

The Language of Signs

W. Bro. Patrick Harriott

A sign is an act or gesture used to convey an idea, a desire, information, or a command. Every culture has employed signs as a nonverbal method of communication. Current linguistic theory suggests that humans used sign language to communicate before verbal communication arose (Fig.1). In modern times, sign language is taught to young children. This is because they can start expressing themselves with sign language at six months while effective speaking comes comparatively much later. In all the ancient mystery schools the use of hand gestures, called mudras in Sanskrit, are employed (Fig. 2 & 3). Francis Bacon aptly named them 'transitory hieroglyphs'. They are powerful archetypes that take rise from a natural expression of emotion. They not only communicate symbols to others, but affect our own consciousness when we employ them. We communicate with signs unconsciously in our every day lives and they are codified into all aspects of our society. Signs are so fundamental to the human experience that it is no surprise to find them as a part of our rituals.

Archeological finds show a saturation of symbolic gestures in ancient art; gestures which are not unlike the ones we encounter in Freemasonry and other esoteric schools. These gestures are evident as far back into the past as archeologist have penetrated. The native North Americans used signs as a form of universal language to interact between tribes (Fig 4). Even as far as India and China we see the due guard of an entered apprentice used in Yoga and Falun Dafa, also known as Falun Gong, meditation (Fig. 5). Ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia clearly demonstrate the longevity of these signs; however, it is from Ancient India that the most diversity survives to modern times. Besides the wealth of gestures in Buddhist and Hindu art, hand gestures play a key role in Indian dance. There are 24 hand gestures. Another 43 gestures can be formed using both the hands so in total there are 67 hand gestures (Fig. 6).

Chironomia is the ancient art of using gesticulations or hand signs in traditional rhetoric or oratory. Effective use of the hands, with or without the use of the voice, was practiced in the classical era. The great Greek and the Roman public speakers refined this art and systematized it. Various gestures had conventionalized meanings which were commonly understood, either within certain class or professional groups, or broadly among dramatic and oratorical audiences (Fig. 7 & 8). This art is employed in abundance during Shakespearian dramas. Gestures are still used to great effect today to punctuate speeches (Fig. 9 & 10). Chironomy is an extension of this art which makes use of hand gestures to direct musicians in tempo and pitch (Fig. 11 & 12), much as modern conductors do (Fig. 13).

Ancient artists wanted to convey meanings that would transcend languages and subjective connotations. They knew that a hand on one's heart would portray a deep sense of truth and sincerity to all who saw it. They also knew that open hands facing towards someone would convey a message of honoring the person and impart the intent of peace (Fig. 14, 15 & 16). This iconographic tradition was carried forward and features

in most religious traditions, with Christianity being no exception (fig. 17, 18, 19, 20 & 21).

In our modern lives, which seem so different from the lives of the ancients, we still find ourselves expressing the same experiences of our lives on this planet and thus still employ these mudras. To appease someone today, weather they are holding a gun or being irate in conversation, we still raise our hands in a gesture of placation (Fig 22 & 23). It is still under the due guard of a fellow craft that oath are sworn in North America (Fig. 24).

So how does a person best express sincerity (Fig. 25, 26 & 27)? How can exuberant joy be described with mere words (Fig. 28 & 29)? Do we not, upon seeing a friend approach us walking down the street towards us, greet them with a raised open hand before they are close enough to hear us (Fig. 30 & 31)? Today, as in millennia gone by, eastern philosophy makes use of the language of sign to meditate on the principals they represent. Many of these poses may seem strangely familiar to us (Fig 32, 33 & 34).

Let us consider a series of gestures in the third degree of Freemasonry, as this is a symbolic language common to us all. What meaning is trying to be conveyed? Why do we use these signs in our rituals and perpetuate the transmission of them? To elaborate further the words of Francis Bacon from his book 'De Augmentis Scientiarum': "Gestures are as transitory Hieroglyphs. For as uttered words fly away, but written words stand, so Hieroglyphs expressed in gestures pass, but expressed in pictures remain." Perhaps the Grand Hailing sign of Distress is expressing on a fundamental level our sense of powerlessness. When something is beyond us it is natural for us to throw up our hands to the heavens in a gesture of submission to the will of Deity (Fig. 35 & 36). Part two of the sign would convey adoration and an acknowledgment of a power greater than our own (Fig. 37). The third part of this sign, according to Buddhist and Christian symbolism, is the gesture of reassurance and safety which dispels fear and accords divine protection and bliss to the devotee (Fig 38 & 39). Therefore, perhaps what the great three part symbol communicates is: I am powerless before the will of the Divine; I beseech the Great, omnificent and omnipotent Architect of the Universe; allay my fears and protect me from harm.

Perhaps we should consider the non-verbal clues left to us by all ancient cultures as a visual Rosetta Stone. It is a method of setting the tone and emphasis of a philosophical or symbolic system regardless of the language you speak or the era you are born into. The language of signs is a timeless time capsule that one needs only have the right eyes to unlock.



