

## CHAPTER 11

# NAMASKAR

By now, you are familiar with the term “Bha-Ra-Ta-Natyam” which represents the classical dance form from India. We have explored the science behind the origins, set the stage, understood the history of Bharatanatyam, and essence of Bharatanatyam. We went farther to explore the importance of theory in performing arts, and introduced and defined “natya”, and traced its origin and explored “rasa and dwani.” In this chapter, we will go one level deeper to understand the nuances of the dance form.

Join me on this exploration. Bha-Ra-Ta-Natyam comprises of four syllables in Sanskrit which may be understood as:

1. Bha (or Bhava) = Expression
2. Ra (Raga, Ragam) = Music
3. Ta (Thala, Thalam) = Beats
4. Natya (Natyam) = Dance

So, Bharatanatyam is a beautiful combination of expression, music, beats, and dance coming together, creating this complete harmony. We begin and end every dance lesson with a salutation. A salutation is a way of offering prayer, greetings, and seeking blessing of the God, the guru, or the teacher and the audience that they make that journey memorable.

**Traditional Roots:** Namaskar, derived from the Sanskrit word “namah” meaning “to bow” or “to pay homage,” is deeply rooted in Indian culture and spirituality. In Bharatanatyam, Namaskar is not just a customary greeting but a profound act of respect towards the divine, the guru (teacher), and the audience. It symbolizes humility, surrender, and gratitude, reflecting the core values of the dance form.

**Symbolic Meaning:** Namaskar involves a series of specific gestures and movements that are rich in symbolism. It typically begins with the dancer joining their palms together at the heart center, known as Anjali mudra, representing the unity of the individual’s mind, body, and soul. The dancer then extends their arms outward, touching their forehead, chest, and thighs, symbolizing reverence, and acknowledging the divine presence in these three realms.

**Conveying Emotions:** Namaskar serves as a medium for expressing a range of emotions in Bharatanatyam. Through subtle variations in hand gestures, body postures, and facial expressions, dancers can convey feelings of joy, gratitude, devotion, or even sorrow. The Namaskar gesture, combined with nuanced movements, helps establish a connection with the audience, evoking a shared emotional experience.

**Establishing Connection:** Namaskar not only establishes a connection with the audience but also fosters a sense of unity and connection within the dance community. Before and after performances, dancers often greet each other with Namaskar as a mark of mutual respect and appreciation for their shared passion. This practice reinforces the sense of camaraderie and collective celebration of the art form.

**Spiritual Significance:** Beyond its cultural and artistic aspects, Namaskar holds spiritual significance in Bharatanatyam. It is a way of acknowledging the divine presence within oneself, the guru, and the audience. By performing Namaskar with a sincere and focused mind, dancers seek to transcend the physical realm and access a deeper spiritual consciousness, enhancing their performance and connecting with the divine energy.

## **Posture and Adavus**

A posture is a frozen position of the body. Posture gives you balance and alignment, and the body can vary in different postures. These postures are the foundations of Bharatanatyam and can come to life with movement to create basic steps called Adavus. “An Adavu is defined as “the basic rhythmic unit of dance within a specific tempo and time structure that involves composite movements pertaining to Nritya”.” (“Adavus – Nritya Natyam”)

Adavus can be understood as a series of structured steps or units of movement in Bharatanatyam. Adavus are the basic dance steps in Bharatanatyam. They serve as the fundamental building blocks upon which the entire dance repertoire is constructed. The Adavu is a combination of:

- A. Sthanakas - leg and feet postures**
- B. Mandalam – standing posture**
- C. Charis - body movements**
- D. Hasta Mudra - hand gestures**

Their purpose is to provide a solid foundation for the dancer’s technical skills, coordination, and overall mastery of the dance form. The technique of any classical dance rests on the sturdy base of the Adavus. The Adavu system is a sound and logical ground upon which the pedagogy of Indian dance is based. (“Adavu System in Bharatanatyam - Satvikam Shivam School of Indian ...”)

Origins of today’s Adavus can be traced 300 - 400 years ago to Gangai Muttu Nattuvanar, the ancestor of Thanjavur Quartet which has references in the Sangita Saramrita by King Tulaja II. (“Adavu System in Bharatanatyam - Satvikam Shivam School of Indian ...”) There are many styles or traditions of Bharatanatyam, and so therefore, with Adavus. The most common styles are Vazhuvoor, Kalakshetra, Thanjavur, Pandanallur, and Mysuru. These styles were born in a particular region after which the style is named. There are about 64-120 variations of Adavus practiced before the main items are taught. (“Adavu System in Bharatanatyam - Satvikam Shivam School of Indian ...”)

