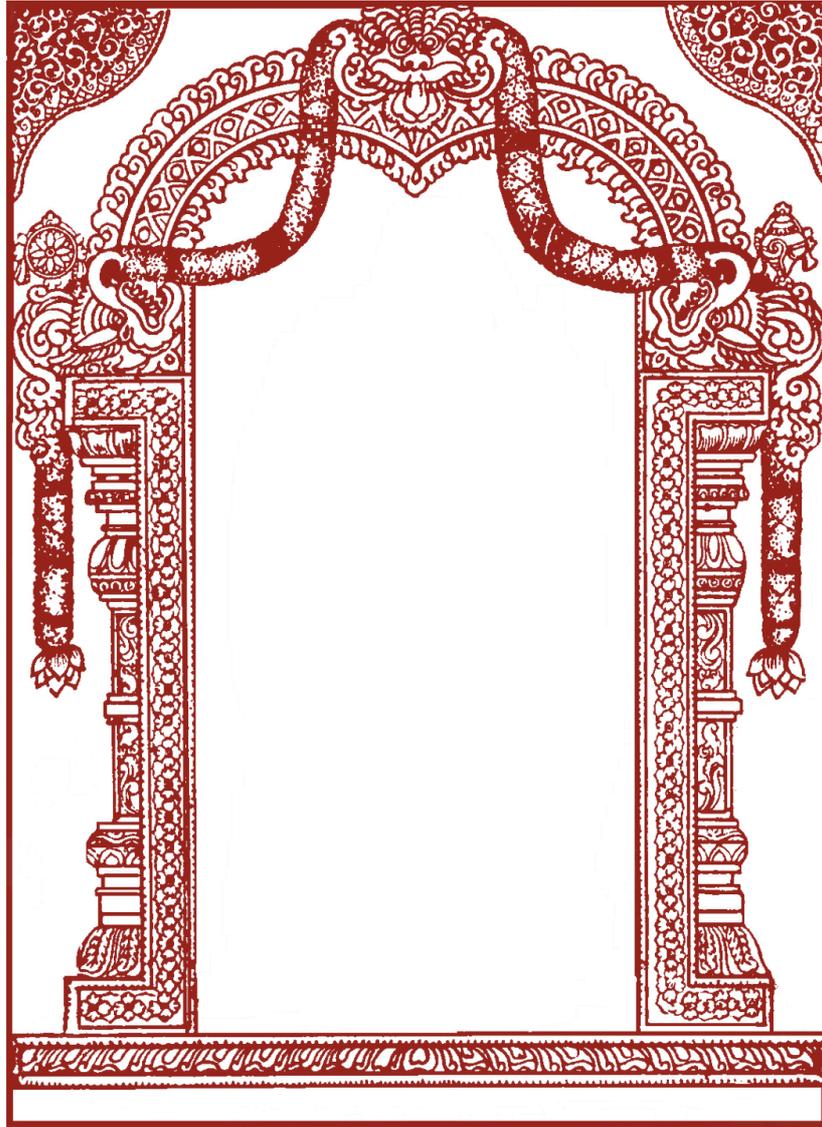


# HINDU ICONOLOGY

The study of the symbolism and meaning of Icons



by

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# HINDU ICONOLOGY — INTRODUCTION



**Definition;** Icon (*ikon*) is a word derived from the Greek and is defined as an image or representation of a religious figure. *Iconology* is the study of icons.

Everything connected with the Hindu icon has a symbolic meaning; the posture, gestures, ornaments, number of arms, weapons, vehicle, consorts and associate deities (*parivāra devatā*). Symbolic meanings of various rituals and paraphernalia are first given in the *Brāhmanas* and *Aranyakas*, and later the iconic symbols are explained in the various *Purāṇas* such as *Srimad Bhāgavatam* (S.B.), *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* (V.P.), *Śiva Purāṇa*; *Upaniṣads* such as *Gopāla-uttara-tāpini Upaniṣad* (G.U.T.Up), *Kṛṣṇa Upaniṣad* (K.U.) and *Āgamas*.

## Iconology

Iconology is defined as the study of the symbolism behind sacred images. One of the most prominent tools of devotion in Hinduism is the use of images. These images or icons are made of wood, stone, metal or painted on cloth. The term generally used by non-Hindus and unfortunately by Hindus themselves when referring to these sacred images is **IDOL**. This term is actually *pejorative* — a demeaning, insulting word first used by Christian missionaries who perceived Hinduism in an extremely negative way — describing us as pagans, heathens and idolaters.

The use of images is also predominant among Catholics and Eastern Orthodox Christians who refer to sacred images as **ICONS** to differentiate them from the ‘idols’ of the heathens.

An icon can be defined as a sacred symbol which embodies a spiritual truth and is worthy of veneration and contemplation.

All Hindu icons are visual representatives of the transcendent Divine and the Spiritual Forces which support, sustain and direct the Cosmos. The art and symbology of Icons has been developed to an extremely sophisticated degree by the Hindu mind. Each and every feature of an icon has a profound truth behind it, and all the mystical teachings of the sages are presented to the spiritual seekers through the means of these icons and symbols.