Figure 1 Koko the gorilla

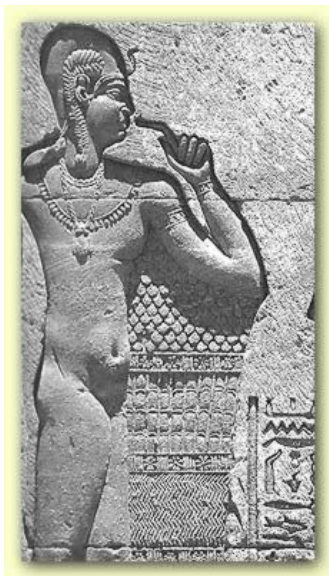


Figure 2 Sign of Harpocrates or the sign of silence



Figure 3 The weeping of Athena

10 INDIAN SIGN LANGUAGE

I Hand	II Hand	IV Hand	V Hand
R indicates right hand, L indicates left hand, Arrow shows movement			
Abandon Aufgeben	à bord Darauf	Above	Dezuss Darüber
Abuse Insulten Beschimpfen	Douleur Schmerzen	Ache	French: A Travers German: Querüber
ajouter Hinzulegen	Avancer Vorgehen	Afraid	Avoir Peur Fürchten
Après Nachher	Après Midi Nachmittag	Alright	Descendre Absteigen
Vivant Lebendig	Tout Alles	All Gone	Diaperu Alles Weg

FRENCH AND GERMAN EQUIVALENTS ARE SHOWN WITH EACH ILLUSTRATION

Line drawing shows beginning and dotted outline shows end of movement of hands. Students must Compare Each Diagram with Explanation Found on Opposite Page.

Figure 4 Native American sign language



Figure 5 Falun Gong Practitioner

SAMYUKTA HASTA MUDRÁ
(GESTOS COM AS DUAS MÃOS)

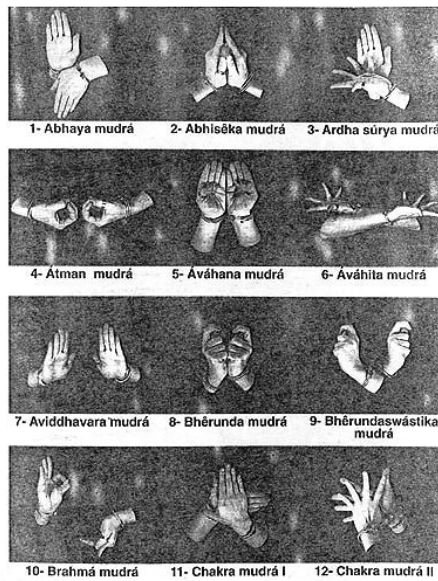


Figure 6 Traditional Indian dance gestures



Figure 7 Classical Orator Gestures



Italian gestures: 1) Silenzio, Silence; 2) Negativa, No; 3) Belleza, Beauty; 4) Fame, Hunger; 5) Besseggiare, Mockery; 6) Fatica, Fatigue; 7) Stupido, Stupid; 8) Guercio, Squint-eyed; 9) Ingannare, Cheating; 10) Astuto, Crafty. From *The Evil Eye*.



Figure 9 George Bush during public speaking



Figure 10 Tony Blair during public speaking



Figure 11 Bas-relief in the tomb of Neneftkai of the 5th dynasty (ca. 2700 B.C., standard chronology)