Adavus are usually practiced in 3 speeds (called kaalams). All Adavus performed at three speeds.

Sanskrit name	English transliteration	Tempo of dance	Tempo variation
वलिम्बिलय	vilambita-laya	Slow	normal
मध्यलय	madhya-laya	Medium	doubling normal speed
दुरुतलय	druta-laya	Fast	quadrupling normal speed

While learning the Adavus, importance is given to:

1. Anga shuddha (correct postures), an essential aspect of Bharatanatyam, as it enhances the visual appeal, expressiveness, and technical finesse of the dance. “Anga” means body, and “Shuddha” means purity or cleanliness.
  - a. Body Alignment: Anga Shuddha focuses on maintaining correct body alignment. It involves keeping the spine straight, shoulders relaxed, and maintaining a balanced posture throughout the performance. Proper alignment enhances the visual appeal and grace of the dancer’s movements.
  - b. Hand Gestures (Hastas): Anga Shuddha emphasizes precise and well-defined hand gestures or mudras. Each mudra has specific meanings and conveys emotions, characters, or ideas. The fingers, palms, and wrists are articulated with clarity and control to bring out the subtleties of expression.
  - c. Facial Expressions (Abhinaya): Anga Shuddha incorporates refined facial expressions to effectively convey emotions, narratives, and characters. The eyes, eyebrows, cheeks, and lips are used to express various emotions with clarity and depth, enhancing the storytelling aspect of the dance.
  - d. Footwork (Adavus): Anga Shuddha emphasizes clean and precise footwork. The dancer’s foot movements, including stepping, stomping, gliding, and intricate patterns, are executed with accuracy, strength, and control. Proper footwork adds rhythm and dynamics to the performance.
  - e. Body Movements: Anga Shuddha involves refined body movements, including graceful walks, turns, bends, and postures. The dancer maintains fluidity, control, and balance in executing movements, creating a harmonious and pleasing visual presentation.
  - f. Abdominal Control: Anga Shuddha requires a conscious engagement of the core muscles. This helps in maintaining stability, control, and balance in the body movements and postures, contributing to the overall precision and gracefulness.
2. Tala Shuddha (correct rhythm) refers to the adherence to the rhythmic structure and precision in the execution of beats and rhythmic patterns. Tala, meaning rhythm, and Shuddha, meaning purity, together signify the importance of maintaining accuracy, clarity, and consistency in rhythmic elements during the dance performance. This includes:
  - a. Adherence to Tala: Tala Shuddha emphasizes the dancer’s ability to follow the prescribed rhythm, or tala, of the accompanying music. The dancer maintains a keen sense of timing, aligning their movements and footwork precisely with the beats of the tala. This includes staying coordinated with the sam (first beat) and maintaining the proper variations and accents within the rhythmic cycle.

- b. **Clarity in Beats:** Tala Shudda requires clarity in the execution of beats. The dancer strikes the rhythmic accents or “bol” with precision and consistency. Each beat is articulated distinctly and accurately, enhancing the overall rhythmic clarity and dynamics of the performance.
- c. **Rhythmic Patterns:** Tala Shudda involves proficiency in performing intricate rhythmic patterns or “korvais.” These patterns are composed sequences of beats that follow specific rhythmic cycles. The dancer executes these patterns with clarity, maintaining the integrity of the composition and ensuring a seamless flow of rhythm.
- d. **Layam (Internal Pulse):** Tala Shudda also encompasses the internal pulse or “layam” within the dancer. The dancer maintains a steady and controlled sense of rhythm throughout the performance. This includes maintaining a consistent tempo, subtle variations, and precise pauses, enhancing the expressiveness and musicality of the dance.
- e. **Coordination with Music:** Tala Shudda emphasizes the synchronization of the dancer’s movements with the musical accompaniment, such as percussion instruments like the mridangam or tabla. The dancer maintains a close connection with the rhythm played by the musicians, responding to rhythmic cues, and maintaining a harmonious coordination with the music.

By practicing Tala Shudda, Bharatanatyam dancers cultivate a keen sense of rhythm, precision, and musicality in their performances. It enables them to highlight the beauty and intricacy of rhythmic elements, enhancing the overall aesthetic appeal engaging the audience with the captivating interplay of movement and rhythm.