The language of symbols develops when an attempt is made to represent something that is beyond the normal capacity of the human mind to comprehend or to express. A transcendent reality is expressed in terms of equivalents known as symbols.

All of human interaction is carried out through the use of symbols. To represent a quantity of something we use symbols called *numbers*. To articulate and communicate ideas we use symbols known as *words*. To transmit words to others in a graphic manner we use the symbology of *letters* of the alphabet.

A symbol can be natural or conventional. When we perceive a direct relationship between one order of things with another a natural symbol develops.

In Hindu cosmology, symbolism is the expression of reality. It is the expression of the particular points where two realms meet — the transcendental (*niṣkala*) with the material (*sakala*).

The Āgamas affirm 2 core tenets;—

1. the material realm (*sakala*) is a reflection of the transcendental realm (*niṣkala*) and
2. the inner spiritual/psychic world is related with the outer (*yathā brahmāṇḍa tathā piṇḍāṇḍa*)

and therefore symbolism arises from nature itself and is not the result of speculation. And through the contemplation of the outer symbols one reaches the innermost subtle concepts behind those symbols.

However far back we reach in Indian thought as a whole we find a coherent use of symbols

to represent the abstract. The whole of Indian iconology is built up upon a code of symbols based on the assumption that there exists a natural affinity between ideas (*nāma*) and forms (*rūpa*).

This code of symbols has been transmitted over thousands of years and its origins are lost in the remote past.

Symbols do not speak to the rational mind and cannot be fully understood by logic, they are the subject of contemplation, worship, assimilation, inner experience and ultimate spiritual realization. Symbols are the esoteric language of the unconscious mind.

## The technique of Icons

*Brahma-vid āpnoti param — Taittiriya Upaniṣad.*

One who contemplates upon the Brahman attains the Supreme.

The Upaniṣads prescribe many techniques for spiritual advancement but the most prominent of them is *upāsana*. *Upāsana* (*upa* + *āsana*) literally means – ‘sitting near’ and refers to the act of meditation. The term *upāsana* can be translated as worship, contemplation, devotion, the making of offerings etc.

The icons are primarily used for this practice of *upāsana*. They not merely "representations" of the Godhead but are in fact a "focus" or "locus" of the presence of the Godhead. This means that God is actually present in the icons.

How is this doctrine justified? Firstly God is *omnipresent* (all-pervading), *omniscient* (all-knowing) and *omnipotent* (all-powerful). The entire creation is pervaded by the Godhead, there is no place or thing in this universe which is devoid of the presence of God. So naturally it follows that the Godhead is also present in the icon. When the icon is properly consecrated according to the prescribed rites — God is implored to be especially present in the icon out of compassion and love so that we in turn may love and adore Him/Her.

Secondly God is the Inner-witness who knows our every thought and emotion, and Scripture tells us that God always responds to our devotion. So God with a small fraction of His limitless being takes up residence in the consecrated icon in a very special and specific way, and because by definition God is omnipotent — all-powerful, this empowering of the icon is certainly no great effort on his part!!

The Divine is all-pervading and intimately close. The entire universe is pervaded within and without by Divinity. The Divine cannot be confined to the icon because of omniscience but through the power of *mantras* (sacred formulae) and *mudras* (ritual gestures) the Divine Essence is invoked into the icon and It, through It's infinite mercy condescends to take residence in the gross object for the purpose of receiving the worship of devotees and bestowing Grace. In other words the divine Presence is *particularized* or *focused* in the icon. The energy that is already there is awakened, it does not enter from somewhere outside. The image of stone or brass is thus

transformed into a *living entity*. Its actual shape and ornamentation are symbolic and convey meaning in every single aspect. Once the invocation ceremony (*prana-*

*pratishtha*) has been performed, the icon is no longer regarded as merely 'symbolic' but as a **mūrti** which means '*a materialization or embodiment*' of the Divine.

## TERMINOLOGY.

In Sanskrit there is a very rich terminology that is used when referring to icons;

<b>bera</b>	— image
<b>mūrtī</b>	— anything which has definite shape and physical limits, an embodiment or incarnation.
<b>bimba</b>	— reflection or prototype — the original or model after which a thing is copied (the Original Being of course is God)
<b>vigraha</b>	— extension, expansion, form.
<b>pratīma</b>	— resemblance, similitude, representation
<b>pratīka</b>	— symbol
<b>rūpa</b>	— form, aggregate, a sum total of form.
<b>arca</b>	— object of adoration and worship

If one does not have the vocabulary (*nāma*) one cannot understand an experience (*rūpa*) and if one cannot understand and define an experience to oneself, one cannot share it with others. The function of the icon is to represent, through a combination of forms and proportions, some fundamental aspect of the cosmos and its presiding consciousness which is not directly perceptible by our senses. Although these cosmic realities cannot be *perceived*, they can be *experienced*, the icons are the vocabulary whereby we interpret the experience of the divine to ourselves and convey that understanding to others.

