



Yoga mudras as in ancient texts and its current relevance

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Abstract

Context: Asanas and Pranayama are popular in the field of Yoga. This is a study of not so popular Yoga Mudras. What does the ancient texts talk about the Yoga Mudras? Is it possible to practice these Yoga Mudras in today's world? Are Mudras different from Asanas?

Objective: The aim is to compare the knowledge of Yoga Mudras in the ancient texts and to make use of it.

Methods: Study the ancient texts like Yoga Upanisads, Gheranda Samhita, and Hatha Yoga Pradipika to find out about Yoga Mudras.

Result: Many Mudras have been mentioned in these texts, of which the five Mudras that can be practiced in the current world are described.

Conclusion: Hatha Yoga Pradipika 3.8 says, Mudras are difficult to be attained by the Devas. Humans can attain that which cannot be attained by the Devas!

Keywords: yoga mudras, Yoga Upanisads, Asanas, Krishnamacharya

Introduction

Yoga Mudras are not so popular as the dance Mudras nor is popular as Asana and Pranayama in the field of Yoga. A posture usually refers to Asana, but in Mudras the postures are held with a particular pattern of breath with more focus on extended exhale and exhale hold along with Bandhas. Asana belong to Annamaya Kosa, where as Mudras belong to Pranamaya Kosa. A Headstand is called sirsasana, but with a particular breath pattern and Bandhas, it's called Viparita Karani Mudra.

Objective

The aim of the study is compare the knowledge of the Mudras available in the ancient texts and its relevance in today's world.

Methods

This was study of Mudras in the ancient texts like Yoga Upanisads, Gheranda Samhita, Hatha Yoga Pradipika, Yoga Makaranda and more recent texts, of Krishnamacharya's elder son T. Sribhashyam and Krishnamacharya's student A.G. Mohan.

Result

Gheranda Samhita talks about 25 mudras; Hatha Yoga Pradipika talk about 10 Mudras. Yogacarya T Krishnamacharya in his book Yoga Makaranda talks about 20 Mudras. The sequence presented in these texts is:

- Gheranda Samhita – 1. Kriyas 2. Asanas 3. Mudras 4. Pratyahara 5. Pranayama.
- Hatha Yoga Pradipika – 1. Asana 2. Pranayama 3. Mudras 4. Samadhi.

- Yoga Makarandam – 1. Adhikari 2. Yoga anga nirupana 3. Yoga abhyasa 4. Sat kriya 5. Mudras 6. Asanas.

In Gheranda Samhita Mudras are presented before Pranayama, because Mudras should produce a pleasurable sensation, which is essential to practice pranayama; so that the mind longs for it, and has a tendency to repeat it.

But in Hatha Yoga Pradipika, Mudras are presented after Pranayama, probably because Mudras require Prana Balam, which can be acquired with the practice of Pranayama.

25 mudras of Gheranda Samhita are Maha-mudra, Nabho-mudra, Uddiyana, Jalamdhara, Mulabandha, Mahabandha, Mahavedha, Khecari, Viparitarani, Yoni, Vajroli, Sakthichalini, Tadagi, Mandavi, Sambhavi, Panchadharana (5 Dharanas), Ashvini, Pasini, Kaki, Matangi and Bhujangini (Vasu, 2012) [2].

20 Mudras of Yoga Makaranda are Maha-mudra, Nabho-mudra, Uddiyana Jalamdhara, Mulabandha, Mahabandha, Mahavedha, Khecari, Viparitarani, Yoni, Vajroli, Sakthichalina, Tadaka, Mandavi, Sambhavi, Ashvini, Pasini, Kaki, Matangi and Bhujangini (Krishnamacharya, 1938) [4].

Krishnamacharya mentions all the Mudras in Gheranda Samhita except for the 5 Dharana Mudras.

10 Mudras of Hatha Yoga Pradipika are Maha-mudra, Uddiyana, Jalamdhara, Mulabandha, Mahabandha, Mahavedha, Khecari, Viparitarani, Vajroli, Sakthichalina (Svātmārāma *et al.*, n.d.)

