spell-prints.



Figure 4a–c. *Mudrās* from the
Mahāpratisarā spell-amulet, 10th

Tang Song shiqi de diaopan yinshua.

outer rim of
Century. After Su Bai,

These prints, especially those relating to the cult of Mahāpratisarā, show considerable variety in their manner of composition and, as mentioned above, only some of them feature *mudrās* in their outer rim. In some cases they are entirely absent, and in others they have been replaced with seed syllables (Skt. *bīja*, Chin. *zhongzi zi* 種子字) in Siddham script.²⁶

Now, what are we to make of this? I would suggest that in those cases where a pair of *mudrās* can be seen, they are meant as indicators of the use of *mudrās*, whereas in those where they have replaced all the ritual implements and ritual symbols, they are the de facto *mudrās* to be used in the worship of the divinity represented by the spell-amulet. In this manner the printed amulets may have served a dual purpose, one, as a protective device, and secondly, in case its bearer should be inclined to perform a ritual to honour or thank the deity in question, the outer rim of the amulet will supply him or her with the correct *mudrās* to be used. A third possibility could simply be that the illustrated *mudrās* themselves were perceived as auspicious.

With this we may conclude that, as far as the use of *mudrās* in Dunhuang’s Buddhist rituals are concerned, manuals with typological listings—similar to the three incomplete manuscripts we have discussed above—were likely relatively common. A brief survey of the Tibetan

²⁶ For a comprehensive study of the iconography and compositions of spell-amulets relating to the cult of Mahāpratisarā, see Li Ling 李翎, “Dasuiqiu tuoluoni zhou jing de liuxing yu tuxiang 大隨求陀羅尼咒經的流行與圖像 [On the Spread and Iconography of the Mahāpratisarā *dhāraṇīsūtra*],” *Pumen xuebao* 普門學報 [The Pumen Journal] 45 (2008): 127–167.



Dunhuang manuscripts of Esoteric and Tantric Buddhist provenance show that *mudrā*-lore was as important, if not more so, than that documented in the surviving Chinese manuscripts. In this connection it is interesting to observe that in all the cases where references to *mudrās* appear in the Tibetan Dunhuang material, they are in textual form only.²⁷

While most *mudrās* tend to be representative of various deities, some of the *mudrās* refer to ritual implements and types of offerings, such as flower, vase, lasso, vajra, etc. These are used in accordance with the progression of the ritual process. They obviously function as ritualised simplifications or symbolic replacements for physical objects, which one could imagine would otherwise have required more complicated arrangements, and perhaps additional costs.

4. *On the Conflation of Mudrās and Talismanic Seals in Dunhuang*

Before leaving our discussion of *mudrās* in the Buddhist rituals at Dunhuang, there is one significant and related aspect that we have not dealt with here. That concerns the use of talismanic seals (Chin. *fuyin* 符印) and their conceptual conflation with *mudrās*. The conflation of *mudrās* and talismanic seals most probably happened when Indian Buddhist scriptures discussing *mudrās* were rendered into Chinese, but with no accompanying explanations to make it clear that they were actually hand-seals and not seals to be stamped by hand. This obfuscation already took place during the late Northern and Southern Dynasties (386–589, 南北朝) as exemplified in the *Guanding jing* 灌頂經 [Scripture of Consecration] (T. 1331.21), when the Buddhists began using talismanic seals modelled upon those common in Daoism, and their use continued in vogue up through the Five Dynasties period (906–978) and after.²⁸ The Dunhuang material is full of texts featuring such seals, some of which have been studied by Paul Copp and others in recent times.²⁹ In the course of time

²⁷ Cf. Jacob Dalton and Sam van Schaik, *Tibetan Tantric Manuscripts from Dunhuang: A Descriptive Catalogue of the Stein Collection at the British Library* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2006), 30, 69, 72, 158, 166, etc.

²⁸ For an illustrative case from medieval Korea, see Henrik H. Sørensen, “On the Nature of Esoteric Buddhist Practice under the Koryō: Apropos the Sin’in ad Ch’ongji Schools,” *International Journal of Buddhist Thought and Culture* 5 (2005): 49–84.