## Theological and Scriptural support for the use of icons.

*na ca rūpaṃ vinā dhyātum kenapi śakyate ||  
sarva rūpa nivṛttā hi buddhiḥ kutrāsya tiṣṭhati |  
nivṛttā glāyate buddhir nidrayā vā parīyate ||  
tasmād vidvān upāsīta buddhyā sākaram eva tam |  
asti tasya paroḥṣaṃ tad iti kiñcid anusmaret ||  
sarvathā akāram uddiṣṭaṃ na parityajya paṇḍitaḥ ||*

Vishnu samhita 29:55 — 57

Without a form how can God be meditated upon? If he is completely formless, where will the mind fix itself? When there is nothing for the mind to attach itself to it will slip away from meditation, or will glide into a state of slumber. Therefore the wise will meditate on some form, remembering however that it is an indirect method, a particularization or indication of that which is completely formless.

Hindu theology affirms that the Supreme Being is a Personal God/Goddess but at the same time declares that His/Her form is **undefinable** (*anirdeśya*), **incomprehensible** (*acintya*) and **infinite** — i.e. unconditioned by Time and Space (*ananta*). We should not

think of the “Personality” of God in human terms – like a great Sultan in the Sky!

In the Vishnu Samhita 29; 49b — 58. It is pointed out that it is beyond the capabilities of an average human being to adequately conceive of the Supreme Person for the

purpose of contemplation. The human mind relies on concepts and forms and contrasts, in order to focus its thinking processes.

Without a definitive content, the mind wanders and contemplation becomes impossible. So therefore the Āgamas have

prescribed the use of symbols for focusing the mind and providing content upon which to meditate. This content itself must be meaningful, in order to bring about the required change of consciousness.

In the Parama Samhita 3:7 it is stated;

*nirākāre tu deveśe na arcanam sambhave nṛṇām |  
na ca dhyānam na ca stotraṃ tasmāt sākāram arcayet ||*

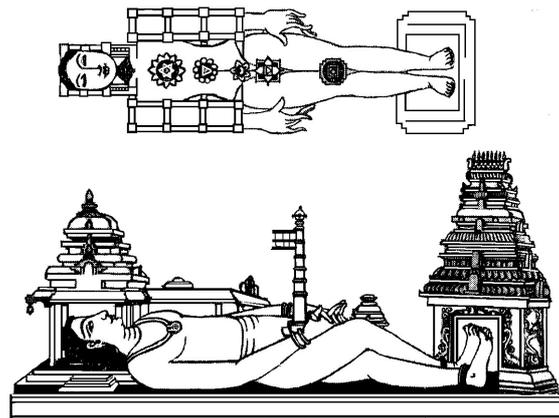
It is impossible for the human being to worship, meditate or praise a deity without form. Therefore the Lord should be worship through an icon.

The Sriprashna Samhita 18;1 affirms that the descent of the Lord into a permanent iconic abode is due to His Divine Initiative alone, for bestowing grace and blessing upon the devotees

## The Temple Structure and Icons.

The human body is the temple for the Indwelling Spirit of God (*Antaryamin*). All the various parts of the temple structure correspond to various parts of the human body. The temple is the physical body which houses the presence of Divine. So the actual building of the temple itself is a symbol of the presence of the Divine in the world. The temple with all its intricate imagery represents the universe in all its variety and just as on the macrocosmic scale the universe is the *body* of the Divine

so on a microcosmic scale when the icon represents the manifested Godhead; the temple is It's Body.



## Types of Icons.

Two types of icons are encountered in the temple. There is the main deity which is usually carved out of stone or sometimes in the case of very large icons such as in Srirangam temple they are molded out of plaster. This is known as the *mūla vighraha*, and once installed can never be removed — this icon receives all the daily services. The second type of icon is known as the *proxy icon (utsava vighraha)*. It is smaller than the

main icon and is usually constructed of an alloy of 5 metals (*pañca-loha*). During festivals the Spiritual Energy [*shakti*] from the main icon is transferred temporarily into the proxy icon which is then taken out in procession and receives particular services.

The icons for use in the home for daily worship are either pictures or metal images. Metal images, when used for worship should be about 14 cms high.

## Classification of Icons;

1. Āgamic Icons fall into three broad groups they are;

<b>citra</b>	sculptured in the round.
<b>citrārdha</b>	base-relief
<b>citrabhāsa</b>	painting

2. Those that are sculptured in the round can be classified according to movability as;

<b>cala</b>	movable,
<b>acala</b>	immovable,
<b>calācala</b>	both movable and immovable.

3. They are also classified according to temperament;

<b>śanta</b> or <b>saumya</b>	those of a peaceful demeanor
<b>vīra</b>	Those of an heroic nature
<b>raudra</b> or <b>ugra</b>	those of a terrifying nature.

4. The immovable icons are known as **dhruva-bera** or **mūla-vigraha** are classified by posture;—

<b>sthānaka</b> —	standing,
<b>āsina</b> —	sitting,
<b>śayana</b> —	reclining

5. Icons are further classified according to the purpose for which they are worshipped, different results being obtained from each type (*yad bhāvati tad bhavati* — that upon which you contemplate you become.).

