

# Eliot Weinberger / AT THE SIGN OF THE HAND

I.

In English Benedictine monasteries around the year 1000, it was forbidden to speak, so novices were given the *Monasteriales Indicia*, an Anglo-Saxon handbook of hand signs:

If you want bread, put your two thumbs and index fingers together.

If you want cheese, put your hands together as if you were pressing cheese.

If you want raw vegetables, put your finger on your left hand.

If you want leeks, bore your finger into your hand, then put your hand flat to your nose as if you were smelling something.

If you want beans, put your index finger on the first joint of your thumb.

If you want peas, put your thumb on your little finger.

If you want an apple, crook your right thumb into the middle of your hand and take hold of it with your fingers and lift up your fist.

If you want a pear, do the same, but spread your fingers.

If you want a plum, do the same but with your left hand, and stroke your fist with your index finger.

If you want cherries, put your left thumb on the joint of your little finger, then pinch it with your right hand.

If you want eggs, scrape with your finger on your left thumb.

If you want salt, shake your hand with your three fingers as if you were salting something.

If you want pepper, knock with one index finger on the other.

If you want honey, put your finger on your tongue.

If you want fish, move your hand in the way a fish moves its tail when it swims.

If you want eel, move your right hand and then put it on your left arm, with the left hand stretched out, and stroke across it with your right hand, as if you were cutting it.

If you need a Bible, move your hand around and hold up your thumb and put your hand flat against your cheek.

If you need a Psalter, stroke with your right index finger on your left hand, as if you were paying great attention.

If you need a Martyrology, lay your index finger over your throat.

If you need a rod, move your fist as if you were going to hit someone.

If you need a scourge, move your fist in the same way and raise two fingers.

If you need a candle, blow on your index finger.

II.

The Turkish book *The History of the Forty Viziers* tells the story of a Christian monk who tries to avoid paying taxes for himself and his people by challenging the sultan with a riddle. He opens the five fingers of his hand and holds his palm up, and then he lets the five fingers droop. "Do you know what that means?"

The learned men of the court are silent: "What can this be? It is not mentioned in the Commentaries."

Then a wandering dervish comes by and asks to solve the riddle. The monk opens the five fingers of his hand and holds his palm up. The dervish closes his fist and shows it to the monk. The monk lets his five fingers droop downward. The dervish opens his fist and holds his fingers upward. The monk says, "That is the answer," and gives the sultan the money.

The sultan, perplexed at what has happened, takes the dervish aside. He explains: "When he opened his fingers and held his hand up, it meant 'This is how I'm going to punch you in the face.' So I showed him my fist, which meant 'I'll punch your throat.' He then let his fingers droop, which meant, 'I'll punch you in the stomach and grab your throat.' So I held my fingers up, which meant, 'If you grab my throat, I'll grab yours.'"

The sultan then took the monk aside, who explained: "When I held up my five fingers, it meant 'Do you not worship five times a day?' He held up his fist to indicate that it is true. Then I let my fingers droop, to ask a question from our books, 'Why does the rain come down from heaven?' He held his fingers upward to say: 'The rain falls down from heaven that the grass may spring up from the earth.' This is the answer that our people know, so I paid the tribute."

The monk returned to his own country and the sultan, saying nothing, gave the dervish a share of the money.

### III.

The hand is a mandala. Open it: the fingers are the outer circle, the five elements and their female manifestations. Close it: the nails are the middle circle, the five Buddhas, their colors, and their sacred syllables. Open it again: on the palm is a red lotus with five petals who are the goddesses.

The right hand is the world of the Buddhas, the Diamond World. The left hand is the world of sentient beings, the Matrix World. The left is the moon, the right the sun; the left is contemplation, the right observation. The left is blessedness, the right is wisdom; the left is the memory of affection; the right is the memory of compassion. The left is within; the right is outside.

The five fingers are earth, water, fire, air, and the void. They are form, sensation, perception, operation of the mind, and discernment. They are faith, energy, memory, meditation, and wisdom; the five Buddhas and the five Bodhisattvas. They are eye, ear, nose, tongue, and body. The ten fingers are knowledge, power, vow, means, wisdom, charity, precepts, patience, effort, and contemplation. The ten fingers are the ten Essence Worlds. On the left, the worlds of hells, animals, hungry spirits, malevolent spirits, and humans. On the



right, the worlds of gods, disciples, hermit-Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, and Buddhas.

Make a fist with your thumb against the side of the index finger: that is an unopened lotus. Clasp your hands together, palm to palm, with the fingers outside: the space between your hands is the moon. There is a clasp of the sincere heart, of the empty heart, of clear exposition, of refuge, of holding water, of a lotus as it opens.

The evil Devadatta gave liquor to an elephant, got it drunk, and caused it to stampede. The Buddha raised his right hand, flat, with the fingers together, and the elephant stopped dead and knelt.

The Buddha, in an earlier life, met a woman whom he thought he might marry, but he didn't know if she was single, and educated. So he raised a closed fist, and she, in reply, showed him her empty hand. They were wed.

The Buddha said: "There is a goddess called Marishi. She has great powers. She is forever passing in front of the gods of the sun and moon, yet they cannot see her. Men cannot see or recognize her; they cannot hurt or deceive her; they cannot take her possessions; they cannot condemn or punish her." Make a fist with your left hand, with three fingers tightly closed, the thumb touching the fingernail of the index to make a ring. Hold it in front of your chest; meditate on entering into that hole and being contained within. Then take your right hand, hold it flat above your fist, and revolve it in a counter-clockwise motion. This is the mudra of Marishi's precious receptacle, the mudra of hiding forms, and if you chant the correct mantras while making it, you will become invisible.

Ryukai, a priest of the Hasso sect at the Gango-ji Temple, died while making the mudra of the Tathagata Amida with his right hand. When the body was burned, all that remained was his hand.