



MAP OF SOUTHERN INDIA
SHOWING LOCATIONS OF

KERALA & TAMIL NADU

WITHIN KERALA, THE NORTHERN (MALABAR REGION OF CALICUT AND CANNANORE), CENTRAL (COCHIN), AND SOUTHERN (TRAVANCORE/TRIVANDRUM) REGIONS EACH HAD ITS OWN DISTINCTIVE STYLES OF KALARIPPAYATTU PRACTICE.



KALARIPPAYATTU

A SOUTH INDIAN MARTIAL ART AND THE YOGA AND AYURVEDIC PARADIGMS¹

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In the well-known *Bhagavad Gita* section of India's *Mahabharata* epic, Krishna elaborates a view of duty and action intended to convince Arjuna that, as a member of the warrior caste (*ksatriya*), he must overcome all his doubts and take up arms, even against his relatives. As anyone familiar with either the *Mahabharata* or India's second great epic, the *Ramayana*, knows, martial techniques have existed on the South Asian subcontinent since antiquity. Both epics are filled with scenes describing how the princely heroes obtain and use their humanly or divinely acquired skills and powers to defeat their enemies: by training in martial techniques under the tutelage of great gurus like the brahmin master Drona, by practicing austerities and meditation techniques which give the martial master access to subtle powers to be used in combat, and/or by receiving a gift or a boon of divine, magical powers from a god. On the one hand, there is Bhima who depends on his brute strength to crush his foes, while on the other, we find the "unsurpassable" Arjuna making use of his more subtle accomplishments in single-point focus or his powers acquired through meditation.

Among practitioners and teachers of *kalarippayattu*, the martial art of Kerala, southwestern coastal India, some, like Higgins Masters of the P.B. Kalari in Trissur, model their practice on Bhima, emphasizing *kalarippayattu*'s practical empty-hand techniques of attack, defense, locks, and throws. Others, like my first and most important teacher, Gurukkal* Govindankutty Nayar of Thiruvananthapuram's C.V.N. Kalari, with whom I have studied since 1977, follow Arjuna and emphasize *kalarippayattu* as an active, energetic means of disciplining and "harnessing" (*yuj*, the root of *yoga*) both one's body and one's mind, that is, as a form of moving meditation. As comparative religions scholar Mircea Eliade has explained, "One always finds a form of yoga whenever there is a question of experiencing the sacred or arriving at complete mastery of oneself . . ." (Eliade, 1975:196).

*GURUKKAL, THE PLURAL OF GURU (MASTER), IS A TITLE REPRESENTING ALL PAST MASTERS IN THE LINEAGE OF TEACHING.

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Even though there has been great interest in both yoga and *Ayurveda* (the Indian science of health and well-being) in the West, little is known about a number of Indian martial arts still practiced today which are founded on a set of fundamental cultural assumptions about the body/mind relationship, health, and well-being that are similar to the assumptions underlying yoga and *Ayurveda*. This essay is an introduction to *kalarippayattu*—a martial/medical/meditation discipline traditionally practiced in Kerala State, southwestern coastal India, since at least the twelfth century A.D. and more specifically is an introduction to the history and a few of the assumptions about the body, mind, and practice shared with yoga and *Ayurveda* and which inform the way in which some traditional masters still teach *kalarippayattu*.

A FEW PRELIMINARY CAVEATS AND THOUGHTS

The emphasis that only some traditional masters (like Drona and Arjuna) foreground yoga in their practice of *kalarippayattu* should alert the reader to the fact that this connection is only one of several paradigms that shape practice of the martial art. Other masters not discussed here follow other paradigms of teaching and practice, like Bhima mentioned above. In an increasingly heteronomous society in which traditional practitioners must vie for students with karate teachers who often emphasize immediate “street-wise” results, the paradigms, beliefs, and/or practices discussed in this essay are in a constant process of negotiation with competing paradigms and practices, and, therefore, are only more or less observed by teachers today.²

Some of the concepts and phenomena discussed here, such as “meditation,” “the sacred,” “oneself,” “power,” or “purity,” are neither transparent nor self-evident. What is considered “sacred,” “the self,” “power,” “pure,” or “meditation” is particular to each interpretive community, history, context, i.e., what is “sacred” or “pure” to a brahmin male Malayali born in 1924 will be different from what is “sacred” or “pure” to a male Nayar *kalarippayattu* fighter of the thirteenth century, a male Sufi Muslim of Kannur born in 1965, an American male born in 1947 who has never been to Kerala or India, or a European woman born on the continent who has practiced yoga since her youth and eventually turns to a study of *kalarippayattu*. Historical, social, religious, gender, and ideological positions constitute quite different frames of reference and interpretative categories through which the “sacred,” “self,” or “pure” will be read and understood.

Under the influence of “new age” religious assumptions or other potentially reductionist ways of thinking,³ too often in the United States there is a humanist tendency to erase cultural difference, disregard history, participate and/or be involved in romantically projecting onto South Asia an Orientalist essentialism (Said, 1976; Inden, 1986).⁴ Too often accounts reify the self and the “spiritual” as if all experiences that might be appropriately discussed as in some way “spiritual” were singular and universal.

Most problematic is our Western tendency to project our hegemonic notion of the self as unitary and individual onto “selves” in other cultures. As anthropologist Clifford Geertz notes:

The Western concept of the person as a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe

a dynamic center of awareness, emotion, judgment and action organized into a distinctive whole and set contrastively both against other such wholes and against a social and natural background is, however incorrigible it may seem to us, a rather peculiar idea within the context of the world's cultures. . . [We need to] set that concept aside and view their experience within the framework of their own idea of what selfhood is.⁵ – Geertz, 1983:59

As cultural theorist Richard Johnson asserts, “subjectivities are produced, not given, and are therefore the objects of inquiry, not the premises or starting points” (Johnson, 1986:44). Following both Johnson and anthropologist Dorrine Kondo’s thoughtful ethnographic study of the “crafting” of selves in Japan (Kondo, 1990), I assume here that “self” as well as the “agency” and “power” which might accrue from the practice of a martial art like *kalarippayattu* are context and paradigm specific, i.e., that they are variable and provisional. In this view, self, agency, and power are never “absolute,” but rather are “nodal points repositioned in different contexts. Selves [agency and power], in this view, can be seen as rhetorical figures and performative assertions enacted in specific situations within fields of power, history, and culture” (Kondo, 1990:304). *Kalarippayattu* is a set of techniques of bodymind practice through which particular “selves” are understood or assumed to gain particular kinds of agency and/or power *within specific contexts*. Consequently, a martial practice like *kalarippayattu* becomes one means of “crafting” a particular self and, therefore, is a “culturally, historically specific pathway . . . to self-realization . . . [and/or] domination” (Kondo, 1990:305). The particular self crafted and realized in a Sufi Muslim *kalari* in northern Kerala will be different from the self crafted in a militantly radical Hindu *kalari* or the self crafted by learning *kalarippayattu* in the United States from an American teacher who might emphasize a “self-actualized self.”

With these caveats in mind, I turn to a brief historical overview of *kalarippayattu* and the nature of power for the martial artist(s) of the past and then to a more specific examination of some of the ways in which some of today’s *kalarippayattu* masters understand yoga, Ayurvedic, and power in interpreting their practice and, therefore, in crafting their “selves.”

EARLY SOURCES OF THE KALARIPPAYATTU TRADITION: THE SANGAM AGE FIGHTING ARTS

Two traditions of martial practice from antiquity have influenced the history, development, subculture, and practice of *kalarippayattu*: Tamil (Dravidian) traditions dating from early Sangam culture and the Sanskritic *Dhanur Vedic* traditions. Although a complete account of South Indian martial arts in antiquity must be left to the future by South Asian historians, this necessarily brief description outlines a few of the salient features of the early Sangam Age fighting arts but focuses in particular on the *Dhanur Vedic* tradition and its relationship with the yoga paradigm.

From the early Tamil Sangam “heroic” (*piram*) poetry, we learn that from the fourth century B.C. to 600 A.D., a warlike, martial spirit predominated across southern India. Ponmudiar wrote concerning the young warriors of the period,

It is my prime duty to bear and bring him up, it is his father’s duty to make him a virtuous man . . . it is the duty of the blacksmith to provide him with a lance; it is the duty of the king to teach him how to conduct himself (in war). It is the son’s duty to destroy the elephants and win the battle of the shining swords and return [victorious].

– Subramanian, 1966:127

Each warrior received “regular military training” (Subramanian, 1966:143-144) in target practice, and horse riding, and specialized in the use of one or more of the important weapons of the period, including lance or spear (*vel*), sword (*val*) and shield (*kedaham*), bow (*vil*) and arrow. The importance of the martial hero in the Sangam Age is evident in the deification of fallen heroes through the planting of hero-stones (*virakkal*; or *natukal*, “planted stones”) which were inscribed with the name of the hero and his valorous deeds (Kailaspathy, 1968:235) and worshipped by the common people of the locality (Subramanian, 1966:130).⁶

The heroes of the period were “the noble ones,” whose principal pursuit was fighting and whose greatest honor was to die a battlefield death (Kailaspathy, 1968; Hart, 1975, 1979). The heroic warriors of the period were animated by the assumption that power (*ananku*) was not transcendent, but immanent, capricious, and potentially malevolent (Hart, 1975:26, 81). War was considered a sacrifice of honor, and memorial stones were erected to fallen heroic kings and/or warriors whose manifest power could be permanently worshipped by one’s community and ancestors (Hart, 1975, 137; Kailaspathy, 1968, 235).

SHIFTING CIRCUMSTANCES AND ALLIANCES

Certainly the earliest precursors of *kalarippayattu* were the Sangam Age combat techniques which fostered the growth of a heroic ideal; however, there can be no doubt that the techniques and heroic ethos, at least of Kerala’s *kalarippayattu*, must have been transformed in some way by the merging of indigenous techniques with the martial practices and ethos accompanying brahmin migrations from Saurashtra and Konkan down the west Indian coast into Karnataka and eventually Kerala (Velutat, 1976:25, 1978). By the seventh century A.D., with the founding of the first Kerala brahmin settlements, a “new cultural heritage” had been introduced into the southwest coastal region which subtly transformed the socio-religious heritage of the area. The Kerala brahmins shared with other coastal settlers the belief that their land had been given to them by Parasurama, the axe-wielding brahmin avatar of Vishnu. According to the Kerala legend,

Parasurama, threw his axe (*parasu*) from Gokarnam to Kanyakumari [or from Kanyakumari to Gokarnam according to another version] and water receded up to the spot where it fell. The tract of land so thrown up is said to have constituted the Kerala of history, otherwise called *Bhargavakshetram* or *Parasuramakshetram*.⁷

– Menon, 1979:9

The establishment of brahmin settlements gradually brought the emergence of brahmin ritual and socioeconomic dominance through the establishment of a complex system of hierarchically ranked service and marital relationships based on relative ritual purity between and among castes, especially in the northern and central regions of present-day Kerala (A.K.B. Pillai, 1987:1-119). Important among early brahmin institutions for this discussion were the *salai* or *ghatika*, i.e.,

institutions mostly attached to temples where the *cattar* or *cathirar*, proficient in *Vedas* and *sastras* and also military activities, lived under the patronage of kings who considered their establishment and maintenance a great privilege.