- 1. yoga mūrti;** These icons depict the Supreme Being in various meditational postures. They are worshipped by the aspirant desiring self-mastery or Yoga. These icons should be established and consecrated on the banks of rivers, in forests or on top of mountains, it should be quite far from human habitation, the reason being quite obviously in order to afford a peaceful and undisturbed environment in which the aspirant can practice yogic meditation.
- 2. bhoga-mūrti;** These icons depict the deity in a domestic situation. This is the best suited form for worship in temples constructed in towns and places of habitation. These icons are conducive of enjoyment and happiness and can be resorted to by all classes and by people of all temperaments. The images of Uma-Maheshvara, Radha-Krishna and Lakshmi-Narayana etc. are of this type.
- 3. vīra-mūrti;** These icons depict the Deity in a heroic posture such as Rama defeating Rāvana or Durga defeating Mahiṣāsura or Śiva as Naṭarāja. This type of icon bestows power and victory over enemies (such as anger, greed, delusion etc.), it can be established either in the town or outside of it.
- 4. ugra-mūrti;** This is the form which is used for protection against enemies (either real or spiritual in the form of anger, delusion, desire etc.). They are characterized by sharp teeth and a large number of arms carrying various weapons, wide eyes and a

flaming halo around the head. This icon may only be set up in the North-eastern corner of the settlement or village. The setting up of an *Ugra-murti* in the midst of a town or city is prohibited. If it is established then a *śānta-mūrti* must be placed directly in front of it, or a tank of water should be constructed in front of the temple. The *Viśvarūpa*, *Narasimha*, *Sudarśana* and the *Vaṭa-patra-śāyin* are of the Vaiṣṇava Ugra type. Gaja-samhāra is an ugra form of Lord Śiva and Kāli dancing on Śiva, and Pratyāṅgira Devī are examples of Ugra Śaktis.

**5. abhicārika-mūrti;** used for the purpose of inflicting death and destruction on one's enemies or confounding his purposes. This form is only set up far from a town and never in a place of human habitation. (This form is purely theoretical as there are no temples of this type and no bhakta would have anything to do with them).

## Orientation of Icons

The standing and seated icons are orientated either facing the east or the west. The *sayana bera* (reclining) can face any of the four cardinal points, if facing North then the head is to the East, if facing South-the head is to the West. If facing East or West then the head is to the South. Depending on the direction of the head of the Icon differing results are obtained;

East	<i>Shantidam</i> (peace)	West	<i>pushtidam</i> (vigour)
South	<i>jayadam</i> (victory)	North	<i>abhicarikam</i> (depredation)

The *Ugra-rupa* can only be established in the North-east of the settlement where it will give prosperity and happiness, the incorrect establishing of the *ugra-rupa* in a town or village leads to the following results;

In the East	destruction of village
In the south-east	destruction of the settlement
In the South	degradation of the womenfolk
In the South-west	population will be decreased through disease
In the west	bad conduct, depression and mental anguish
In the north-west	delinquency amongst the populace
In the north	various types of afflictions.

*Narasimha* — usually the yoga form — is always set up to the west of the main sanctorum, even in Siva temples.

## Karma Bimbas;

A karma bimba is a *proxy* image of the main Icon which is used for a variety of practical purposes. The life force (prana) from the main Icon is transferred into the karma bimba for a short duration for serving the particular purpose. Thereafter it is transferred back into the main Icon.

In a temple consecrated according to the Agamas there should be three, five or six such karma-bimbas. Five are most common and are known as the **Pañca-bera**.

*dhruvam tu grāma rakṣārtham arcan artham  
tu kautukam | snānārtham snapanam*

*proktam balyartham baliberakam | utsava  
cotsavartham ca pañca-bera prakalpitāḥ ||*

1. **dhruva-bera** — the main icon in the sanctum sanctorum which is of the immovable kind, constructed of stone and permanently fixed. It protects the town
2. **kautuka-bera** the movable image used for daily offerings .
3. **snapana-bera** the icon used for the daily bathing ceremony.
4. **bali-bera** icon used for the daily *bali* offerings in the courtyard of the temple.
5. **utsava-bera** the icon which is taken out in procession on festivals.

6. **śayana-bera** the icon used for putting to rest at night

Few temples are opulent enough to possess and to handle all these five beras so the general situation is to have two beras only; the **mula-bera** and the **utsava-bera**. The *utsava-bera* fulfills the function of all the other 4 types. These *karma-bimbas* have to correspond in certain iconical forms to the *dhruva-bera*. If the *dhruva-bera* stands they stand, if the *dhruva-bera* sits they sit, but if the *dhruva-bera* reclines then the *karma-bimbas* either stand or sit. They also have to correspond in the number of arms and various other paraphernalia.

*karmārcā sarvathā kāryā mūla-bimba anusāriṇī | Viśvaksena Samhita 17; 11.*

The karma-bimbas must correspond in every way to the mula-bimba.