## TYPES OF ADAVUS

Adavus are categorized into diverse groups based on their characteristics and complexity. Each Adavu has its unique structure, rhythm, and accompanying hand gestures, allowing for a diverse range of movements and expressions. These include:

- a. **Tatta Adavu:** This involves eight steps and includes the words “thiyaa thai.” It is also alternatively known as the “thai thai tham.” (“Bharatanatyam Adavus – Complete Guide to Learn Adavus Steps”)
- b. **Natta Adavu:** This also involves eight steps which are denoted by the words of Thaiyyum That Tha and the words “thaiyuum “. (“Bharatanatyam Adavus – Complete Guide to Learn Adavus Steps”)
- c. **Mettu Adavu:** This is the basic Mettu Adavu, which involves a combination of steps that include crossing the feet in various patterns, tapping the feet, and executing precise movements while maintaining rhythm.
- d. **Nattei Adavu:** This is the basic Nattei Adavu, which involves delicate and gentle movements of the feet. The steps in this Adavu are executed with smoothness and grace, creating a flowing and lyrical quality.
- e. **Kuditta Mettu Adavu:** This basic step is characterized by first jumping and then striking with the heels on the floor, involves a combination of steps that include tapping the feet in various patterns, swift movements, and intricate footwork while maintaining the rhythm. These moves are done sitting in the Araimandi position to give it an appealing presentation.

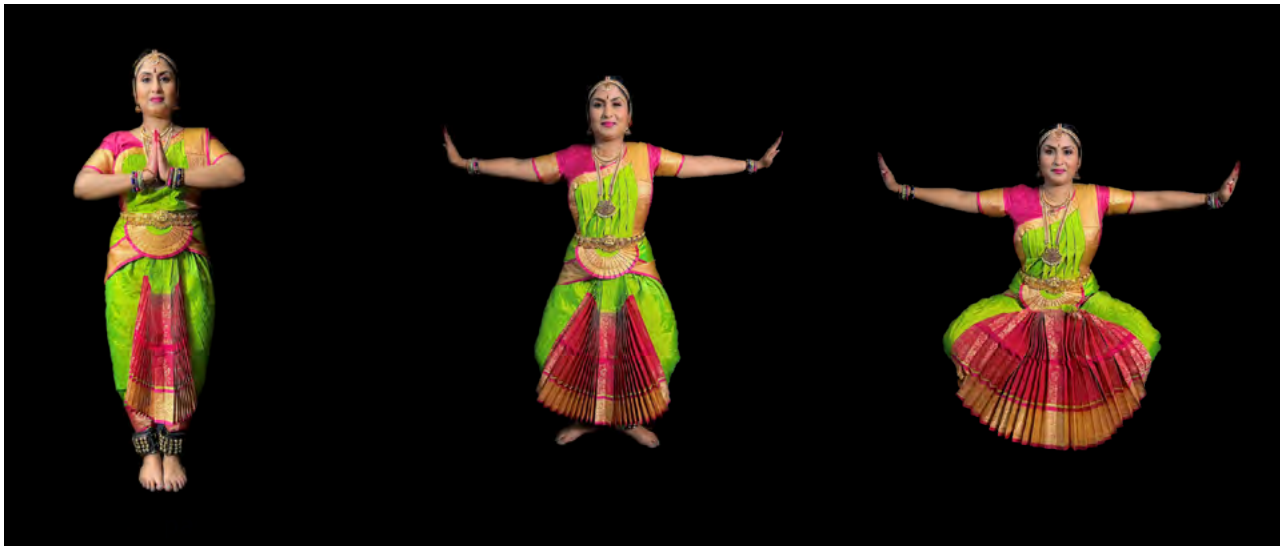
- Kuditta Mettu Adavu (Dhatta): This variation of Kuditta Mettu Adavu incorporates specific hand gestures (mudras) known as Dhattu Hastas. The feet perform the footwork patterns while the hands execute the Dhattu Hastas, adding an expressive element to the adavu.
  - Kuditta Mettu Adavu (Natta): This variation of Kuditta Mettu Adavu combines the footwork patterns with Natta Adavu, which involves intricate footwork and swift movements, creating a more complex and energetic sequence.
- f. Ta Tai Tai Tam Adavus: This Mettu Adavu involves a combination of steps where the feet are crossed in different directions, tapping the feet, and executing specific movements while maintaining a consistent rhythm.
- g. Tatti Mettu Adavu: The Tatti Metti Adavu is divided into two parts whereby “tatti” means tapping on the floor while “metti” means heels staying connected with the floor. (“Bharatanatyam Adavus – Complete Guide to Learn Adavus Steps”) This basic step is one of the most relevant and commonly used ones in the Bharatanatyam dance and is seen mostly in Jatiswarams and Tillanas.
- h. Tei Tei Dhatta Mettu Adavus: Tei Tei Dhatta Mettu Adavu is another variation that combines the footwork patterns of Mettu Adavus with specific hand gestures (mudras) known as Dhattu Hastas. The feet cross and tap in different patterns while the hands perform the Dhattu Hastas.
- i. Mandi Adavus: The knee is bent to perform this Adavu and has several types performed by the students in three different speeds.
- j. Tirmanam Adavus: This consists of two steps and the words involved in the dance are:
- i. Tha “dhin gina thom”
  - ii. “Thari kita thom.”
- k. Kattu Adavus: Kattu davus are a set of Adavus that emphasize forceful footwork and energetic movements. These Adavus involve strong stamping, striking, and kicking movements, displaying power and agility in the dancer’s performance.
- l. Nadai Adavus: Nadai, meaning “gait” or “walk,” signifies the different rhythmic patterns and timings in which the steps are performed. These Adavus add complexity and dynamic variations to the dancer’s footwork.
- Nadai Adavu (Chatusram): This is the basic Nadai Adavu performed in Chatusram, which has a four-beat rhythmic pattern. The steps in this Adavu are executed with clarity and precision, maintaining a steady rhythm.
  - Nadai Adavu (Tisram): Nadai Adavu in Tisram follows a three-beat rhythmic pattern. The steps in this Adavu incorporate variations and syncopations, creating intricate and playful movements.
  - Nadai Adavu (Kandam): Nadai Adavu in Kandam follows a five-beat rhythmic pattern. The steps in this Adavu emphasize longer movements, highlighting grace and fluidity while maintaining the rhythmic structure.
  - Nadai Adavu (Misram): Nadai Adavu in Misram combines two different rhythmic patterns. It involves alternating between Chatusram (four beats) and Tisram (three beats), creating a rhythmic interplay and adding complexity to the footwork.