– Narayanan, 1973:33

Drawing on inscriptional evidence, M.G.S. Narayanan has established that the students at these schools were *cattar* who functioned under the direction of the local village brahmin assembly (*sabha*), recited the *Vedas*, observed *brahmacarya*, and served as a “voluntary force” to defend the temple and school if and when necessary (Narayanan, 1973:25-26).⁸ The eighth century Jain Prakrit work, *Kuvalayamala* by Udyotanasuri from Jalur in Rajasthan, records a clear picture of the nature of these educational institutions:⁹

Entering the city he sees a big *matha*. He asks a passerby, "Well sire, whose temple is that?" The person replies, "*Bhatta*, oh *Bhatta*, this is not a shrine, but it is a *matha* [monastery, residential quarter] of all the *cattas* [students]." [On entering the *matha*] . . . he sees the *cattas*, who were natives of various countries, namely Lata Karnata, Dhakka, Srikantha . . . and Saindhava. . . . They were learning and practicing archery, fighting with sword and shield, with daggers, sticks, lances, and with fists, and in duels (*niuddham*). Some were learning painting (*alekhya*), singing (*giya*), musical instruments (*vaditra*), staging of *Bhanaka*, *Dombiliya* [?], *Siggadaiyam* [?], and dancing. They looked like excited elephants from *Maha-Vindhya*.

– Shah, 1968:250-252)

Along with other brahmin institutions, these *salai* and the *cattar* trained in them must have played some role in the gradual formation of the distinctive linguistic, social, and cultural heritage of the southwest coastal region although the degree of influence was certainly in direct proportion to the density of brahminical settlement and local influence. M.G.S. Narayanan dates this period of change between the founding of a second or new Cera capital at Makotai under Rama Rajasekhara (c.800-844A.D.) and its breakup after the rule of Rama Kulasekhara (1089-1122A.D.). Before the founding of the Makotai capital, Kerala was “a region of Tamilakam with the same society and language”; however, in the post-Makotai period Kerala became distinctive in many ways from the rest of Tamilakam (Narayanan, 1976:28).

This watershed period of Kerala history culminated in the disintegration of the second Cera Kingdom at Makotai after a protracted one-hundred year war of attrition with the Cola Empire. At the end of the war, Rama Kulasekhara (the Perumal) abdicated, and the hitherto centrally controlled Cera Kingdom was dismembered and split into numerous smaller kingdoms and principalities.

It is to this extended period of warfare in the eleventh century A.D. when military training was “compulsory . . . to resist . . . the continuous attacks of the Cola army . . .” that historian Elamkulam Kunjan Pillai attributes the birth of the martial tradition now known as *kalarippayattu* (1970:241).¹⁰ During the war, some brahmins continued to be trained in arms themselves, trained others, and actively participated in fighting the Colas (Pillai, 1970:155; 243-244).

Although the *salais* themselves declined with the end of the Cera Kingdom and the division of Kerala into principalities, Kerala brahmin engagement in the practice of arms continued among some sub-castes. Known as *cattar* or *yatra* brahmins who were considered degraded or “half” brahmins because of their vocation in arms, for several centuries they continued to train in, teach, fight with, and rule through the martial arts.¹¹ Although written from a brahminical point of view to legitimize dominance, the legendary Kerala brahmin chronicle, *Keralopathi*, confirms brahminical sub-caste involvement in teaching and bearing arms. The chronicle tells that Parasurama gave the land to the brahmins to be enjoyed as ‘*brahmakshatra*’ i.e., a land where brahmins take the role of *ksatriyas* also. The chronicle adds that

3600 brahmins belonging to different settlements or *gramas* accepted the right to bear arms from Parasurama. They are described as *ardhabrahmana* or half-brahmins and *valnampis* or armed brahmins, and their functions are mentioned as *padu kidakka* [restrain offenders] *pada kuduka* [military service] and *akampadi nadakukkuka* [guard service]. They are said to be divided into four *kalakams* [a colloquial form of *ghatika*, or the organizations of brahmin *cattar* to defend the land] called Perincallur, Payyanur, Parappur and Chengannur respectively. These *kalakams* nominated four preceptors or *rakshapurushas* for the duration of three years with

the right to collect . . . revenue.

– Narayanan, 1973:37-38

Some among today's traditional *kalarippayattu* masters possess manuscripts which accept the *Keralopathi's* account of history, pay homage to brahmin masters of the past, and implicitly accept brahmin hegemony. For example, according to one master's manuscript,

Long ages ago, the sage Parasurama brought one hundred and sixty-six *katam* [one *katam* equals five miles, i.e., this land mass was brought up from the ocean, thereby "founding" the Malayalam-speaking reasion known today as Kerala State] from the sea and consecrated 108 idols. Then in order to defeat his enemies he established forty-two *kalari*, and then brought some *adhyanmar* [high caste brahmins] in order to conduct worship (*puja*) at the *kalari*. Then he taught twenty-one masters of the *kalari* how to destroy their enemies.¹²

The text also mentions that among the deities to be meditated upon in the *kalari* are "the famous past *kalari* gurus of the Nambootiri houses known as Ugram Velli, Dronam Velli, Ghoram Velli, and Ullutturuttiyattu."

Although the *cattar* continue to be mentioned in Kerala's heavily Sanskritized Manipravalam literature, between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries these formerly well-respected brahmin scholars and practitioners in arms are depicted as living decadent lives. References find them "wearing weapons with fresh blood in them," engaging in combat, demonstrating feats with their swords, describing the martial prowess of Nambootiri chieftains (such as Tirumalaseri Nambootiri of Govardhanapuram), and touting the prowess of *cattars* in combat (Pillai, 1970:275). A few of these brahmins continued their practice of arms into the Portuguese period of Kerala history, the Edapalli Nambiadiri (a special designation for a Nambootiri general) serving as commander of the *Zamorin* (ruler) of Calicut's army and navy in the early wars with the Portuguese.

Whatever the caste or religion of the medieval practitioners of *kalarippayattu*, all practiced their martial art within a socio-political environment which was unstable, i.e., a constantly shifting set of alliances and outbreaks of warfare between feuding rulers of petty principalities. Since practitioners had pledged themselves to death on behalf of their rulers,¹³ they were obliged to develop both the mental power and battlefield skills that would allow them to sacrifice themselves on the battlefield in order to fulfill their pledges unto death.

Following J. Richardson Freeman's recent research on the nature of *teyyam* worship in North Malabar to which *kalarippayattu* practice and martial heroes are integrally linked, it is clear that, for the medieval Malayali practitioners of *kalarippayattu*, the "world" within which they exercised their martial skills was shaped by a religious and socio-political ideology in which "battle serves as a dominant metaphor for conceptualizing relations of spiritual and socio-political power" (Freeman, 1991:588). Following Hart's

research on the early Dravidian notion of power (*ananku*) as capricious and immanent (mentioned above), Freeman convincingly argues that in medieval Kerala also “the locus of divine power is not primarily, or at least usefully, transcendent, but immanent, and located in human persons and their ritual objects” (Freeman, 1991:130). The martial practitioner was confronted with having to harness through whatever techniques might be at his disposal, those special, local, and immanent powers that might be of use to him in fulfilling his pledged duty to a ruler.

THE DHANUR VEDIC TRADITION AND THE YOGA PARADIGM

It seems likely that at least some of the distinctive traits of Kerala’s *kalarippayattu* crystallized during the intensive period of warfare between the Cholas and Ceras and that such developments were at least in part attributable to the mingling of indigenous Dravidian martial techniques dating from the Sangam Age with techniques and an ethos influenced by brahmins and practiced in their *salai*, especially in the northern and central Kerala region where brahminical culture became dominant and *kalarippayattu* developed. It is not insignificant that some present masters trace their lineages of practice to “Dhanur Veda” and claim that the texts in which their martial techniques are recorded derive from *Dhanur Vedic* texts.

Although the *Dhanur Veda* to which present-day *kalarippayattu* masters refer literally translated means the “science of archery,” it encompassed all the traditional fighting arts. Among them the art of the bow and arrow was considered supreme.

Battles [fought] with bows [and arrows] are excellent, those with darts are mediocre, those with swords are inferior and those fought with hands are still inferior to them.

– Gangadharan, 1985:645

The *Visnu Purana* describes *Dhanur Veda* as one of the traditional eighteen branches of knowledge. Both of India’s epics, the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, make clear that *Dhanur Veda* was the means of education in warfare for all those called upon to fight. Drona, the brahmin guru of the martial arts, was the teacher of all the princely brothers in the *Mahabharata*.

Elsewhere, [*Dhanur Veda*] is said to be an *Upaveda* of *Yajurveda*, “by which one can be proficient in fighting, the use of arms and weapons and the use of battle-arrays” . . . Further, it is described as having a *sutra* like other Vedas, and as consisting of four branches (*catuspada*) and ten divisions (*dasa-vidha*). It is reasonable, therefore, to conclude that a literature on *Dhanur Veda* came into existence before the epics reached their present form.

– Chakravarti, 1972:x¹⁴

The four *Dhanur Veda* chapters in *Agni Purana* appear to be an edited version of one or more earlier manuals briefly covering a vast range of

techniques and instructions for the king who needs to prepare for war and have his soldiers well trained in arms. The much later *Brhat Samgadhara Paddhati* makes explicit what is implicit in the *Agni Purana Dhanur Veda*:

This book contains ideas of people who are masters at
bow and arrow. With practice one becomes an expert
and can kill enemies. — Pant, 1978: verse 1717

The explicit concern in *Dhanur Veda* texts is not with battlefield strategies, but rather with training in martial techniques.¹⁵

Like the *purana* as a whole, the *Dhanur Veda* chapters provide both “sacred knowledge” (*paravidya*) and “profane knowledge” (*aparavidya*) on the subject. The *Dhanur Veda* opens by cataloging the subject, stating that there are five training divisions (for warriors on chariots, elephants, horseback, infantry, or wrestling), and five types of weapons to be learned (those projected by machine [arrows or missiles], those thrown by the hands [spears], those cast by hands yet retained [noose], those permanently held in the hands [sword], and the hands themselves [249:1-5]). Regarding who should teach, we are told that either a brahmin or *ksatriya* “should be engaged to teach and drill soldiers in the art and tactics of the *Dhanur Veda*” because it is their birthright, while *shudras* can be called upon to take up arms when necessary if they have “acquired a general proficiency in the art of warfare by regular training and practice,” and finally “people of mixed castes” might also be called upon if needed by the king (249:6-8) (M.N. Dutt Shastri, 1967:894-5).