²⁹ For an attempt at dealing with talismanic seals in the Dunhuang material, see Paul Copp, “Manuscript Culture as Ritual Culture in Late Medieval Dunhuang: Buddhist

Buddhist *mudrā*-lore was adopted by the Daoists for their rituals and, although obviously basing themselves on the Buddhist method and conceptualisations, they gradually developed their own explanations and meanings for the use of *mudrās*.³⁰

5. Conclusion

The Dunhuang manuscript copies of *mudrā* manuals or guides for their use—limited in scope as they are—are unique examples of the manner in which these ritual hand gestures were transmitted in China during the late medieval period. They are not only unique, but also the oldest extant examples known to us today. Similar collections of drawn *mudrās* are known from Heian Japan, but they postdate the Dunhuang examples by at least two centuries. As such they document the on-going production and re-production of *mudrā*-lore in the early pre-modern period in East Asia. Hence, and although we cannot let the few relevant Dunhuang manuscripts we have discussed above serve as representative of the developments in *mudrā*-lore during the Tang and Five Dynasties period, it is obvious that they do reflect to some extent the manner in which such ‘manuals’ were circulated and copied among Buddhists in the Chinese heartlands.

Given the proliferation of Esoteric Buddhism in Dunhuang during the later half of the Tang and up through the Guiyijun rule, it is somewhat surprising that we have not found more material relating to the use of *mudrās*. One would have expected quite a bit more, especially so in connection with the material deriving from or ascribed to Amoghavajra, but such is not the case. Even in the important and popular material relating to the food offering (Chin. *shishi* 施食) complex of scriptures found among the Dunhuang manuscripts, which, as we know, features sets of *mudrās*, knowledge of their use was only conveyed through writing and not in the form of drawings, as is known from later copies.

Talisman-Seals and their Manuals,” *Cahiers d’Extrême-Orient* 20 (2011): 193–226. For a broader discussion of talismanic seals in Chinese Buddhism, see Tom Suchuan and Henrik H. Sørensen, “The Talismanic Seal Incorporated: An Iconographic Note on Seal-Bearing Bodhisattvas in the Sculptural Art of Sichuan and the Significance of Seals within the Chinese Esoteric Buddhist Tradition,” *Artibus Asiae* 73.2 (2013): 403–443.

³⁰ For a comparative survey of the use of *mudrās* in Daoism, see Mitamura Keiko, “Daoist Hand Signs and Buddhist Mudrās,” in *Daoist Identity: History, Lineage, and Ritual*, ed. Livia Kohn and Harold D. Roth (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2002), 235–254.



When dealing with *mudrās* in Dunhuang, we should not lose sight of the fact that these hand gestures were limited in number, even though they were employed in a large number of different Esoteric Buddhist rites. This is because various rituals could in principle make use of the same or some of the same gestures as other rites provided that they correspond to a similar phase and intent in the structure of the ritual proceeding. Thus there was a certain degree of standardisation in their application. For instance, the *abhiṣekamudrā* could be used in a variety of rituals dedicated to different deities as long as it served the same purpose in the ritual configuration, i.e., initiation. The same would hold true for the use of the *samayamudrā*, etc. Therefore, some of the *mudrās* from Dunhuang discussed here could, in fact, also be used in other rituals.

As is the case with a large part of the Esoteric Buddhist manuscript material from Dunhuang, the three manuscripts under discussion above belong to the cult(s) of Avalokiteśvara. This is hardly a coincidence, but is to be expected given the numerous scriptures, canonical as well as apocrypha, concerned with this preeminent of bodhisattvas. Incidentally the same holds true for the materials which feature talismanic seals. They are overwhelmingly associated with Avalokiteśvara and his role as master healer.