**Technical Proficiency:** Adavus play a crucial role in developing technical proficiency in Bharatanatyam. They require precise coordination of footwork, hand gestures, body movements, and facial expressions. Practicing Adavus help dancers refine their balance, agility, and flexibility, enabling them to execute intricate movements with grace and precision. Additionally, mastering the complex rhythmic patterns within Adavus enhance the dancer's ability to synchronize with the accompanying music.

**Aesthetic Beauty:** Adavus contribute significantly to the aesthetic beauty of Bharatanatyam performances. Each Adavu highlights the dancer's skill, artistic interpretation, and ability to convey emotions through movement. The rhythmic patterns of Adavus create a captivating visual spectacle, enhanced by the synchronization of the dancer's footwork, hand gestures, and facial expressions. Adavus also serve as a means of storytelling, allowing the dancer to portray various characters, moods, and narratives on the stage.

**Expansion and Variation:** While Adavus provide a foundation, they also allow for creativity and innovation within Bharatanatyam. Experienced dancers often incorporate variations and improvisations in their performances, infusing their unique style while staying true to the essence of the Adavus. This artistic flexibility keeps the dance form dynamic, allowing it to evolve while maintaining its traditional roots.

## A. STHANAKAS



**Samapadam / Sthanakam:** It is the basic posture of the body in Bharatanatyam. (“Leg Postures in Bharatanatyam – Nysa Dance Academy”) The perfect alignment of the hands comes when you place both hands with the thumbs-up position at both sides of your waist in the Ardha Chandra Hasta or the Half Moon style. “The upper portion and the lower portion of the body are aligned in a way that the body frame neither looks very firm nor very relaxed.” (“5 Best Bharatanatyam Postures You Must Know - ipassio”) The chin is slightly bent (an inch down) and the eyes face the front. Both feet are placed together without any space between them.