Beginning with the noblest of weapons (bow and arrow), the text discusses the specifics of training and practice. It provides the names and describes ten basic lower-body poses to be assumed when practicing with bow and arrow and the specific posture with which the disciple should pay obeisance to his preceptor (249:9-19). Once the basic positions have been described, there is technical instruction in how to string, draw, raise, aim and release the bow and arrow and a catalogue of types of bows and arrows (249:20-29).

In the second chapter are recorded more advanced and difficult bow-and-arrow techniques. But first are details of how a brahmin should ritually purify weapons before they are used (250:1). Also within the first seven lines of this chapter appear several of numerous phrases which collectively constitute the manual’s leitmotif: an intimation of the ideal, subtle state of interior accomplishment which the practitioner must possess to become a consummate martial practitioner. The archer is first described as “girding up his loins” and tying in place his quiver only *after* he has “collected himself”; he places the arrow on the string only *after* “his mind [is] divested of all cares and anxieties” (M.N. Dutt Shastri, 1967:897); and finally, when the archer has become so well practiced that he “knows the procedure,” he “should fix his mind on the target” before releasing the arrow (Gangadharan, 1985:648). Implicit throughout is a clear sense of a systematic progression in training from preliminary lower body postures which provide a psychophysiological foundation for virtuosity; through technical mastery of lifting, placing, drawing, and releasing; and thence to the interior subtleties of mental accomplishment necessary to become a consummate archer and, therefore, an accomplished fighter.

Having achieved the ability to fix his mind, the archer's training is still not complete. The archer must apply this ability while performing increasingly difficult techniques, such as hitting targets above and below the line of vision, vertically above the head, and while riding a horse; hitting targets farther and farther away; and finally hitting whirling, moving, or fixed targets one after the other (250:13-19). The chapter concludes with a summary statement of the accomplished abilities of the archer:

Having learned all these ways, one who knows the system of karma-yoga [associated with this practice] should perform this way of doing things with his mind, eyes, and inner vision since one who knows [this] yoga will conquer even the god of death [Yama].

– Dasgupta, 1993

To “conquer the god of death [Yama]” is to have “conquered” the “self,” i.e., to have overcome all obstacles (physical, mental, emotional) inasmuch as one has cultivated a self-possessed presence in the face of potential death in combat.

Although this quote concludes the second chapter, it does not complete all there is to say about the training and abilities of the archer. The opening verse of the third chapter describes a further stage in the training of the archer:

Having acquired control of the hands, mind, and vision, and become accomplished in target practice, then [through this] you will achieve disciplined accomplishment (*siddhi*); after this, practice riding vehicles.

– Dasgupta 1993

The remainder of Chapter 251 and most of the final Chapter 252 are brief descriptions of postures and/or techniques for wrestling and the use of a variety of weapons including noose, sword, armors, iron dart, club, battle axe, discus, and the trident. A short passage near the end of the text returns to the larger concerns of warfare and explains the various uses of war elephants and men. The text concludes with a description of how to appropriately send the well-trained fighter off to war:

The man who goes to war after worshipping his weapons and the *Trailokyamohan Sastra* [one which pleases the three worlds] with his own *mantra* [given to him by his preceptor], will conquer his enemy and protect the world.

– Dasgupta, 1993

To summarize, the *Dhanur Veda* paradigm of practice was a highly developed system of training through which the martial practitioner was able to achieve success with combat skills utilized as duty (*dharma*) demanded.

This level of martial accomplishment was circumscribed by ritual practices and achieved by combining technical practice with training in specific forms of yoga and meditation (including repetition of mantra) so that the practitioner might ideally achieve the superior degree of self-control, mental calm, and single-point concentration necessary to face combat and possible death, and thus attain access to certain aspects of power and agency in the use of weapons in combat.

THE PLAY OF POWERS IN ANTIQUITY

What is implicit in these Dravidian, Sanskritic, as well as medieval Kerala sources and history is the view that combat is not simply a test of strength and/or will between two human beings like modern sport boxing, but rather is a contest between a host of complex contingent, unstable, and immanent powers to which each combatant gains access through divine gifts, through magico-ritual means, and/or by attaining mastery of some aspect of power through practice and training. The first two of these modes of gaining access to power are religio-sacred, and the third is more "rational" in that accomplishment comes through training. Other realms of practiced knowledge in South Asian antiquity, such as Ayurvedic medicine, reflect a similar symbiotic relationship and interaction between the divine and the "scientifically" explainable. The antique medical authority, Susruta, articulated the existence of both rationally understood causes for systemic imbalance in the body's humors as well as the possibility of divine and/or magical sources of imbalance and/or cure. In fact, he identified one of seven kinds of disease as "the providential type which includes diseases that are the embodiments of curses, divine wrath or displeasure, or are brought about through the mystic potencies of charms and spells" (Zimmermann, 1986:Cikitsasthana xxiv, 10; Bhisagratna, 1963:231).

Likewise, the agency and power of the martial artist in Indian antiquity must be understood as a complex set of interactions between humanly acquired techniques of virtuosity (the human microcosm) and the divine macrocosm. Unlike our modern biomedical and/or scientifically-based notions of power and agency, which assume that any type of power (electricity, gravity, etc.) is totally rational, stable, and, therefore, measurable and quantifiable, "power" (*ananku* or *sakti*) in Dravidian antiquity and at least through the medieval period in South India, as we have seen, was considered unstable, capricious, and locally immanent. Given this instability, the martial practitioner accumulated numerous different powers through any and all means at his disposal, depending not only on his own humanly acquired skills achieved under the guidance of his teacher(s), but also on the acquisition of powers through magico-religious techniques such as the repetition of *mantra*.¹⁶

The Sanskrit epic literature reflects this complex interplay between divinely gifted and humanly acquired powers for the martial practitioners of antiquity. One example is the playwright Bhasa's version of Karna's story, *Karnabhara*, which illustrates the divine gift of power (*sakti*) which requires no attainment on the part of the practitioner. Indra, disguised as a brahmin, has come to Karna on his way to do combat with the Pandavas. As a brahmin, Indra begs a gift from Karna. Karna freely offers gift after great gift, all of which are refused. Finally, against the advice of his charioteer, S'alya, he offers that which provides him as a fighter with magical protection—his body

armor, which could not be pierced by gods or demons, and his earrings. Indra joyfully takes them. Moments later a divine messenger informs Karna that Indra is filled with remorse for having stripped him of his protection. The messenger asks Karna to “accept this unfailing weapon, whose *sakti* is named Vimala, to slay one among the Pandavas” (102). At first Karna refuses, saying that he never accepts anything in return for a gift; however, since this gift is offered by a brahmin, he agrees to accept it. As he takes the weapon from the messenger, he asks, “When shall I gain its power (*sakti*)?” and the messenger responds, “When you take it in [your] mind, you will [immediately] gain its power” (105-106).¹⁷ Unlike other powers to which a martial artist gains access through the practice and repetition of exercises and/or austerities, here Karna is a vehicle of divine power which requires that he simply “take [the weapon] in mind” for its full power to be at his disposal.

A more complex set of circumstances is at play in the story of Arjuna and the *Pasupata*, and his mastery of the weapon requires much more of him than simply accepting the weapon as a gift.¹⁸ Yudhisthira knows that, should combat come, the Kauravas have gained access to “the entire art of archery,” including “Brahmic, Divine, and Demonic use of all types of arrows, along with practices and cures.” The “entire earth is subject to Duryodhana” due to this extraordinary accumulation of powers. Yudhisthira, therefore, calls upon Arjuna to go and gain access to still higher powers than those possessed by the Kauravas!

Yudhisthira prepares to send him to Indra, who possesses “all the weapons of the Gods.” But to gain access to Indra, Yudhisthira must teach Arjuna the “secret knowledge” which he learned from Dvaipayana and which will make the entire universe visible to him. After Arjuna is ritually purified to win divine protection and once “controlled in word, body, and thought,” he meets Indra in the form of a blazing ascetic who attempts to dissuade him from his task, but he is not “moved from his resolve” and requests that he learn from Indra “all the weapons that exist.” Indra sends Arjuna on a quest—he can receive such knowledge only after he has found “the Lord of Beings, three-eyes, trident-bearing Siva.”

Setting out on his journey “with a steady mind,” he travels to the peaks of the Himalayas where he settles to practice “awesome austerities.” Eventually Siva comes to test him in the form of a hunter. After a prolonged fight with bows, swords, trees and rocks, and fists, Siva-the-hunter subdues Arjuna when he “loses control of his body.” Siva then reveals his true form to Arjuna, who prostrates before him. Siva recognizes that “no mortal is your equal” and offers to grant him a wish. Arjuna requests the *Pasupata*, the divine weapon. Siva agrees to give him this unusual weapon, which is so great that “no one in all the three worlds [the Brahmic, Divine, and Demonic] . . . is invulnerable to it.” In other words, with this weapon he will gain access to powers greater than those possessed by the Kauravas.

However, to gain access to the weapon’s power Arjuna must first undergo ritual purification, prostrate himself in devotion before Lord Siva and embrace his feet, and then learn its special techniques. Siva instructs him in the specific techniques of the *Pasupata*, and having become accomplished in these techniques he also learns “the secrets of its return.”