## Construction of Icons

In the Agamas and Silpa Sastras (canons of architecture) there are *dhyāna slokas* (visualizations) which are given; describing the exact features of the particular Deity and the paraphernalia in great detail for the purpose of meditation. It is according to these *dhyana slokas* that the icons are constructed.

Certain proportions having symbolic significance, are essential features of icons as well as of temple architecture. The image is made in strict conformity to the original canonical texts and concentration and visualization is extremely important. Any omission, error or oversight is attributed to imperfect concentration and slacking of

attention, in this case the image is discarded and the process is deferred.

The Agamas insist on the necessity of making the icon as beautiful as possible but actually even an ill-shaped image made strictly according to the Agamic directions serves the same purpose as a very artistic and beautifully executed one.

The construction is always begun upon a date set according to astrology, being an auspicious day and in harmony with the nature of the deity. The Silpi or craftsman is expected to maintain his ritual purity during the process of construction and there are several disciplines which he has to undertake until the completion of the task.

## Materials of Construction:

*kṛtvā pratidhiṃ samyag dāru loha śilādibhiḥ |*

*tat sthāpayitvā māṃ sthāne śāstra dṛṣena vartmanā || Padma Samhita Kriya Pada 1;5*

According to the Agamas, icons can be constructed of stone, wood, metal, clay, *kadi-sarkara* — a kind of cement, precious stones or painted on cloth. Those made in metal are usually sculptured in wax form and then cast in metal.

## Iconometry — Measurement of Icons

### Dhruva Bera;

The height of the *Dhruva-bera* varies. It is either taken in proportion to the temple super structure or the temple measurements are taken from the *dhruva-bera*.

### Example 1

The whole Icon consists of three parts; 2 parts are the Icon proper and 1 part is the pedestal. Multiply the whole length of the Icon by 4 and divide by 8. One 8th is the width of the doorway into the sanctum.

### Example 2

The whole length of the Icon including pedestal should be 7/ 8ths of the height of the doorway. (i.e. height + 7 x 8 = doorway). If the Icon is made 2 meters in height then the following measurements are calculated;

doorway =	2.28 mtrs high x 1.14 mtrs in width.
Sanctum =	4.57 mtrs square
Vimana =	9.14 mtrs high
Mandapa =	9.14 mtrs wide
Plinth =	3 mtrs high

### Proportional measurement of Karma Bimbas

*mūla-bimba samucchṛāyāṃ dvidhā vāpi tridhāpi va |*  
*caturdhā vā saṃvibhajya eka bhāgena kalpayet ||*  
*utsavārcāṃ tad ucchrāyāṃ dvidhā vāpi tridhāpi vā |*  
*caturdhā vā vibhajya eka bhāgena parikalpayet ||*

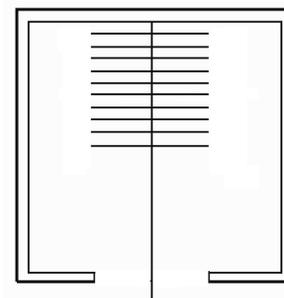
īśvara Samhita 17; 242, 243.

The *karma-bimbas* should be either a quarter, a third or half of the height of the *mula-bimba*.

### Position of the Deities in the Sanctum

The sanctum sanctorum is called the *garbhalaya* and is divided into half. The half should again be sub-divided into 10 parts. The deities are positioned as follows;

- Shiva Lingam in the 10th part i.e. center
- Brahma is placed in the 9th part.
- Vishnu is placed in the 8th part.
- Shanmuga is placed in the 7th part.
- Sarasvati in the 6th.
- Surya in the 5th.
- Ganesha in the 4th.
- Bhairava in the 3rd
- Shakti in the 2nd place from the rear wall.

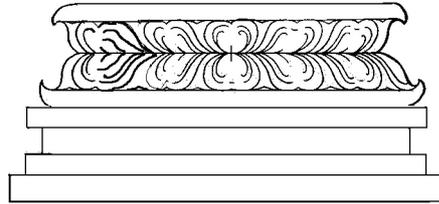


# Understanding Iconography

There are certain features which are common to almost all Hindu deities and some Buddhist ones.

## Lotus Throne

All the gods & goddesses, buddhas and bodhisattvas are usually depicted standing or seated upon lotuses. The pure and unsullied lotus arising from the depth of the waters and far from the banks of the lake is associated with the idea of purity which arises from the

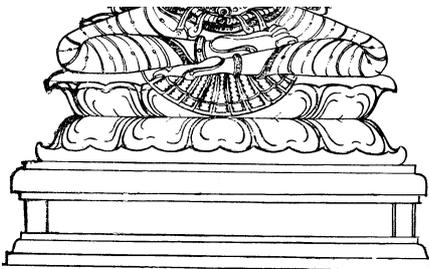


law-of-conduct (*dharmā*) and wisdom (*jñāna*). The Lotus is also symbolic of the enlightened mind. It rises in the mud of material existence gradually growing through the waters until it reaches the surface and then opens up to the sun in all its glory. Water splashed upon a lotus leaf never remains but immediately slips off. In the same way the dirt of worldliness never stains the enlightened being. The lotus base therefore establishes the idea that the devata or buddha contemplated is nothing but a projection of the mind, and has no existence apart from the devotee.

