

Me, when I teach, I start the same way every time. We sit. We schmooze a bit. I give a little spiel and trot out a couple of plodding jokes. My students indulge me, bless their hearts. Then, we draw our hands to Anjali Mudra, also known as prayer position. We close our eyes, pour awareness into our breath, and chant a simple Sanskrit invocation. It's ooey. It's gooey. It's actually awfully nice. What can I say? I'm a sucker for this sort of thing. This is our ritual, and when I occasionally visit studios where the classes don't have some sort of formal beginning, I miss it. But this post is supposed to be about Anjali Mudra, so I'll wax poetic about the beauty of ritual some other time.

Right, Anjali Mudra. What's it about, anyway? Why all the prayer hands? Why not just go to church if you want to pray? Or to temple or the sacred grove? Or wherever. You get the point.

Well, it's symbolic. Anjali Mudra represents your heart, which is the thing you can't see, laid out before you as something that you *can* see—namely, your own two hands. That's what yogis do, right? We draw what's inside out and reel what's outside in. We begin where we end, with a gesture infused with gratitude.

Anjali can be translated "soft as ghee." I happen to know cuz someone smart told me. Ghee is clarified butter and an Indian staple. Are we all on the same page now? Good. Then Anjali is the metaphoric heart that's, like we'd say in Brooklyn, soft "like buttah." It's a metaphor wrapped around a simile.

What good is a heart that's like butter? Somewhere in New Hampshire, my father's cardiologist just shuddered. Canola oil would be less poetic, but shouldn't health-conscious yogis be aspiring to hearts of the monounsaturated variety?

Well, the thing about soft butter is that it's malleable. It yields. Which means it can be imprinted upon. When we hold our hearts out symbolically in this way, we can impress upon them that which we hold dear. Here, before us, the heart can be engraved with the names of the ones we choose to always keep near. Here, we may contemplate who and what we've taken to heart. The richer the better.



Soft Like Buttah

How does your favorite yoga class begin?

Anjali is, of course, more than this, too. Way more. It holds entire sets of esoteric teachings. But I'm doing my darndest not to go off on a long-winded geek tirade here. So... wanna play a game?

Fold your hands into Anjali Mudra. As the fingertips and heels of your hands press gently, allow for a small space between the palms. Now, how many things do you see? And, yes, as I told my class earlier this week, it is a trick question. Duh.

Well, there's one thing, of course. One mudra that's complete unto itself. And yet, it's two things, right? Two separate hands. The two are distinct yet embraced by a greater whole. The one is found only as the distinct two. So the two are one. The one is two. This is very much the way a tantric yogi sees the world. And Anjali's secret? That would be the space held in-between. The two that are one hold a third thing, a space that can open up or whittle down. Full of potency, that opening between your hands becomes a powerful meditative tool, a wormhole, a wrinkle in time, a portal into which consciousness, softened like butter, can be poured. So, spill into your own heart. Pour yourself into Anjali's embrace and see what happens. 🧘

Bernadette Birney is a certified Anusara yoga teacher who studies with John Friend and Dr. Douglas Brooks. Visit her quirky website, www.berniebirney.com.