**Araimandi / Ardhamandala:** It is the most important (and hardest) posture in Bharatanatyam. (“Leg Postures in Bharatanatyam – Nysa Dance Academy”) “Arai” is a Tamil word which means “Half” and “Mandi” means “to sit.” Hence, this is a posture of half-sitting. “Every step in Bharatanatyam will involve

the dancer sitting in the Aramandi posture.” (“Leg Postures in Bharatanatyam – Nysa Dance Academy”) In this posture,

- the dancer’s heels are joined together, the toes of both legs pointed to the opposite direction. A straight line should form from one end of the toe, through the heels, to the end of the other toe.
- the dancer squats halfway down, making sure to maintain the feet in this same position. When the dancer sits this way, a diamond shape will form between the legs which must be always maintained for a good Aramandi. Maintain a gap of 2 fingers between your feet.

“This posture gives a perfect triangular formation to the body.” (“Know Everything About these 5 Bharatanatyam Postures”) It emerged in 263 C.E. from the Aayata Mandala and has been mentioned in the Abhinaya Darpan. The instructions which are given to the dancer during the Arai Mandi position, are as follows:

- Do not allow the lower abdomen to protrude.
- Stand straight with your back erect.
- Do not lean forward.

**Muzhumandi:** It represents the complete sitting position in Bharatanatyam. The position of the feet is kept the same in the Muzhumandi position as in the Araimandi or the Ardhamandalam position. This joins the heels and keeps the toes apart from each other in this position. “In this posture the thighs are stretched in opposite direction, the heels to be kept in a joined position and the feet are kept apart from each other to provide balance to the body.” (“Know Everything About these 5 Bharatanatyam Postures”) This is a common posture or body formation while performing Bharatanatyam.



Swastika in a Dance



Prenkhana in a Dance



Eka Pada in a Dance

**Swastika:** In this posture, the dancer keeps the right leg on the toes across the flat positioned left leg. It is done in an Aramandi or Sthanakam position.

**Prenkhana:** This posture is done in an Aramandi or Sthanakam position with one knee bent, and toe kept in the opposite direction. (“Know Everything About these 5 Bharatanatyam Postures”) The other leg is kept stretched out and the heels of the feet stay in contact the ground. This posture is introduced during the learning of the Natta Adavu. To achieve the stance, one needs to tap the right leg. “The right

hand is placed at a 45-degree angle, above shoulder level in Katakamukha hasta.” (“5 Best Bharatanatyam Postures You Must Know - ipassio”)

**Eka Pada** is performed in the static position, then the posture is Sthana, and when the Eka pada is executed taking a turn, then the posture is Bhramari. While executing Eka Pada, one needs to stand on one foot, with the leg stretched straight, and place the other leg across the knee of the standing leg. The knee of the crossed leg is flexed and open so that the knee points sideways.

## B. MANDALAS

“Mandalam” refers to the spatial arrangement or formation created by the dancer’s movements on the stage. It involves skillful positioning and coordination of the body and limbs to create geometric patterns and aesthetically pleasing shapes. Mandalam plays a significant role in enhancing the visual appeal and composition of a Bharatanatyam performance.

**Group Formations:** Mandalam includes group formations where multiple dancers come together to create synchronized patterns. These formations may include straight lines, circles, arcs, triangles, or other geometric shapes. Mandalam emphasizes the harmonious coordination and unity among the dancers in creating visually appealing compositions.

**Solo Formations:** Even in solo performances, the dancer utilizes Mandalam to create captivating patterns and shapes with their body movements. They may move across the stage, changing their positioning and orientation to form different geometric arrangements. These formations contribute to the dynamic and aesthetic quality of the performance.

**Anga Mandalam:** Anga Mandalam refers to the proper alignment and positioning of various body parts. It involves maintaining symmetry, balance, and clarity in the placement of the limbs, hands, feet, and torso. By achieving Anga Mandalam, the dancer creates a sense of elegance and grace in their movements.

**Use of Space:** Mandalam involves utilizing the entire performance space effectively. The dancer moves fluidly and confidently, covering different areas of the stage, creating varied patterns, and ensuring that the movements and formations are visible to the audience.

**Aesthetic Appeal:** Mandalam enhances the aesthetic appeal and visual impact of the dance performance. The precise formations and patterns created by the dancers add beauty, symmetry, and precision to the overall composition. It adds depth and dimension to the stage presentation, captivating the audience’s attention.

Mandalam requires spatial awareness, control over body movements, and a keen sense of artistic composition. Dancer’s practice and refine their Mandalam skills to create visually captivating arrangements, highlighting the beauty and precision of Bharatanatyam as a performing art.