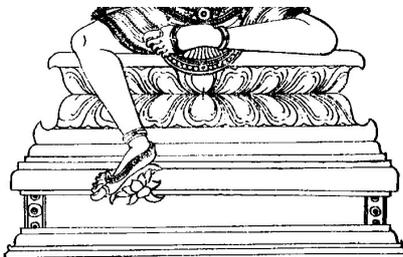
## The Postures.

The deities and buddhas are shown in various stereotyped postures, reclining, sitting with one foot raised, two feet raised or two feet down or standing.

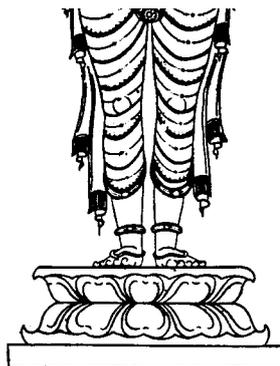
The reclining posture indicates absolute transcendence, a state of inscrutable "otherness" and is beyond all our powers of comprehension.



Seated there are three stages of manifestation being depicted. Both legs crossed in *padmasana* (lotus posture) indicate a state of transcendence with a potential for manifestation. One leg lowered indicates a concern for sentient beings, a desire to be pro-active and an intention to engage in acts of compassion and liberation. Both legs down indicates a full intention to assist the devotee and an impending act of great compassion guiding others to enlightenment.



— the closeness of our inner within our minds and the world



Standing indicates full manifestation within our realm and capacity to comprehend — it indicates immanence being. It is the Divine in full action in which we live.

## The Four Arms.

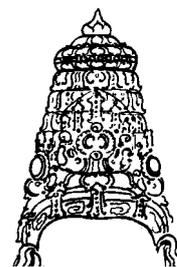
Most Hindu deities are depicted with four arms, these represent:—

- The poises or states of Reality:— *Brahman* — the Absolute all inclusive totality of being; *Īśvara* — the Personal Creative Deity, *Hiraṇyagarbha* — the conglomeration of individual Selves or *Jīvas*, and *Virāṭ* — the manifest universe.
- The cardinal directions; indicating that the god is all pervading and has perfect dominion over all the directions.
- The four divisions of society; intellectuals, administrators, entrepreneurs, and workers.
- The four stages of life; student, householder, retirement and renunciate.
- The four aspects of Hindu psychology — the lower cogitative mind (*manas*) the intellect (*buddhi*), ego (*ahamkara*) and consciousness (*cit*).
- The four levels of consciousness; waking (*jagrata*), dream (*svapna*), sub-consciousness (*sushupti*) and transcendental consciousness (*turiya*).
- The four essential components of dharma; truth (*satya*), meditation (*tapa*), compassion (*daya*), and charity (*Dana*).
- The four aims of human endeavor (*purusharthas*); pleasure (*kama*), prosperity (*artha*), righteousness (*dharma*) and liberation (*moksha*).
- The four "immeasurable" qualities — friendliness (*maitri*), compassion (*karuna*), empathetic joy (*mudita*) and non-attachment (*upeksha*).



## The Crown

The crown is the quintessential symbol of sovereignty and is also said to be indicative of the Unknowable Reality which is trying to be presented through this deity.



## The Earrings

The earrings shaped like mythical sea-monsters (*makara*) represent the two methods of pursuing knowledge — intellectual knowledge (*sankhya*) and intuitive perception (*yoga*).



## The Face of Glory

Very often the deity is framed by a doorway like formation with a monster's head over the top. This is a common feature of many of doorways to the old houses, temples and palaces in India and South East Asia. This is called a *kirti-mukha* which literally means "the face-of-glory" and it represents the principle of all-consuming Time. Since Time is the great destroyer and takes from us all

that is precious and separates us from our loved ones and objects it is shown as being wrathful and terrifying. It serves to remind the contemplator that everything is conditioned by time and space and all things in the universe including the deity depicted are all subjected to appearance and disappearance. Everything is impermanent and subject to constant change.



## The Gestures

The language of the hands known as *mudra* is very significant in all forms of Indian art — in dance as well as sculpture and ritual. There are some *mudras* which are common to many deities and buddhas. These are:—

**Abhaya Mudra** — *the gesture of fearlessness* — the palm displayed with the fingers pointing to the sky. Indicates the practice of harmlessness to all beings in word, deed and thought (*ahimsa*) and granting to all beings the gift of freedom from fear.



**Varada Mudra** — *the gesture of generosity* — the palm displayed, fingers pointing downwards. This indicates the benevolence of the deity as well as the teaching of the principle of generosity to all beings.



