

## HYPOTHETICAL DISCOURSE

# An Artistic Portrayal of Polydactyly as Sacrilege: The Case of Todd Rundgren's Album *Nearly Human*

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**In 1989, the American musician Todd Rundgren released an album titled *Nearly Human*. The album cover features the imprint of a human hand with six fingers. Interestingly, the cover on copies of the album released in Japan feature a hand with five fingers. Per a website dedicated to Rundgren's career and work, the album cover was altered because a six-fingered hand has religious significance in Japan. The authors postulate that aspects of Japanese Buddhism fostered the public sentiment that resulted in the altered album cover for copies of *Nearly Human* released in Japan.**

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## INTRODUCTION

Todd Rundgren is an American singer, songwriter, and music producer<sup>1</sup> whose musical career spans over forty years.<sup>2</sup> He released the album *Nearly Human* in 1989. The album cover features an imprint of a human hand with six fingers. Interestingly, the cover on copies of the album released in Japan feature an imprint of a human hand with five fingers. Per a website dedicated to Rundgren's work, this change

was made because a six-fingered hand has religious significance in Japan.<sup>3</sup>

The extant literature does not yield a more detailed explanation behind the religious significance of the six-fingered hand in Japan. The present paper attempts to provide such an explanation. The authors argue that aspects of Japanese Buddhism fostered the public sentiment that led to the alteration of the cover for Todd Rundgren's album *Nearly Human*.

## Two Branches of Buddhism

Buddhism arrived in Japan from Korea in the sixth century.<sup>4</sup> In 552 A.D., King Seimei of Kudara, a Korean kingdom in the vicinity of the Japanese archipelago, sent a gold and copper image of Buddha, Buddhist books, and a letter in which he extolled Buddhism to the emperor of Japan.<sup>5</sup> Buddhism subsequently spread throughout Japan and gave rise to various sects. A careful distinction must be made between two branches of Buddhism: *Theravada* and *Mahayana*. The term *Theravada*, which translates as "School of the Elders", is regarded as the original and orthodox form of Buddhism, and is practiced in countries such as Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos, whereas the term *Mahayana*, which translates as "Great Vehicle", developed later and is practiced in countries such as China, Japan, Tibet, and Mongolia.<sup>6</sup> Of note, the *Theravada* tradition was formerly referred to as *Hinayana*, which translates as "Small Vehicle", but the preferred term among academic circles is *Theravada*. A salient feature of *Mahayana* Buddhism is syncretism, which is less pronounced in the *Theravada* tradition. Aspects of indigenous Japanese religion, such as ancestor worship in Shinto, were combined with Buddhist philosophy and thereby fostered the development of various denominations of *Mahayana* Buddhism in Japan.

A key distinction between *Theravada* and *Mahayana* concerns spiritual enlightenment. In *Theravada*, the highest ideal is the *Arhat*, an individual who seeks enlightenment for himself and is indifferent to the welfare of other beings; in *Mahayana*, the highest ideal is the *Bodhisattva*, an individual who seeks salvation also for others.<sup>5</sup> Whereas *Theravada* extols wisdom, *Mahayana* praises compassion. Furthermore, these two schools of Buddhist thought have disparate views on soteriology. *Theravada* essentially holds that enlightenment is the individual's responsibility and that there is no avenue for assistance from a deity in the form of grace: "Everyone must

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work out his own salvation through a long process of self-discipline. No one can really help another; not even the gods, for if there are any gods they too are subject to the law of *Karma* and are bound to the Wheel of Life with its endless revolutions.”<sup>5</sup>

However, such grace is possible in the *Mahayana* tradition: “Man is not left to his own strength. He becomes an object of grace, especially the grace of the great Buddha Amitabha who saves by his might all those who believe in him and call upon his name . . . And if it is not the Buddha Amitabha who saves man then it is Vairochana or some other great Buddha.”<sup>5</sup> Vairochana is the form of Buddha who is an important deity worshipped by Japanese Buddhists of the *Yogacharya* tradition.<sup>4</sup> In short, *Mahayana* Buddhism is more permissive of the worship of Buddha or a pictorial representation of an element of Buddhist philosophy. Deity worship is more congruent with the concept of the *Bodhisattva* than with the concept of the *Arhat*.

### Polydactyly and Piety

The worship of a deity understandably can be accompanied by fear of displeasing that deity. The original album cover of Rundgren’s *Nearly Human* may have evoked fear among some Japanese Buddhists. The authors postulate that the source of this trepidation is the implementation of *mudrās* in Japanese Buddhism.<sup>4</sup> *Mudrās* refer to specific distortions or poses of the fingers.<sup>4</sup> *Mudrās* are an important form of non-verbal expression in the performing arts of India and became integral elements of ceremonies observed by Japanese Buddhists who venerate Vairochana.<sup>7</sup>

Getty writes: “The fundamental principle of the Yoga system is the ecstatic union of the individual with the Universal Spirit, and in Japan, Vairochana is looked upon as the highest vehicle of the mystic Union. The *mudrā* of Vairochana indicates the mystic Union.”<sup>4</sup> Getty describes this *mudrā* as involving six fingers: “The index finger of the left hand is clasped by the five fingers of the right. The six fingers represent the Six Elements which, when united, produce the ‘six-fold body and mental happiness’. The five fingers of the right hand represent the five material elements of which man is composed: earth (little finger), water (ring finger), fire (middle finger), air (index finger), and ether (thumb). The index finger of the left hand represents . . . the mind.”<sup>4</sup>

The association of this *mudrā* with Vairochana likely caused the pictorial representation of six fingers to acquire religious significance among Japanese Buddhists. In this context, the

original album cover of *Nearly Human* was sacrilegious. The portrayal of polydactyly, which is the presence of supernumerary fingers or toes resulting from defective patterning of the anterior-posterior axis of the developing limb,<sup>8</sup> on a commercial product may have been interpreted as disrespectful of Vairochana’s *mudrā*. In the eyes of some Japanese Buddhists, the purchase of this album with its original cover would invite the displeasure of Vairochana.

## CONCLUSION

The alteration of the cover for Todd Rundgren’s album *Nearly Human* for his Japanese audience illustrates the profound influence that a religious belief can have on the reception of a commercial product by observers of that belief. This portrayal of polydactyly may have caused some Japanese Buddhists to fear divine retribution for purchasing a copy of *Nearly Human* with its original album cover. The authors conclude that this fear stemmed from the symbolic significance attributed to a *mudrā* associated with the Buddhist deity Vairochana.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author has no conflict of interest to disclose.

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