## C. CHARIS

“Charis” refers to stylized walking movements that are an integral part of the dance vocabulary. It involves the graceful and controlled movement of the body, particularly the lower body, while maintaining specific postures and positions. These movements are used to depict various characters, convey emotions, and create a dynamic visual appeal in the dance performance.

There are the four types of Charis in Bharatanatyam:

- a. Samapada Charis involve balanced and symmetrical walking with equal weight distribution on both feet. The feet are placed in parallel positions, creating a harmonious and centered movement. Samapada Charis are commonly used for depicting divine beings, deities, or characters representing grace and poise.
- b. Mandala Charis involves circular walking patterns. The dancer moves in a circular motion, often with one foot placed in front of the other while making rotations. Mandala Charis is associated with celestial characters, suggesting a divine or ethereal presence.
- c. Mayura Charis imitates the gait of a peacock. The dancer incorporates graceful and swaying movements, capturing the essence of the majestic bird. Mayura Charis symbolizes beauty, elegance, and enchantment. They are often used to portray feminine characters or to express aesthetic qualities.
- d. Alidha Charis involve walking with one foot placed in front of the other, creating an elegant and flowing movement. This style of walking adds a sense of grace, rhythm, and fluidity to the dance. Alidha Charis are commonly used for depicting various characters and expressing different moods and emotions.

**Body Posture and Alignment:** Charis require the dancer to maintain proper body posture and alignment. The spine is kept straight, the shoulders are relaxed, and the head is held high, highlighting grace and poise while walking. Proper body alignment adds elegance and fluidity to the movements.

**Transitions and Variations:** Charis involve smooth transitions between different walking styles and variations. Dancers seamlessly shift from one Charis to another, incorporating changes in speed, direction, and rhythm to create dynamic and engaging movements.

Charis in Bharatanatyam highlight the dancer’s ability to embody various characters and convey emotions through stylized walking movements. Through practice and training, dancers develop control, balance, and grace in executing Charis, enhancing the overall artistic presentation and storytelling aspect of the dance performance.

## D. HASTA MUDRAS

Hasta Mudras are hand gestures used in Bharatanatyam to convey meaning, emotions, and narratives. These gestures play a vital role in enhancing the expressiveness and storytelling aspect of the dance. These include:

1. **Asamyuta Hastas**, also known as Single-Hand Gestures. These hand poses or gestures are performed using a single hand and are an integral part of Bharatanatyam’s expressive vocabulary. Each Asamyuta Hasta has its own unique meaning and symbolism. Here is a list of the 28 Asamyuta Hastas in Bharatanatyam:

Pataka	Mukula	Bhramara	Kapittha
Tripataka	Hamsasya	Hamsasya-mukula	Katakamukha
Ardha Pataka	Hamsapaksha	Ardhachandra	Sarpashirsha
Kartarimukha	Sandamsa	Ardhachandra-kara	Mrigashirsha
Mayura	Mukula-pataka	Shukatunda	Simhamukha
Arala	Sola	Mushthi	Kangula
Shikhara	Chatura	Shikhara-pataka	Alapallava

These Asamyuta Hastas provide a wide range of hand poses that help convey emotions, depict characters, and narrate stories in Bharatanatyam. Each gesture is performed with precision and artistic finesse to add depth and expression to the dancer's performance. Mastering the execution and meaning of these Asamyuta Hastas is crucial for a Bharatanatyam dancer to effectively communicate and connect with the audience.

2. **Samyuta Hastas**, also known as Nritta Hastas. These Samyuta Hastas are formed by combining two or more hasta mudras (hand gestures) together. They provide a broader range of expressive possibilities for the dancer. Here is a list of the 24 Samyuta Hastas in Bharatanatyam:

Anjali-pataka	Sarpashirsha-sikhara	Arala-sarpashirsha	Kapittha-alapadma
Kapota-alapadma	Katakavardhana-anjali	Shikhara-kartarimukha	Kartarimukha-pataka
Karkata-swastika	Mayura-pataka	Mrugasira-ardhapataka	Alapadma-tripataka
Katakamukha-mrugasira	Ardhachandra-pataka	Mukula-kataka	Kataka-sarpashirsha
Alapadma-kataka	Ardhapataka-tripataka	Svastika-pataka	Tripataka-sikhara
Shukatunda-mukula	Kartarimukha-kataka	Shikhara-kataka	Kataka-mukula

In a later chapter, we will cover each aspect of these gestures in detail.