As illustrated in this and other stories, among all the martial heroes of the epics, Arjuna is the perfect royal sage, possessing the ideal combination of martial and ascetic skills, and able to marshal the various powers at his

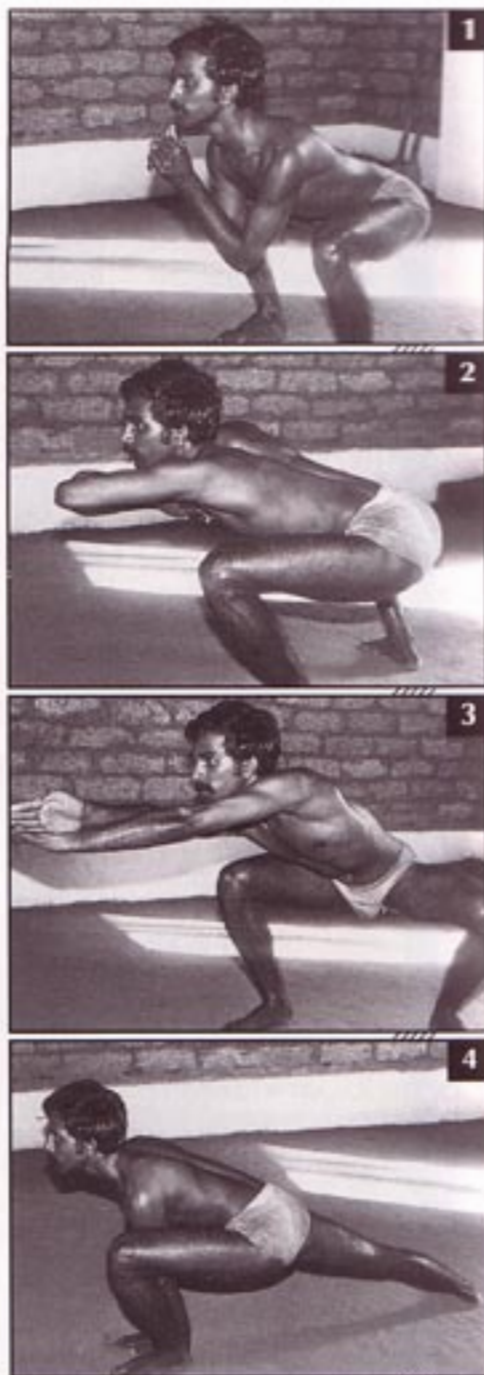
command as and when necessary. Arjuna is able to attain the awesome power of the *Pasupata* because of his extraordinary "steadiness of mind," his superior skills at archery, and his ability to undergo "awesome" austerities.

Although Arjuna's skills and accomplishments appear superhuman, the process of attainment of powers follows a pattern we shall find repeated among some traditional masters in the ethnographic present: ritual purification, superior devotion, practice of techniques to gain mastery, gaining access to higher powers through the practice of austerities and/or special meditation practice, acquiring the secrets of practice, and even the use of magical means to obtain immediate access to a specific power.¹⁹ However, even if this pattern of attainment of powers is still present in the ethnographic present, as the necessity of gaining access to powers when confronting death in combat has become largely a moot point, the hitherto capricious, unstable, immanent, and local nature of power(s) has been somewhat muted and pacified today—a subject to which I shall return in the concluding discussion.

THE KALARIPPAYATTU SYSTEM AND ITS TECHNIQUES IN THE ETHNOGRAPHIC PRESENT

Like their epic and purist counterparts, for traditional *kalarippayattu* practitioners attaining power in practice is still a composite, multi-dimensional set of practices. There is the power to be attained through repetition of mantra, each of which must be individually accomplished; the power inherent in discovery and control of the internal energy/breath (*prana-vayu*); the strength of mental power (*manasakti*) manifest in one-point focus and complete doubtlessness; the elemental discovery and raising of the power per se (*kundalini sakti*); and the powers of the divine gained through worship and rituals (*puja*), meditation, devotion, and/or magic.

However, to gain access to the majority of these types of power, one must begin with the body and its training in actualizing particular powers. A Muslim master once told me, "He who wants to become a master must possess complete knowledge of the body." As assumed in traditional yoga practice, knowledge of the body begins with the physical or gross body (*sthula-sarira*), discovered through exercises and massage. Together they are considered "body preparation" (*meyyorukkam*). The exercises include a vast array of poses, steps, jumps, kicks, and leg movements performed in increasingly complex combinations back and forth across the *kalari* floor (Figures 1-4). Collectively, they are considered a "body art" (*meiabhyasam*). Individual body-exercise sequences (*meippayattu*) are taught one by one, and every student masters simple forms before moving on to more complex and difficult sequences. Most important is mastery of basic poses (*vadivu*), named after animals and comparable to basic postures (*asana*) of yoga, and mastery of steps (*cuvad*) by which one moves into and out of poses. Repetitious practice of these outer forms eventually renders the external body flexible (*meivalakkam*) and, as one master said, "flowing (*olukku*) like a river."



FIGURES 1-4:
AN ADVANCED STUDENT OF
C. SANKARANARAYANAN
MENON OF THE SREE
NARAYANAN GURU
SMARAKA VALLABHATTA
KALARI SANGHAM
(CHAVAKKAD) PERFORMS
POSES AND STEPS IN ONE
OF THE BODY EXERCISE
SEQUENCES (MEIPPAYATTU).

FIGURE 5:
ADVANCED STUDENTS (SATHYAN AND PETER) AT THE C.V.N. KALARI, THIRUVANANTHAPURAM, PERFORM THE CAT POSE AS PART OF A BODY-EXERCISE SEQUENCE OFFERED TO THE GUARDIAN DIETY OF THE KALARI UNDER THE WATCHFUL EYE OF THEIR TEACHER, GURUKKAL GOVINDANKUTTY NAIR, DURING THE SPECIAL RITUAL CELEBRATION OF NAVARATRI. WHEN PERFORMED WITH FULL CONCENTRATION AND INTERNAL CONNECTION, THIS AND OTHER BODY SEQUENCES GRADUALLY INSTILL IN THE STUDENT'S BODYMIND A MORE COMPLETE AND DEEPER ACTUALIZATION OF DEVOTION.



FIGURE 6:
THE PUTTARA—A SEVENTIERED PLATFORM LOCATED IN THE SOUTHWEST CORNER OF THE KALARI WHERE THE GUARDIAN DIETY OF THE KALARI IS LOCATED. DAILY SIMPLE OFFERINGS OF FLOWERS, INCENSE, AND WATER ARE GIVEN TO THE DIETY—USUALLY EITHER A FORM OF THE GODDESS, BHAGAVATI, OR A COMBINATION OF SIVA AND SAKTI. THIS PHOTO IS OF A TRADITIONAL "PIT" KALARI DUG OUT OF THE GROUND. THE PUTTARA IS ALSO FORMED OF EARTH.



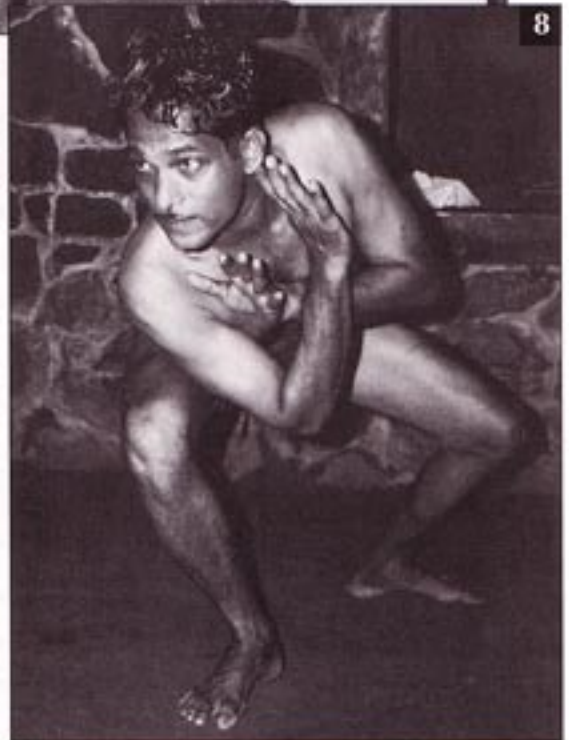
FIGURE 7:
GURUKKAL GOVINDANKUTTY NAIR GIVES HIS BLESSINGS TO A NEW STUDENT WHO IS ABOUT TO BEGIN HIS FIRST LESSON DURING CELEBRATIONS OF NAVARATRI—THE BEGINNING OF A NEW SEASON OF TRAINING.

FIGURE 8:
GURUKKAL GOVINDANKUTTY NAIR PERFORMS ONE OF KALARIPPAYATTU'S BASIC POSES WHICH ILLUSTRATES SINGLE-POINT FOCUS.

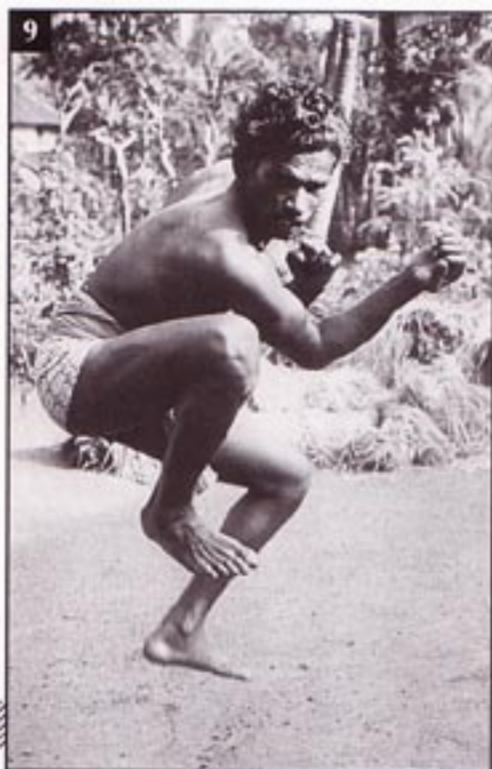
According to tradition, at least during the most intensive period of training while the monsoon is active, masters are supposed to require observance of specific behavioral, dietary, and devotional practices and/or restraints similar to those traditionally practiced in the classic eight-fold Patanjali yoga: (1) negative (*yama*, "do not") restrictions, (2) positive ("do") practices, and (3) the development of a devotional attitude. Students are instructed never to sleep during the daytime nor to keep awake at night, to refrain from sex during the most intensive monsoon period of training, never to misuse what one is being taught; to only use *kalaripayattu* to defend oneself (i.e., when *dharma* demands); and to be of good character (i.e., not to steal, lie, cheat, drink liquor, or take drugs). Finally, from the very first day of practice in a traditional Hindu *kalari*, students must participate in the devotional life of the *kalari* from the point of ritual entry into the sacred space through the practice of personal devotion to the *kalari* deities (Figure 5) and to the master (Figure 7). As Eliade explains, these restraints do not produce "a yogic state but a 'purified' human being . . . This purity is essential to the succeeding stages" (Eliade, 1975:63).

Training traditionally began at about the age of seven for both boys and girls. Students come to the place of training (*kalari*), a pit dug out of the earth, before dawn at about 5:00-6:00 a.m. while it is dark, cool, and auspicious. The most intensive training takes place during the cool monsoon season (June-August). Hindu *kalari* are ritually purified with daily and seasonal offerings (*puja*) to the *kalari* deities (Figure 6), thereby insuring protection of those who practice and are treated inside.

One of the important dimensions of initial training is direction of the student's visual focus. Students are told to "look at a specific place" on the opposite side of the *kalari* while performing the leg exercises, the initial step in developing one-point focus (*ekagrata*) (Figure 8). As master Achuthan Gurukkal told me, "One-point focus is first developed by constant practice of correct form in exercises." Once the external, physical eye is steadied, the student eventually begins to discover the "inner eye" of practice, a state of inner connection to practice.