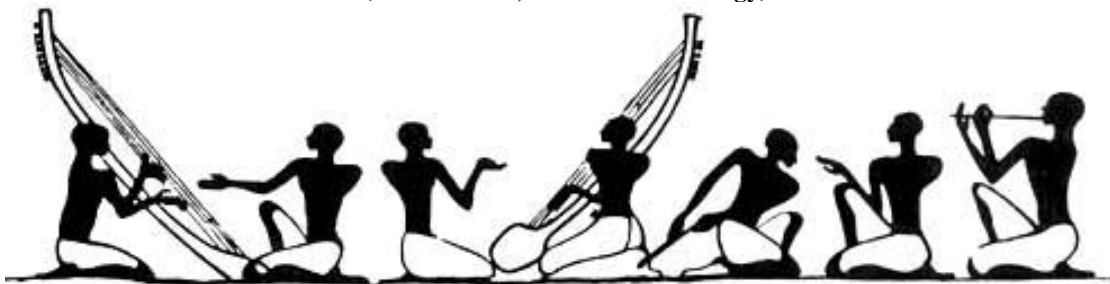


Figure 12 Taken from a mastaba of the Old Kingdom



Figure 13 An orchestral conductor



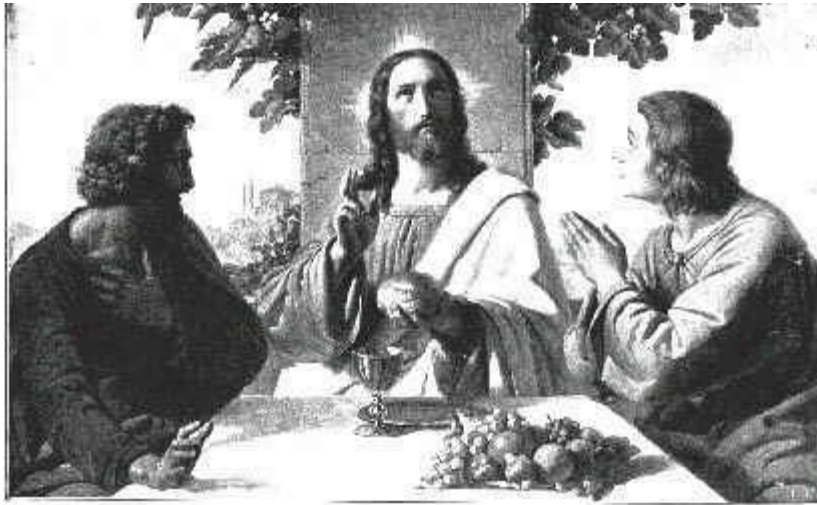
Figure 14 Egyptian god Shu



Figure 15 Egyptians paying homage to the solar calf



Figure 16 A Muslim during prayer



Jesus consecrating bread with the Sign of Blessing or Benediction—artist unknown.

Figure 17



Figure 18 The Hierophant card from Rider Tarot deck showing Sign of Blessing



Figure 19 Medieval depiction of Jesus with Sign of Blessing



Figure 20 Buddha statue with Sign of Blessing



Figure 21 Medieval depiction of a saint with sign of blessing



Figure 22 Dr. Who appeasing someone



Figure 23 Captured soldiers surrendering



Figure 24 George Bush at swearing in ceremony



**Anubis with Praise
Mucka
Figure 25**



**Figure 26 Buddhist statue showing
compassion and sincerity**



Figure 27 Buddhist statue with sign of sincerity



Figure 28 Laughing joyous Buddha



Figure 29 Red Sox fans celebrating



Figure 30 Astronaut waving a greeting



Figure 31 George Bush waving a greeting

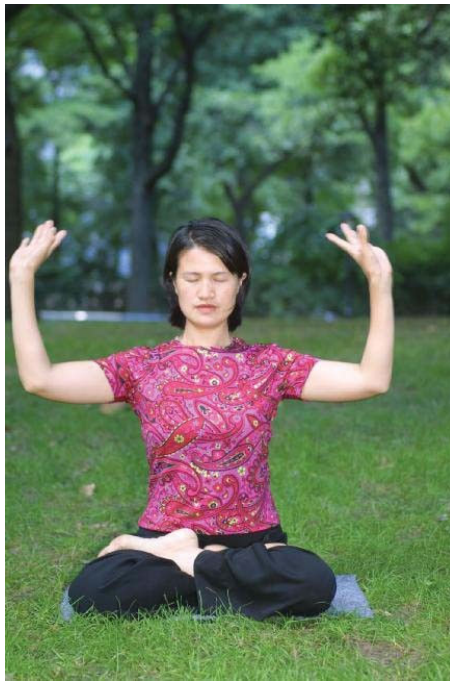


Figure 32 Falun Gong meditation



Figure 33 A mudra from India



Figure 34 Two men in meditation



Figure 35 A women throwing up her hands resignation



Figure 36 Buddha raising his palms to the air



Figure 37 Two petitioners praising an Egyptian god



Figure 38 A Buddhist statue with the reassuring sign

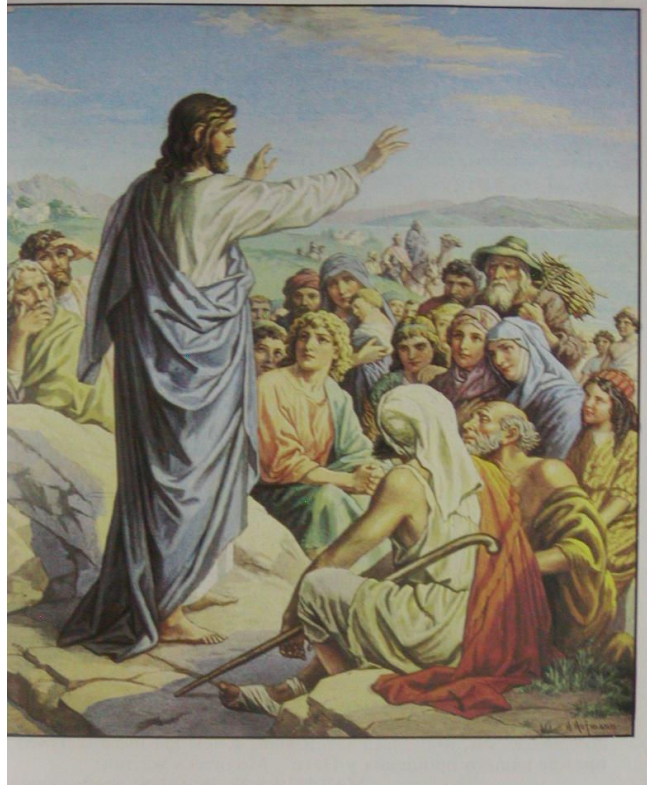


Figure 39 Jesus with the reassuring sign