**Chin Mudra** — *the gesture of teaching* — palm displayed, fingers upwards thumb and fore-finger joined at the tips. This indicates the imparting of knowledge, from the deity to the contemplator and having received the knowledge the aspirant is expected to pass it on to others. The thumb pressing on the index finger indicates suppression of egoism, the 3 upraised fingers indicate overcoming self-referent desire, anger and greed.



**Dhyana Mudra** — *the gesture of meditation*, this takes two forms: palms placed one over the other in the lap or arms stretched out, hands on the knees with the palms outward displaying the *chin mudra*. The former indicates meditation using an abstract or formless focus, and the later expresses the idea of meditation upon a more tangible object.



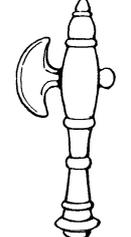
**Tarjani Mudra** — the gesture of vigilance — fist closed with the index finger raised. This mudra is usually found in images of protective or guardian deities and indicative of the need to be extremely mindful when approaching the spiritual path. The index finger is also representative of the ego which is the major obstacle to spiritual advancement. It also represents the principle of aggression and harm — aspects of personality which need to be overcome in the preparatory stages of spiritual life.

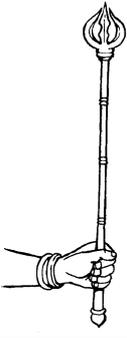
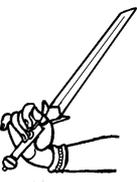


## Common Iconic Symbols

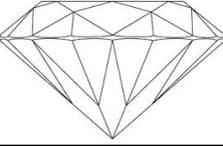
Symbol		Esoteric Meaning
	<b>Pāśa</b> Noose	The 3 bonds that bind us to the cycle of rebirth – <i>avidya</i> (ignorance) <i>karma</i> (action) <i>vasana</i> (habitual patterns). It also has three other meanings attracting oneself to the Dharma, tying oneself by the constraints of Dharma and destroying all obstacles to one's spiritual evolution. (The pāśa represents the three fetters <i>maya</i> , <i>karma</i> and <i>mala</i> .)
	<b>Aṅkuśa</b> Elephant Goad	Incentive to continue in spiritual practice and the application of the teachings. The urging of the guru which drives us to practice and apply. Also the control of anger.
	<b>Churi</b> dagger	The spiritual path - the razor's edge which needs to be treaded with great care and vigilance.
	<b>Vīnā</b> Lute	Inner sound of spiritual harmony; the vibration of the atoms in motion, creation, the sound of the spheres, the harmony of all the diffuse elements of the cosmos. Music and dancing — the arts.

	<p><b>Kamaṇḍalu</b> water jug</p>	<p>Fullness and generosity, also purity and purification.</p>
	<p><b>Gadā</b> mace</p>	<p>Primarily a symbol of Vishnu but also shared among many of the deities. The mace is a symbol of sovereignty and the Cosmic Order. It also symbolises Karma the law of cause and effect.</p>
	<p><b>Salipallava</b> rice-sprig</p>	<p>bounty of nature, fecundity and abundance.</p>
	<p><b>Dhvaja</b> flag</p>	<p>Making oneself known to others, indicating that one is a source of charity and safety to all sentient beings. An indication of the triumph of the Dharma.</p>
	<p><b>Khatvāṅga</b> club with skull</p>	<p>Impermanence, dissolution, also represents the 8 mystical powers obtained through yoga meditation.</p>
	<p><b>Kheṭaka</b> shield</p>	<p>Security, defence, protection of oneself, deflection of negativity and assault by others.</p>
	<p><b>Ḍamaru</b> Hour-glass Drum</p>	<p>Union of the masculine and feminine and the projection of the universe through sound. When the two halves part the sound ceases and the universe dissolves.</p>

	<p><b>Padma</b> Lotus</p>	<p>By reproducing from its own matrix rather than the soil the lotus is a symbol of spontaneous generation (<i>svayambhu</i>). It grows in mud but rises in immaculate purity to the surface and opens to the sun - the evolution begins in the mire of <i>samsara</i> but rises to full enlightenment and purity. The closed lotus symbolizes potential and the open lotus — actualization.</p>
	<p><b>Śaṅkha</b> Conch</p>	<p>In battle conveys the instruction of the commander to the troops. It represents the diffusion of the Dharma teachings and the proclamation of war upon the negative forces of the mind. Also creation through sound and the Pranava — AUM.</p>
	<p><b>Cakra</b> Discus or wheel</p>	<p>The wheel is the symbol of the Dharma which rotates and spins its beneficial influence in all directions. It also symbolises the cycle of Samsara — of repeated birth and death which turns endlessly and from which we desire to be liberated. It is also used as a weapon and it's speed is faster than the speed of the mind — thus representing the cosmic mind which destroys our enemies in the form of the afflictive emotions.</p>
	<p><b>Sarpa</b> Snakes</p>	<p>Kundalini - sexual energy latent within the lowest chakra – the muladhara at the base of the spine. Also symbolizes the control of anger the worst of all the negative emotions.</p>
	<p><b>Śuka</b> Parrot</p>	<p>Truth, the transmission of the teachings. The parrot repeats exactly what it hears without clarification, modification or contortion.</p>
	<p><b>Pātra</b> Bowl</p>	<p>In the hands of a Rishi or the Buddha it symbolizes the begging bowl and the idea of generosity. In the hands of the wrathful deities it is a skull bowl filled with blood which symbolizes the achievement of higher states of consciousness through the elimination of the lower mind and notion of self.</p>
	<p><b>Paraśu</b> Axe</p>	<p>Non-attachment - the severing of our ties and bonds to the material world.</p>