AN ADVANCED STUDENT OF GURUKKAL P. K. BALAN OF KECHERI DEMONSTRATES THE HORSE POSE IN WHICH THE PRACTITIONER "CONCENTRATES ALL [HIS] POWERS CENTRALLY" WHILE JUMPING FORWARD AND THRUSTING WITH THE LEFT ELBOW IN AN ATTACK.



The body-exercise sequences are linked combinations of basic body movements (*meitolil*) including poses (*vativu*), steps (*cuvat*), kicks (*kal etupp*), a variety of jumps and turns, and coordinated hand/arm movements performed in increasingly swift succession back and forth across the *kalari*. Masters emphasize the importance of poses (*vativu*) in a student's progression. As Gurukkal P. K. Balan told me, "Only a person who has learned these eight poses can perform the *kalari law* (*mura*) and go on to empty-hand combat, weapons, massage, or *marma* applications." The poses (*vativu*), usually numbering eight, are named after animals. They are not static forms, but configurations of movements which embody both the external and internal essence of the animal after which they are named. P. K. Balan explained his version of the animal names:

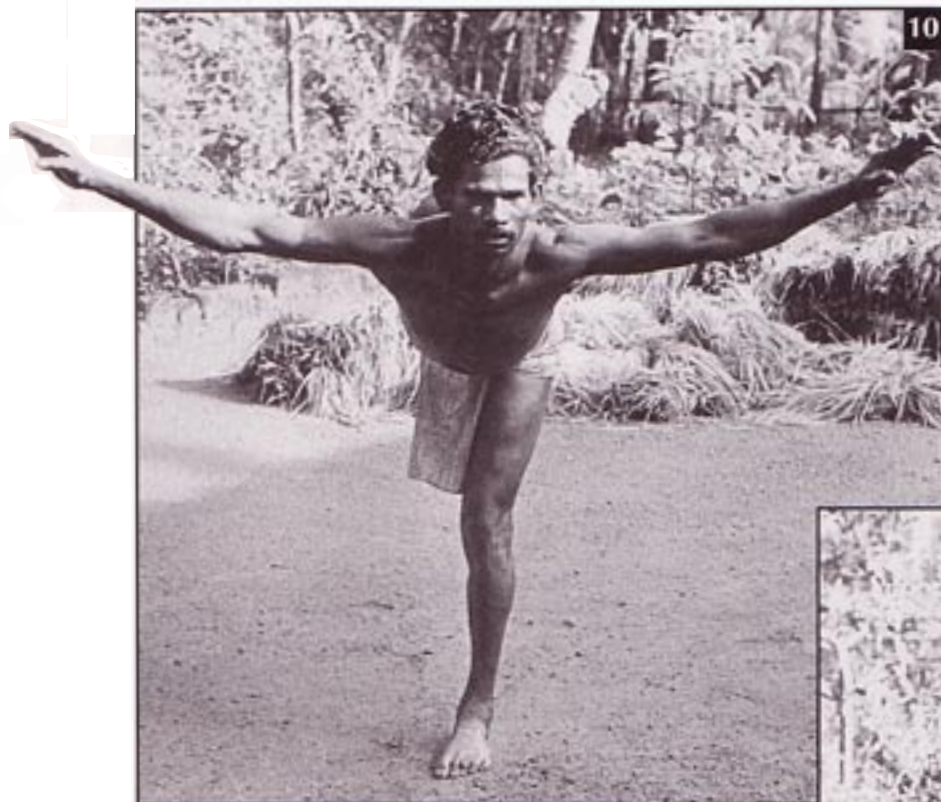
When any animal fights, it uses its whole body. This must also be true in *kalarippayattu*.

The horse is an animal which can concentrate all its powers centrally, and it can run fast by jumping up. The same pause, preparation for jumping, and forward movement [that are in a horse] are in the *asvavadivu* (Figure 9).

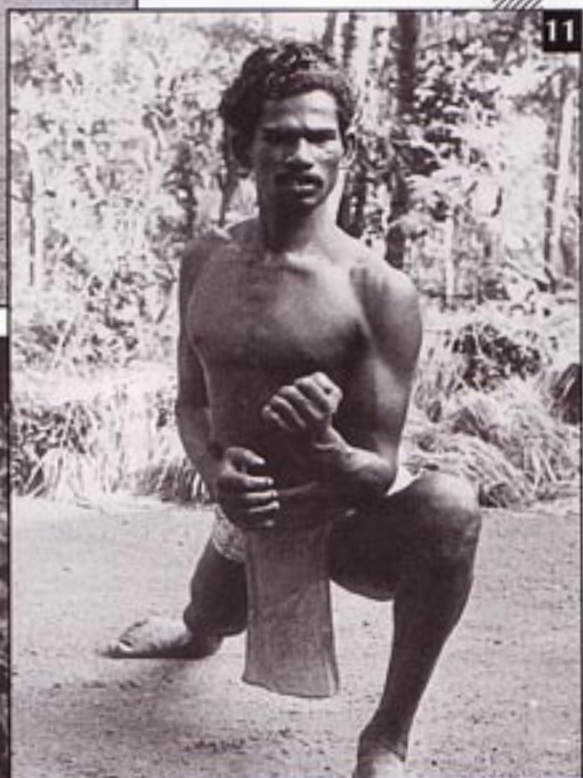
When a peacock is going to attack its enemies, it spreads its feathers, raises its neck, and dances by steadying itself on one leg. Then it shifts to the other leg and attacks by jumping and flying. The capability of doing this attack is known as *mayuravadivu* (Figure 10).

A snake attacks its enemy by standing up; however, its tail remains on the ground without movement. From this position, it can turn in any direction and bite a person. This ability to turn in any direction and attack by rising up is known as *sarpavadivu* (Figure 11).

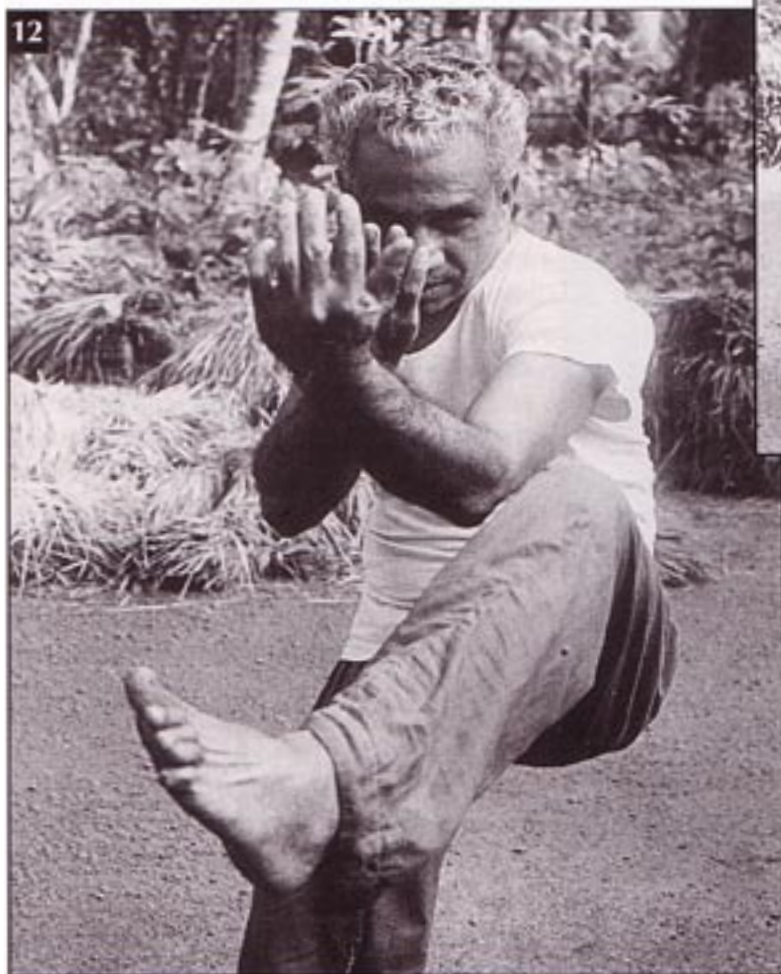
When a cock attacks, he uses all parts of his body: wings, neck, legs, fingernails. He will lift one leg and shake his feathers and neck, fix his gaze on the enemy, and attack. This is *kukkuvadivu* (Figure 12).



10 THE PEACOCK POSE IN WHICH THE PRACTITIONER, LIKE THE PEACOCK, "SPREADS ITS FEATHERS, RAISES ITS NECK, AND DANCES BY STEADYING ITSELF ON ONE LEG."



▲ THE SNAKE POSE IN WHICH THE PRACTITIONER, LIKE THE SERPENT, ALWAYS KEEPS ITS TAIL "ON THE GROUND WITHOUT MOVEMENT" SO THAT "HE CAN TURN IN ANY DIRECTION" TO ATTACK OR DEFEND.



◀ GURUKKAL P. K. BALAN DEMONSTRATES THE COCK POSE, A POSITION FROM WHICH HE LIFTS "ONE LEG AND SHAKES HIS FEATHERS AND NECK, FIXING HIS GAZE ON THE ENEMY AND ATTACKING."

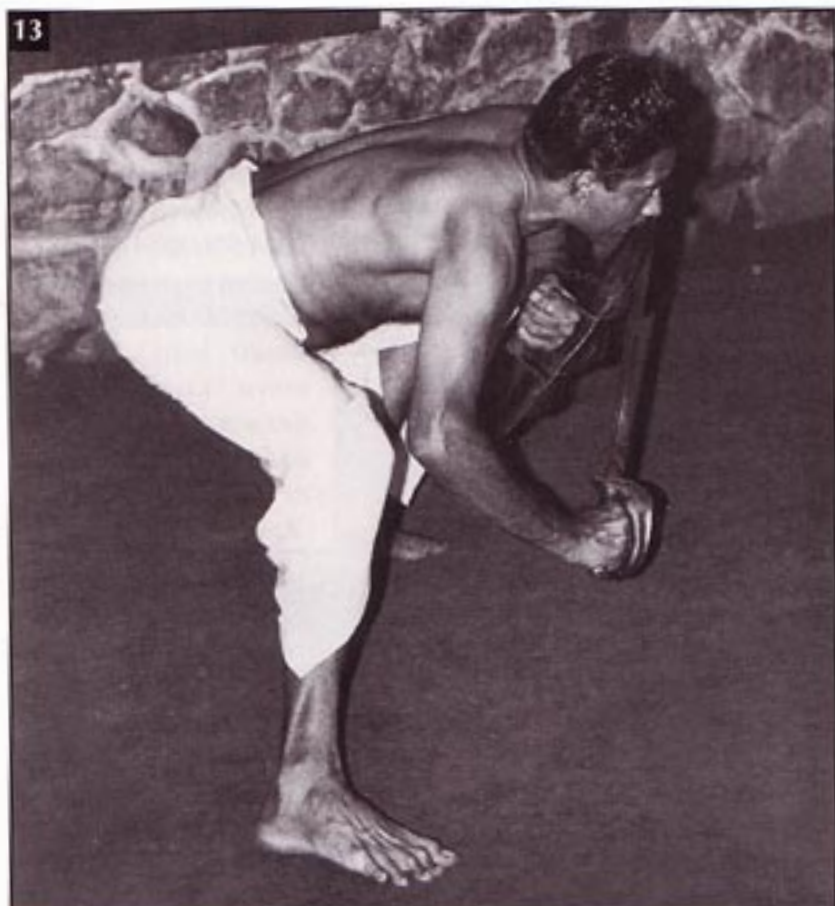


FIGURE 13: DURING PRACTICE OF SET FORMS WITH THE SWORD AND SHIELD, GURUKKAL GOVINDANKUTTY NAIR DEMONSTRATES QUICK SHIFTS OF WEIGHT AND MOVEMENT AS HE TAKES AN EVASIVE STEP TO THE LEFT, SHIFTING HIS WEIGHT FROM HIS RIGHT FOOT TO HIS LEFT, AND DRAWING HIS SWORD BACK FOR AN OFFENSIVE MANEUVER.