The 10 Mudras mentioned in Hatha Yoga Pradipika are the common mudras mentioned in the above three texts. Of the 10 common Mudras in the ancient texts, 5 Mudras are practiced in Krishnamacharya Yoga Mandiram under the guidance of a

competent teacher:

1. Maha Mudra
2. Viparita Karani Mudra
3. Jalamdhara Bandha
4. Uddiyana Bandha
5. Mula Bandha

Description of these 5 Mudras in the ancient texts:

(These techniques were not to be intended to be learned from a book. Practical instruction from a guru was always considered to be a necessary requisite before attempting them)

1. Mahamudra

Gheranda Samhita

Pressing carefully the anus by the left heel, stretch the right leg, and take hold of the great toe by the hand; contract the throat (not expelling the breath), and fix the gaze between the eyebrows.

Benefits: The practices of Mahamudra cures consumption, the obstruction of the bowels, the enlargement of the spleen, indigestion and fever – it cures all diseases (Vasu, 2012) [2].

Hatha Yoga Pradipika

Pressing the perineum with the left heel and stretching out the right leg take hold of the toes of the right foot with the hands. Contract the throat in the Jalamdhara Bandha and hold the breath in the upper part. Then one should breathe out very slowly and never quickly. After having practiced well on the left side, it should be practiced then on the right side.

Benefits: By this such painful factors as the great klesas and death are vanquished. Cures consumption, leprosy, constipation, abdominal diseases, indigestion, etc. are overcome (Svātmārāma *et al.*, n.d.)

Yoga Makaranda

The description is similar to Gherandha Samhita.

Benefits: Tuberculosis, asthma, piles, enlargement of the spleen, indigestion and other gastric disorders are eliminated. Three texts agree that Jalamdhara Bandha has to be maintained, but they differ in the placement of the heel of the bent leg. In HYP it's the perineum, whereas in GS and YM it's the anus (Krishnamacharya, 1938) [4].

Dhyana Bindu upanisad

The cleansing (with the Pranayama) of the heaps of impurities (in the Nadi-s), the bringing about of the union between the Moon and the Sun, the complete drying up of the Rasa-s (Vata, Pitta and Kapha), is known as the Maha-mudra. With the chin laid on the chest, pressing the abyss of the genitals with the left foot, holding with the two hands the outstretched right leg, filling with breath the pair of bellies and holding it up, one should slowly expel it. This indeed is said to be the sin destroying Mahamudra for men (Ayyangar, 1938)

2. Viparita Karani Mudra

Gheranda Samhita

The sun (the solar nadi or plexus) dwells at the root of the navel, and the moon at the root of the palate; the process by which the sun is brought upward and the moon carried downward is called Viparitakarani. It is a secret Mudra in all

the Tantras. Place the head on the ground, with hands spread, raise the legs up, and thus remain steady. This is called Viparitakarani.

Benefits: By the constant practice of this Mudra, decay and death are destroyed. He becomes an adept, and does not perish even at pralaya (Vasu, 2012) [2].

Hatha Yoga Pradipika

When the Sun is above and the Moon below (of the practitioner) whose navel is above and palate below, it is the Viparitakarani. It is to be learnt through the instructions of a Guru.

In the case of one who practices this daily, the gastric fire is increased, and the practitioner should always have plenty of food.

If he stints his diet, the fire quickly consumes the body. On the first day he should stand for a moment upon his head, with his feet above. Practice this by increasing the duration gradually every day.

Benefits: After six months, wrinkles and grey hair disappear. He who practices this for a Yama (three hours) daily, conquers death (Svātmārāma *et al.*, n.d.)

Yoga Makaranda

Description is similar to Gheranda Samhita; Krishnamacharya mentions this as a part of Raja yoga.

Benefits: Death is thus conquered, and the practitioner can survive even the most terrible epidemics (Krishnamacharya, 1938) [4].