Appendix

P. 3905	P. 3835	OA 1919,0101,0.83*
-	十一面三昧印第一	X
-	身印第二	X
-	大心印呪第三	X
-	中心印呪第四	X
闍吒印呪第五	闍吒印呪第五	X
華咄印呪第六	華咄印呪第六	X
觀世音護身印第七	觀世音護身印第七	X
娑羅跢印呪第八	娑羅跢印呪第八	X
觀世音檀拖/陀印第九	觀世音檀拖印第九	X
觀世音甘露印第十	觀世音甘露印第十	X
搯數珠印第十一	-	X
君馳印第十二	-	X
十果報印第十三	-	X
闍夜印第十四	-	X
羯瑟那自那印第十五	-	X
檀那波羅蜜多印第十六	-	X



觀世音輪印第十七		X
觀世音華鬘印第十八		X
觀世音稍印第十九		X
鴛俱舍印第二十		X
觀世音羈索印第二十一		X
觀世音商佉印第二十二		X
什蟠印第二十三		X
觀世音大心印第二十四		X
觀世音散華印第二十五		X
禮拜印第二十六		X
毘社富囉迦印第二十七		X
毘居唎多印第二十八		X
離羅印第二十九		X
婆羊揭唎印第三十		X
娑馱印第三十一		X
阿嚕陀囉印第三十二		X
特崩沙尼印第三十三		X
闍耶印第三十四		X
毘闍耶印第三十五		X

阿目多印第三十六	-	X
阿波羅質多印第三十七	-	X
魔羅栖那波囉末陀爾印第三十八	-	X
啞哩首羅印第三十九	-	X
觀世音索印第四十	-	X
觀世音母印第四十一	-	X
觀世音母娑羅跢印第四十二	-	X
摩訶摩羅印第四十三	-	X
觀世音檀陀印第四十四	-	X
觀世音君馳印第四十五	-	X
鶩俱舍印第四十六	-	X
般那摩印第四十七	-	X
跋折囉母瑟知印第四十八	-	X
阿叉摩羅印亦名跢賒波囉蜜多印第四十九	-	X
阿彌陀佛印第五十	-	-
釋迦牟尼佛眼印第五十一	-	-
地天印第五十二	-	-



如意輪印部		
蓮華三昧耶印第一		
金剛部三昧耶[印第二]		
護身印 [第] 三		
地界印第四		
金剛牆印第五		
寶車輅[印]第六		
請車輅印第七		
請本尊三昧耶降至於道場 印第八		
[明王馬頭印]第九		
上方金剛網印第十		
火院密縫印第十一		
獻蓮花座印第十二		
普供養第十三		
如意輪根本印第十四		
[如意輪]心印第十五		
[心中]心印第十六		
七俱[胝]經佛母心大 陀羅尼部		

佛母三昧耶契第一		
蓮華部三昧耶契第二		
金剛部三昧耶第三		
佛母根本身契第四		
辟除一切天魔惡鬼神等契 第五		
結地界橛契第六		
結牆界契第七		
結網契第八		
結外火院大界契第九		
結車輅契第十		
結迎請契第十一		
結蓮花座契第十二		
結邊迦契第十三		
結洗浴契契第十四		

*Abbreviations*

CMCT	<i>Catalogue des manuscrits Chinois de Touen-Houang</i> . Fonds Pelliot chinois de la Bibliothèque Nationale, Vols. I–V. Paris: École française d’Extrême-Orient, 1970–1995.
EBTEA	<i>Esoteric Buddhism and the Tantras in East Asia</i> , edited by Charles D. Orzech, Henrik H. Sørensen, Richard K. Payne. Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2011.
OA	Oriental Arts Section of the British Museum in London
P.	Pelliot Collection of Chinese Dunhuang Manuscripts preserved at the Bibliothèque National in Paris
S.	Stein Collection of Chinese Dunhuang Manuscripts preserved at the British Library in London
T.	<i>Taishō shinshū daizōkyō</i> 大正新脩大藏經 [Taishō <i>tripitaka</i>], edited by Takakusu Junjirō 高順次郎 et. al. Tokyo: Taishō issaikyō kankōkai, 1924–1935.
TZ.	<i>Taishō shinshū daizōkyō—Tozō bu</i> 大正新修大藏經—圖像部 [Iconographical Supplement to the <i>Taishō tripitaka</i>]. 12 vols. Reprint: Taibei: Xinwenfeng, 1999.
ZWF	<i>Zang wai fojiao wenxian</i> 藏外佛教文獻 [Buddhist Textual Material Outside the Canon]. New Series, vols. 10–16, edited by Fang Guangchang 方廣鎰. Beijing: Zhongguo renmin daxue chubanshe, 2006–2011.

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