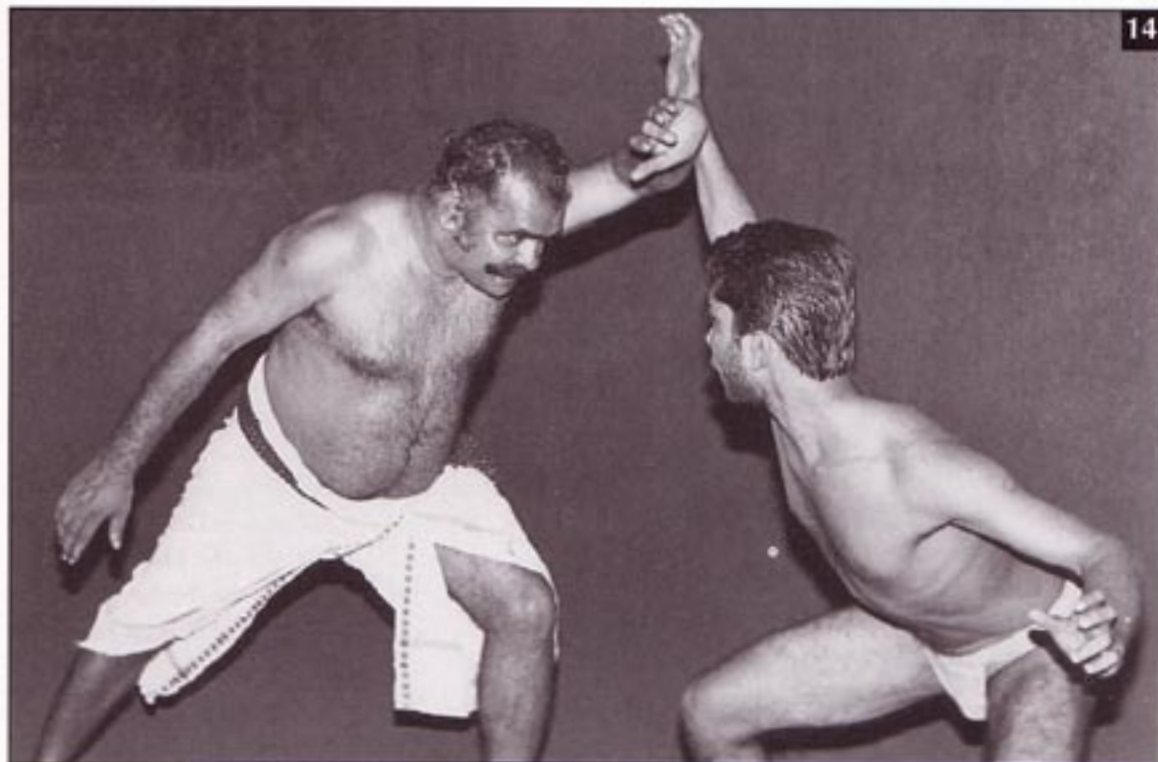
FIGURES 14 & 15: SREEJAYAN GURUKKAL OF CHEMBAD USES SOME OF KALARIPPAYATTU'S BASIC STEPS LEARNED "INNOCENTLY" AS PART OF A BODY-EXERCISE SEQUENCE TO BLOCK AN ATTACK, ENTER TO HIS OPPONENT, AND THROW HIM TO THE GROUND.

Like the leg exercises, the body sequences at first further develop flexibility, balance, and control of the body. This most often occurs when the training is rigorous. The oiled bodies begin to sweat, and by the conclusion of a class the student's entire body should be drenched in sweat. As one teacher said, "The sweat of the students should become the water washing the *kalari* floor." Chirakkal T. Balakrishnan describes the results of such practice for one sequence, *pakarcakkal* as being like "a bee circling a flower. While doing *pakarcakkal* a person first moves forward and back, and then again forward and back. It should be done like a spider weaving its web." What is most important is swift and facile changes of direction executed at the transition points between sets of movements, essential for combat in which instantaneous changes of direction are necessary (Figure 13). Only much later are specific martial applications taught.

Behind the fluid grace of the gymnastic forms is the strength and power of movements which can, when necessary, be applied with lightning-fast speed and precision in potentially deadly attacks. "Hidden" within all the preliminary exercises and basic poses are complex combinations of offensive and defensive applications which are eventually learned through constant practice. The body-exercise sequences "just look like exercises," but many applications (*prayogam*) are possible (Figures 14-15). Correctly executing locks to escape an enemy's grasp, taught as part of the empty-hand techniques (*verumkai*) late in training, can only be executed with full force when a student is able to assume a pose such as the elephant deeply and fully. An advanced student should be able to move with fluid spontaneity in any direction and perform any combination of moves from the body exercise sequences for offensive or defensive purposes. As Gurukkal Govindankutty Nayar put it, the student himself will begin to discover these applications "in due time."

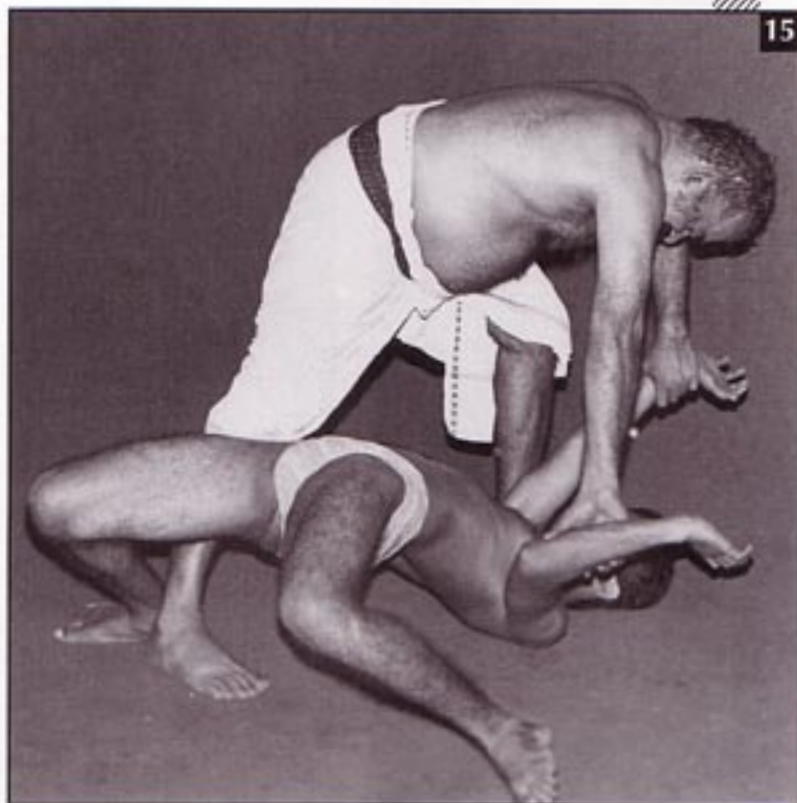
Students advance through the system individually. The teacher keeps a constant and watchful eye on each student's gradual progress, i.e., on how well the student masters the forms of practice and on his general demeanor and behavior. The discerning teacher does not simply look at a student's overt, physical progress, but also looks "within at the heart of the student." Some masters say that they "know [each student's] mind from the countenance of the face" (*mukhabhavattil ninnu manassilakkam*). Nothing overt is expressed, explained, or spoken; the master simply watches, observes, and "reads" each student.

Physically embodying the forms of practice, mentally developing the degree of focus and concentration necessary, and personally developing the



requisite devotion for deities and master all take considerable time. Only when a master intuitively senses that a student is psychophysically, morally, and spiritually "ready" to advance and when the teacher has no doubts about the student's character, is he supposed to teach a new, more difficult exercise. Ideally, each technique is given as a "gift". The teacher should take joy in the act of giving, especially as the gifts become more advanced and, therefore, more precious.

Unlike *varma ati*, *kalarippayattu's* sister martial art indigenous to the Kanyakumari region of the old Travancore kingdom and southern Tamil Nadu, as well as more recent cosmopolitan forms of martial arts oriented toward self-defense and/or street fighting, *kalarippayattu* is similar to its Japanese counterpart, the traditional *bugei* or weapons forms, in which use of weapons was historically the main purpose of practice. Empty-hand fighting has always been important to *kalarippayattu*, but more as a means of disarming an armed opponent than as its sole *raison d'être*. Only when a student is physically, spiritually, and ethically "ready," is he supposed to be allowed to take up the first weapon. If the body and mind have been fully prepared (and therefore integrated), when the student takes up the first weapon it becomes an extension of the integration of the bodymind in action.²⁰



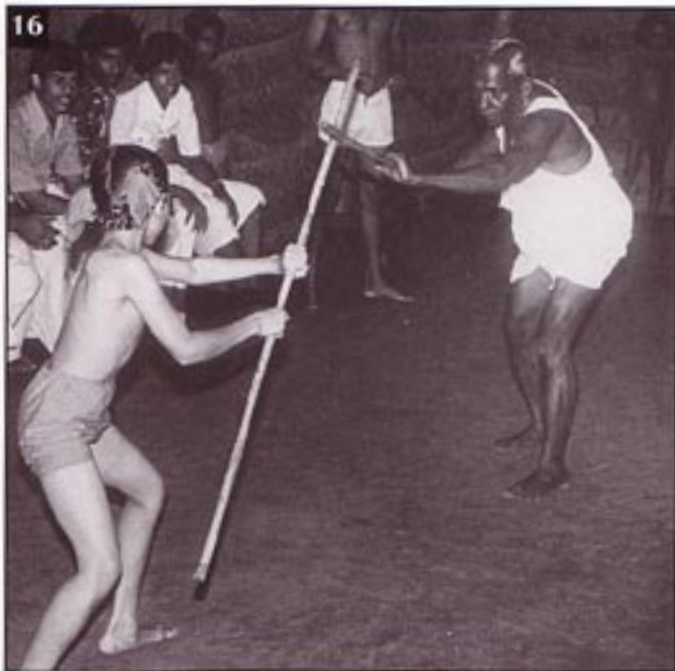


FIGURE 16:
GURUKKAL MADHAVAN PANNIKKAR (NOW DECEASED)
PERFORMS LONG STAFF WITH A FEMALE STUDENT.