Yoga Tattvopanisad

The Karani known as Viparita, which destroys all mental and bodily ailments, develops the Jatharagni of the daily practitioner. Various kinds of food will have to be procured by the practitioner (of that Karani). Should the kinds of food fall short, fire will eat up the body in a minute. With his head down and his feet up, he should remain for a minute on the first day. He should practice by adding to the minute day by day. Wrinkles and grey hairs will not be seen in the course of six fortnights. He who practices it for one Yama per day, he will conquer death (Ayyangar, 1938).

3. Jalamdhara Bandha

Gheranda Samhita

Contracting the throat, place the chin on the chest. This is called Jalamdhara.

Benefits: By this bandha the sixteen adharas are closed. The Jalamdhara is a success giving and well tried Bandha: he who practices it for six months, become an adept without doubt (Vasu, 2012) [2].

Hatha Yoga Pradipika

Contract the throat and hold the chin firmly against the chest (about four inches from the chest).

Benefits: This Jalamdhara destroys old age and death. Because it constricts the network (jala) of Nadi-s and arrests the downward course of the flow of ambrosial water (jala) from the cavity in the palate, this Bandha is Jalamdhara. It destroys all the maladies of the throat.

When the Jalamdhara bandha is practiced, by the contraction

of the throat, the nectar does not fall in to the gastric fire and the Prana is not agitated. By the firm contraction of the throat the two Nadi-s (Ida and Pingala) are deadened. Here in the throat is situated the middle cakra (Visuddhi). This binds the sixteen adharas (vital centres) (Svātmārāma *et al.*, n.d.)

Yoga Makaranda

Sit erect in a vertical position. Then exhale. While exhaling, bend the neck so that the chin is brought in contact with the chest, about four inches below the collarbone. Press the chin against the chest. Remain in that position for a short while, doing normal breathing.

Benefits: The Nadi-s and cakras –s are cleaned thoroughly, and it facilitates the awakening of the Kundalini (Krishnamacharya, 1938).

Yoga Kundaly Upanisad

The Bandha, known as the Jalamdhara, should be performed at the end of the Puraka (after inhalation). This causes the obstruction of the passage of the vital air, due to the constriction of the throat. When constriction of the throat is made by suddenly contracting the nether part of it and with the Pascimatana of the middle, the vital air will enter the Brahma-nadi. Having assumed the posture well, in the manner prescribed above, he should control the Prana-air.

Gheranda Samhita and Hatha Yoga Pradipika do not mention about the breath component, whereas Krishnamacharya emphasizes that the constriction of the throat be done on the exhale component of breath. But Yoga kundaly Upanisad talks about performing this bandha on inhale hold (Ayyangar, 1938).

4. Uddiyana Bandha

Gheranda samhita

Contract the bowels above and below the navel towards the back, so that the abdominal viscera may touch the back. He who practices Uddiyana (flying up) without ceasing conquers death. The Great Bird (Breath), by this process, is instantly forced up into the sushumna, and flies (moves) constantly therein only.

Benefits: Of all Bandhas, this is the best. The complete practice of this makes emancipation easy (Vasu, 2012) [2].

Hatha Yoga Pradipika

The drawing back of the abdomen above and below the navel, so that it is drawn against the back of the body and up towards the thorax is called Uddiyana bandha.

Benefits: He who constantly practices the Uddiyana bandha as taught by the Guru so that it becomes natural, even though he is old, becomes young.

He should draw back with effort the abdomen above and below the navel, and practice for six months. Then he conquers death without doubt.

Of all the Bandhas, the Uddiyana is the most excellent. When this has been mastered, liberation follows naturally (Svātmārāma *et al.*, n.d.).

Yoga Makaranda

Uddiyana bandha can be done either in sitting or standing position. Inhale air and then exhale slowly and completely. In

this position of retention after exhale (kumbhaka), pull back the stomach so that navel almost touches the backbone. Remain in that position for a short duration of time. Bring back the stomach to its normal position. Inhale air slowly.

Benefits: Prana gains entry into the Sushumna, thereby giving longevity of life.

Krishnamacharya clearly mentions that the Uddiyana bandha has to be done on exhale hold and the next inhale should be done after releasing the stomach (KRISHNAMACHARYA, 1938).