	<p><b>Ghaṇṭa</b> Bell</p>	<p>Impermanence. The phenomenal world which is impermanent and evanescent. Creation of the transient universe through sound — being perceived but not held and kept.</p>
	<p><b>Cāmara</b> Fly-whisk</p>	<p>The obedience to the law and in particular to the highest principle of Dharma — <i>ahimsa</i>. Also represents the following of the teacher and the tradition.</p>
	<p><b>Vajra</b> Thunderbolt</p>	<p>Diamond wisdom — the ultimate truth as adamantine and indestructable, but which destroys all that is other than truth. Symbol of sovereignty and the Cosmic Order.</p>
	<p><b>Triśūla</b> Trident</p>	<p>Control over action, speech and thought. Also fire — Agni and its 3 forms. The 3 paths to liberation Bhakti – love, Jñāna – wisdom and Karma– skilful action</p>
	<p><b>Kunta</b> Spear</p>	<p>One-pointedness of concentration applied during meditation aimed at the goal of perfection. Focussed attention at eliminating the inner demons of delusion, anger, greed etc.</p>
	<p><b>Khaḍga</b> Sword</p>	<p>Sword of wisdom which cuts through illusion and destroys all ignorance- hidden within all of us like a scabbard - needs to be withdrawn with skill and used with care and precision.</p>
	<p><b>Pustaka</b> Book</p>	<p>The Vedas – sacred Scriptures and the formal learning of all sorts of knowledge and theory.</p>
	<p><b>Japa-Mālā</b> Rosary</p>	<p>Sādhana or spiritual practice. Meditation and the recitation of mantras.</p>

	<p><b>Cāpa/śara</b> Bow &amp; Arrow</p>	<p>Concentration and focussing of the mind upon the goals of overcoming lower nature and achieving transformation, enlightenment and Liberation.</p> <p>In the hands of Kama the god of love, it represents the attachment of the five senses to their objects.</p>
	<p><b>Ādarśa</b> Mirror</p>	<p>Notion of the evanescence of the material delusion. The world is but a reflection in the mirror of the pure mind. So the mirror represents the perfectly clear mind in which all is reflected but not held or contained. The whole universe is a reflection of the Absolute Brahman.</p>
	<p><b>Kalaśa</b> Vase</p>	<p>The receptacle of water which is the foremost representative of life in general, water is also allied to breath and all-pervading cosmic consciousness. The heart of the devotee should be ready like the jar to contain and hold the waters of truth and universal wellbeing. The jar also contains the nectar of immortality — liberation from conditioned existence.</p>
	<p><b>Mrga</b> Deer</p>	<p>The deer symbolises gentleness as well as attentiveness — whatever its doing the deer is always mindful of predators. This is indicative of the way we should live in the world — practicing ahimsa and being mindful of the impermanence and transitory nature of all created phenomena.</p>
	<p><b>Chatra</b> The Parasol</p>	<p>In Indian culture only high dignitaries were allowed the use of a parasol the largest ones usually white were reserved for the king and for the gods. The larger the number of smaller parasols heaped above the main one, the higher the personage represented. Thus in Indian culture the parasol is a symbol of spiritual power.</p>
	<p><b>Durva</b> lawn grass</p>	<p>Associated with Gaṇeśa, it is the symbol of indestructibility and regeneration — offered in pūjās for the prolonging of life.</p>
	<p><b>Nandi</b> The Bull</p>	<p>The libido, also Dharma — the way to enlightenment and liberation. Dharma has four feet — <i>satyam</i> = truth, <i>tapa</i> = austerity, <i>daya</i> = compassion, <i>dāna</i> = charity.</p>

	<p><b>munda-mala</b></p>	<p>Perpetual revolution of ages, the transient nature of all phenomenon (nāma and rūpa). It also represents all the false personalities we assume for creating identity. The myriad forms that egoism (ahankāra) takes.</p>
	<p>Vibhuti</p>	<p>The sublimated power of procreation. Kāma or Eros was destroyed and turned into ashes by the ray from the third-eye of Shiva. Ashes also symbolise the ultimate transience of everything.</p>
	<p><b>Chintā-maṇi</b> Wish-fulfilling gem</p>	<p>Represents the mind, the precious jewel of the perfected mind in which all wishes and aims are accomplished.</p>
	<p><b>Purna-kumbha</b> [The Full Vase]</p>	<p>symbolises fullness, and spiritual perfection which overflows to serve all beings.</p>
	<p><b>Srivatsa</b> [endless knot]</p>	<p>Symbolises the way things are = endless and complex — without beginning and end.</p>