FIGURE 17:
RAJASHAKHARAN NAIR AND ANOTHER ADVANCED STUDENT
PERFORMING OTTA AT THE C.V.N. KALARI, THIRUVANANTHAPURAM.

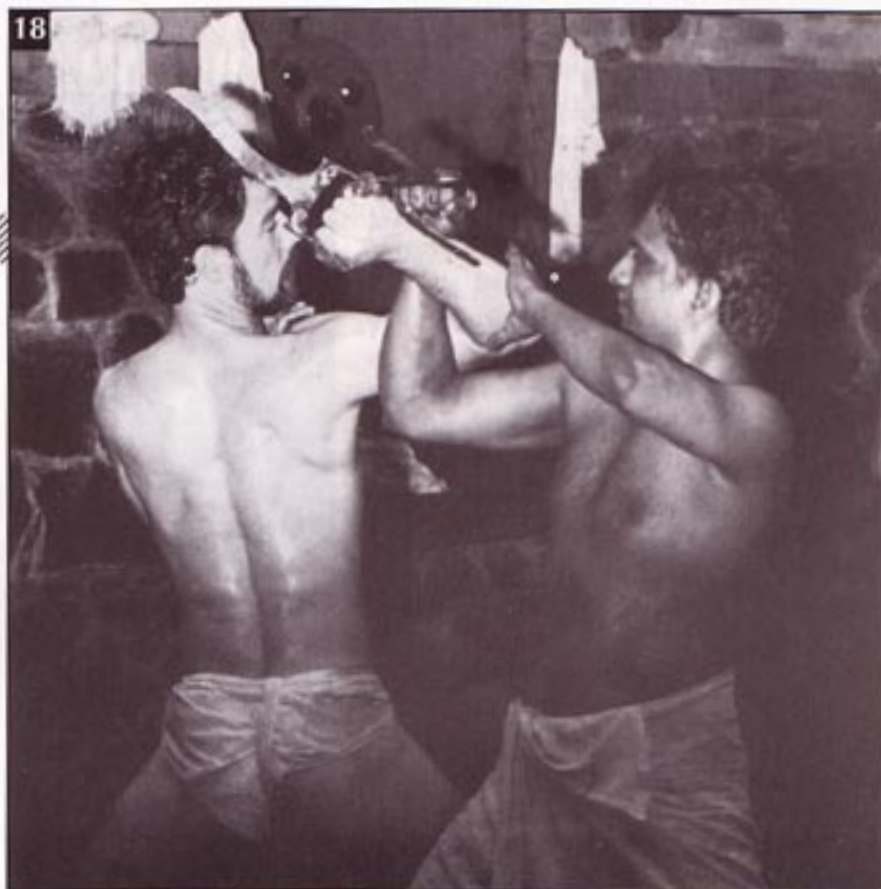


FIGURE 18:
THE AUTHOR BEING LOCKED DURING
DAGGER PRACTICE AT THE C.V.N.
KALARI, THIRUVANANTHAPURAM.
Photograph by Adam Oliensis.

The student first learns wooden weapons: *koltari* or *kolkayattam payattu*—first long staff (Figure 16), later short stick and curved stick (*otta*, Figure 17), and usually after only several years does one advance to combat weapons including dagger (Figure 18), spear, sword and shield (Figure 20), and flexible sword (Figure 21).²¹ The teacher's corrections are intended to make the weapon an extension of the body. The use of each weapon involves one or more basic poses from which the practitioner moves into and out of and through which the weapon becomes an extension of the body. For example, the staff is an extension of the natural line of the spinal column maintained as one moves into and out of basic poses. The hands are kept in front of the body and the body weight is always kept forward, maximizing the range of the staff to keep the opponent at bay.

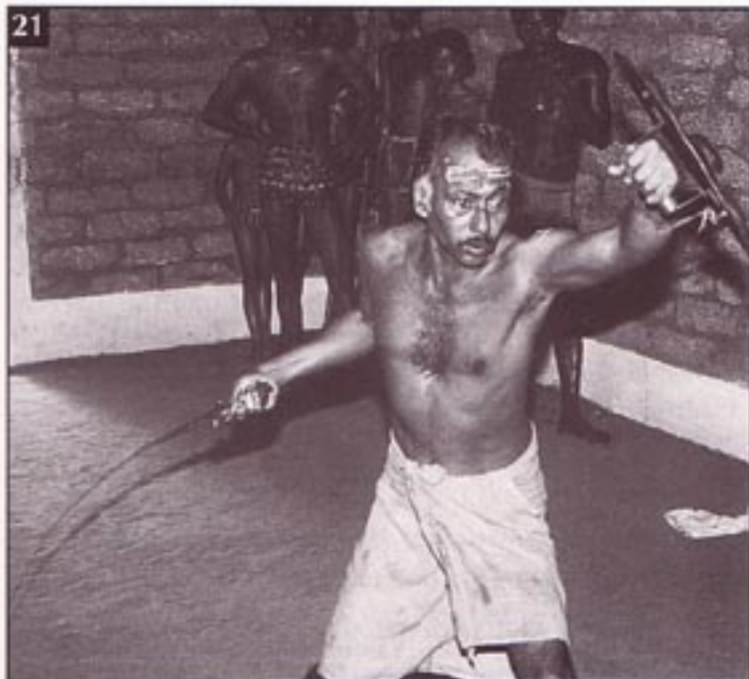
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FIGURE 19:
GURUKKAL
GOVINDANKUTTY
NAIR TEACHES
HIS SON, SATHYAN,
STAFF VERSUS
TWO STICKS.

FIGURE 20:
SWORD AND SHIELD
COMBAT—GURUKKAL
GOVINDANKUTTY
NAIR AND
RAJASHEKHARAN
NAIR.

FIGURE 21:
C. SANKARANARAYANAN MENON WIELDS
THE FIVE FOOT LONG FLEXIBLE SWORD.



21



20

For some masters, practice with the curved stick, called *otta*, with its deep, wavelike, flowing movements, is considered the culmination and epitome of psychophysiological training because not only is there superb and beautiful external form, but also a simultaneous internal awakening. When correct spinal alignment is maintained, practice further develops the important region at the root of the navel (*nabhi mula*) region, hips, and thighs. Without the student knowing it, *otta* also subtly initiates the student in empty-hand combat (*verimkai*), the most advanced part of total *kalarippayattu* training, which eventually culminates when the student learns the location of the body's vital spots (*marmam*) which are attacked or defended (see Zarrilli 1992).

Correct practice of all weapons depends entirely on correct performance of preliminary body exercises. Weapons are never to be manipulated by using overt strength or physical force, i.e., trying to make a blow forceful. Gurukkal Govindankutty Nayar said, "Using overt force is the surest way for a blow to 'become nothing' and 'lose its actuality.'" Like the body exercises, each blow, thrust, cut, or defensive movement must be performed *with the entire body* and not simply with the hand, arm, and/or weapon. While practicing sword and shield, my teacher told me:

A non-actualized cut originates from the shoulder itself and does not bring the entire body into the execution of the cut, nor does it flow into the next cut in the sequence which follows.

Just as one movement should flow into the next when one performs the body-exercise sequence, so in weapons practice one blow merges naturally with the next as there is a continuous energy flow which should never be broken.

Eventually the student should begin to manifest physical, mental, and behavioral signs resulting from practice. At first the exercises are "that which is external" (*bahyamayatu*). Like *hatha yoga*, daily practice of the forms leads to extraordinary physical control, and eventually should turn the student inward; the exercises eventually become "that which is internal" (*andarikamayatu*). One master explained the progression: "First the outer forms, then the inner secrets." Therefore, exercises and weapons forms are repeated until the student has sufficiently embodied the "inner life" (*bhava*) of the sequence, i.e., until the correct form gets "inside" the student's body. Once the exercise becomes "effortless," as one performs the exercise he should naturally begin to experience the "inner action" behind the external movement.

As Gurukkal Govindankutty Nayar discussed in detail with me, simply mimicking correct external form is not enough:

Almost all practice you see is partial. It is not complete. Even with advanced students practicing, their form may be good and correct in [external] form, but it is still lacking something. It is lacking that spark or life (*jivan*) that makes this a real and full practice. They do not yet have the soul of the form.

The external form remains empty, "lifeless," and a mere shell if there is not simultaneously the correct and appropriate circulation of the internal wind or energy.

THE ACTUALIZATION OF POWER (SAKTI)

Most masters would agree with Achutan Gurukkal's statement that only through "correct practice" of poses and steps will the student reap the benefits of practice and also begin to discover and eventually manifest power (*sakti*) in practice. What, precisely, is meant by "power" (*sakti*), and what are the signs of its presence? According to those masters who assume the yoga-based paradigm discussed above, three essential features must be realized: (1) precisely correcting the external physical form and corresponding internal circulation of the wind or energy (*vayu* or *prana-vayu*) so that alignment and movement are correct and within the limits of a form; (2) ensuring that the student is breathing properly, coordinating and releasing the breath properly, and, therefore, circulating the wind or energy correctly; (3) ensuring that the student develops correct external focus and eventually realizes one-point focus internally.

Masters like Achutan Gurukkal stress that "correct practice also means breathing naturally and, therefore, having the breath properly coordinated with performing the exercise or pose." Correct breathing is understood to develop naturally over months of practice. Nilakantan Namboodiripad told me that while doing all the preliminary exercises, breathing "should be automatic and effortless, which comes from continuous practice. Inhalation and exhalation should be the maximum possible, but there is no retention." Teachers tell their students to "breathe through the nose; don't open your mouth." Keeping the mouth closed, the hands raised, and the spinal column firm in its natural alignment during leg exercises forces the student to begin to develop natural, deep diaphragmatic breathing from the navel region and prevents the natural tendency to take shallow breaths from the chest. As Kallada Balakrishnan asserted, "When the straight kick is done fully and correctly and the foot touches the hand above the head, then there will be correct breathing."