Yoga Kundaly Upanisad

After the Kumbhaka and before expelling the vital air, the Uddiyana has to be performed, by which bandha the Prana (vital air), rises up into the sushumna Nadi and for this reason this has been called by Yogind by the Name of Uddiyana. While in the Vajrasana posture, one should firmly hold with the two hands the two feet and press the knot near the region of the ankles against them. Then he should resort to the Pascimatana in the belly, heart and the neck, whereby the Prana (vital air), would slowly reach the junction of the belly. This should always be performed slowly, after shaking off all disorders of the belly (AYYANGAR, 1938).

5. Mulabandha

Gheranda samhita

Press with the heel of the left foot the region between the anus and the scrotum, and contract the rectum; carefully press the intestines near the navel on the spine; and put the right heel on the organ of generation or pubes. This is called Mulabandha, destroyer of decay.

Benefits: The person, who desires to cross the ocean of existence, let him go to a retired place, and practice in secrecy this Mudra. By the practice of it, the Vayu (Prana) is controlled (Vasu, 2012) [2].

Hatha Yoga Pradipika

Pressing the perineum with the heel, contract the anus so as to draw the Apana upwards.

By contraction of the Muladhara, the Apana, whose course is downwards, is forced to go upwards through Sushumna. Pressing the anus with the heel compress the air forcibly and repeatedly until the breath (apana) goes upwards.

Benefits: By the constant practice of the Mula Bandha, a union of Prana and Apana is achieved. Urine and excrement decrease and even the aged become young. When the Apana rises upwards and reaches the sphere of fire, then the flame of the fire becomes lengthened, being fanned by Apana.

When the Apana and the fire join Prana, which is by nature hot, then the heat in the body is greatly intensified. The kundalini, which is asleep, feeling the extreme heat, is awakened, just as a serpent struck by a stick hisses and straightens itself. Then it enters the Sushumna (Svātmārāma *et al.*, n.d.)

Yoga Makaranda

Description is similar to Gherandha Samhita, and according to Krishnamacharya this technique belongs to Hatha yoga (Krishnamacharya, 1938) [2].

Dhyana Bindu Upanishad

By the diminution of urine and faeces is attained the union of the Prana and the Apana vital airs. By performing Mula bandha always, even an old man becomes young. By pressing the genitals with the heels, should contract the anus, by drawing the Apana upwards (Ayyangar, 1938).

Yoga Kundalini Upanishad

When one makes the Apana with the downward course move upwards by force, by constriction (of the sphincter-muscle of the rectum) is known as Mula-bandha. When the Apana coursing upwards reaches the region of fire, then the flame of fire, caused by the vital air to move up, increases in its height. The air and the Apana reach the heated Prana (vital air), then by that (Prana) in an overheated condition is a flame generated in the body. By that flame the sleeping Kundalini, being very much heated, is roused and like a snake belabored with a stick, becomes erect with hissing, reaches the interior of the Brahma-nadi (Ayyangar, 1938).

Yoga defines several parameters for the practice of Mudras:

- A precise asana,
- A defined number of breaths, 6,8,12 or 16 according to the Mudra,
- Long breaths with exhalation twice as long as inhalation,
- A concentration,
- Kumbhaka, retention which traditionally comes after exhalation,
- Use of Ujjayi breathing, which the text of Hatha Yoga name as Ujjayi Kumbhaka (Sribhashyam, 2011)

Conclusion

Kalasya Vancanam translated, as “death deceived” is the benefit of practicing Mudras. Is it possible to deceive death? It means the fear of death – Abhinivesa klesa (Yoga sutra 2.9) diminishes.

How does this happen? This was possible by holding certain postures like Maha Mudra, holding these postures leads to the control of the mind. There is an inward movement of the mind towards the self, realizing “I am not the body “ The survival fear recedes.

Hatha Yoga Pradipika 3.8 – Mudras are difficult to be attained by the Devas. Humans can attain that which cannot be obtained by the Devas! The demigods (deva-s) are said to be in a state of enjoyment (bhoga) always. Only humans can attain freedom through effort and are therefore considered superior to deva-s in this respect.

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