In addition to the natural coordination of breath with exercise some, but by no means all, masters also practice special breath control techniques understood to help activate and circulate the practitioner's "internal energy" (*prana vayu*) and, therefore, contribute to the actualization of *sakti* to be used in fighting and/or healing. There are two types of special exercises: (1) *pranayama* techniques shared with yoga and taught by either *kalarippayattu* or yoga masters, which require repetition of the fourfold pattern of inhalation, retention/pause, exhalation, retention/pause (Figure 22), and (2) special *kalarippayattu* breathing exercises, often simply called *swasam*, which require continuous deep inhalation and exhalation without retention or pause. Some masters insist that correct practice is only fully actualized by those who practice these special exercises.

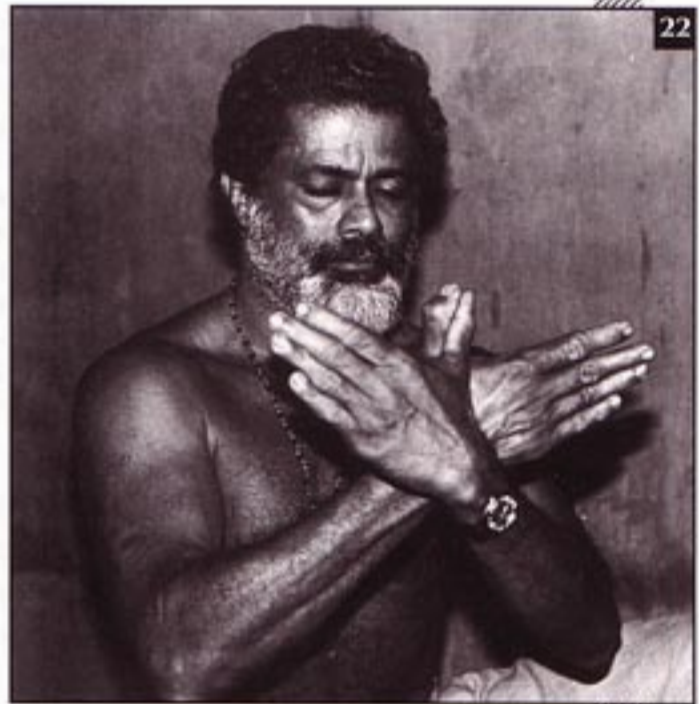


FIGURE 22:
VASU GURUKKAL
PRACTICES HIGHER
MEDITATIONAL TECHNIQUES
INVOLVING MANIPULATION
OF THE HANDS COORDINATED
WITH BREATH CONTROL AND
REPETITION OF SACRED
SYLLABLES (MANTRA)
INTENDED TO "LOCK"
THE BODY AND ACTUALIZE
POWER (SAKTI) INTERNALLY.

One Christian master teaches a special form of *pranayama* called *brahmanapranayamam*, which is coordinated with practice of basic steps (*cuvadu*). Strength is developed through repetition of the usual pattern of “*puraka* (inhalation), *kumbhaka* (retention), and *rejaka* (exhalation)” prior to and after body exercises and when performing empty-hand movements. For this master, “breath control exercises are superior to all other forms of exercise. The vital energy (*prana-vayu*), mind, intellect, and physical strength (*balam*) are all closely related.” Another master claims that practicing *pranayama* leads to “control over the mind as well as the body’s metabolic functions” and, therefore, to the development of correct form practice in the martial art. Neelakantan Namboodiripad told me that practicing *pranayama* brings “concentration” and eventually “air strength” (*vayubalam*) identical with the manifestation of power (*sakti*) itself. One master explained the practical application of *pranayama* in the martial art:

In *pranayama* there are two retentions, one after inhalation and one after exhalation. The one after exhalation is not strong. Therefore, when you give a blow it comes with exhalation. But strong defense comes with inhalation. This is the essence of *kalaripayattu*, but most people don’t know it. Only those who have studied *pranayama* can understand it.

Other masters have learned special *kalaripayattu* breathing exercises, simply called “*swasam*.” Their purpose is the same as *pranayama*, i.e., “to gain strength (*balam*) and power (*sakti*).” Master Mohammedunni describes the result as gaining “wind power” (*vayusakti*) “so that I will have firm steps and for application [in combat].” When performing these exercises, “your mind is simply on what you are doing. There is a grip or power in the stomach at the full point of inhalation.”

Although retention per se is not part of these particular breathing exercises, one of the most important signs of correct practice is when there is a “gripping” or “holding” (*piduttam*) which comes naturally to specific places (*sthanam*) of the body. (For example, notice the back alignment in Figures 1-4 and the fact that the region of the navel and hips provides firm support.) The “grip” results from a combination of natural breath control and correct form practice, enhanced in some cases by special breathing exercises.

The third most important feature of “correct practice” leading to actualization of *sakti* is developing correct, i.e., one-point focus (*ekagrata*). There are numerous practical ways in which internal one-point focus is practiced in the *kalari*. Visually focusing on the teacher’s eyes in weapons training continues the student’s development of one-point focus begun when the student is first instructed to focus when he begins the leg exercises. As Achuttan Gurukkal explained:

We should never take our eyes from those of our opponent. By *ekagrata* here I mean *kannottam*, keeping the eyes on the opponent’s. When doing practice you should not see anything else going on around you.

Master Achutan's comments echo the well-known example of Arjuna's actualization of one-point focus in the archery test which was administered by Drona to all his students and at which only Arjuna was successful.

Single-point focus should not be confused with the simple act of focusing the eyes on an external object. One-point focus has both external and internal dimensions, the internal developed as an integral part of the raising and discovery of the internal wind or energy. For a few masters, one-point focus is simply the first stage in an ever-deepening and more subtle process of interior practice, further developed through special meditational techniques.

Whether Hindu, Christian, or Muslim, those who emphasize the internal aspect of practice teach one or more forms of meditation as a natural extension of this inward progression of practice. Meditation is understood to be a complementary means of controlling the natural state of mental flux which stands in the way of the student's achievement of one-point concentration, as well as a path to higher modes of personal accomplishment and actualization. As one master explained:

Practicing *kalarippayattu* is conducive to learning both yoga and *pranayama*; they all come together. Both produce sharpness and steadiness of mind, both also give courage and patience, and both also help to give good health.

What eventually results from practicing *kalarippayattu* is the discovery of the interior subtle body (*suksma-sarira*) traditionally associated with yoga and meditation, and assumed to be encased within the physical body (see Zarrilli, 1989).

As Govindankutty Nayar put it, "*Kalarippayattu* is 80% percent mental and only the remainder is physical." The eighty percent mental is further developed through a variety of forms of meditation including everything from simple *vrata*m—sitting and focusing one's mind on a deity, name chanting, or focusing on one's own breathing—to more complex forms of moving or stationary meditation which cannot be explained in this brief essay.

Following the yogic ideal of self-control to its logical extreme, the ultimate mastery of "mental powers" applied in martial practice is the development of the esoteric, seemingly "magical" power to attack the body's vital spots (*marmam*) by simply looking or pointing (Zarrilli, 1992). Belief in these subtle powers is simply an extension of pan-Indian assumptions regarding the ability of supremely accomplished individual masters of yoga to accumulate and concentrate their powers internally and then to apply those powers externally. In the ethnographic domain, the continued belief in such powers is the closest contemporary reflection of the subtle, esoteric powers attained by epic heroes like Arjuna.²²

THE FRUITS OF PRACTICE:

KALARIPPAYATTU AND THE AYURVEDIC PARADIGM

For some traditional masters, especially those following the model of epic heroes or teachers like Drona and Arjuna, the training regimen is understood to last a lifetime and, like other yogic disciplines, is intended to lead not only to mastery of esoteric, subtle powers, but also to be, on a much

more mundane level, an all-encompassing way of life, affecting diet, health, moral and ethical behavior, psychophysical development, and spiritual well-being. Corrections to the psychophysiological exercises are initially given in order to help the student assume the correct external form. With practice, as the form "becomes more correct," there is assumed to be a corresponding effect on the health, well-being, behavior, and inner experience of the practitioner, complemented by the forms of meditation and devotion a student may practice. The process of constant repetition eventually leads beyond empty mimicry. At first one must overcome the physical limitations of the gross, physical body, stretching muscles to enable the body to assume correct forms, removing mental distractions, and achieving visual focus. Eventually, one begins to experience and reap the first "fruits" (*phalam*) of practice, assumed to be the "natural result" of nourishing the seeds planted through correct practice. These fruits cannot be consciously striven for since striving itself is understood to stand in the way of fruition. As Kallada Balakrishnan told me, when forms and breathing are practiced correctly, "you begin to see a change" in the student.

The effect of practice on the body of the practitioner is often understood and interpreted according to the traditional humoral concepts of India's classical medical system, Ayurveda. Ayurveda seeks to establish harmony with the environment by maintaining equilibrium in a process of constant fluid exchange. According to South Asian medical anthropologist Francis Zimmermann, the art of medicine is meant to establish

yoga or samyoga, "junctions" or "articulations" between man and his environment, through the prescription of appropriate diets and regimens. . . . Equality, balance and congruous articulations are meant for the conservation and restoration of these precious fluids. . . . By means of *brahmacharya* . . . and various other psychosomatic disciplines, one should establish congruous junctions with the surrounding landscapes and seasons, and thus one should protect one's powers, one should husband one's vital fluids.

– Zimmermann, 1983:17-18

Kalarippayattu is one such discipline, the daily practice of which is popularly believed to establish congruence among the three humors (*tridosas*): wind (*vata*), phlegm (*kapha*), and fire (*pitta*). The master's understanding of the benefits of training and his treatment of injuries are based on this fundamental notion of the body.

The role of exercise and massage in maintaining inner fluidity and articulation among the humors was explained in antiquity in a medical text attributed to Susruta:

The act born from the effort (*ayasa*) of the body is called exercise (*vyayama*). After doing it, one should shampoo (*viMRD*) the body on all sides until it gives a comfortable sensation.

Growth of the body, radiance, harmonious proportions of the limbs, a kindled [digestive] fire, energy, firmness, lightness, purity (*mrja*), endurance to fatigue, weariness, thirst, hot and cold, etc., and even a perfect health: this is what is brought by physical exercise.

Nothing comparable to it for reducing obesity. No enemy will attack a man (literally: a mortal, *martya*) who practices physical exercise, because they all fear his strength.

Senility (or the decay of old age, *jara*) will not seize him abruptly. The muscles keep firm in one who practices physical exercise; that is, one whose body is sedated by physical exercise and who is massaged with the feet (*vyayamasvinnagatrasya padbhyam udvartitasya ca*) diseases fly from him, just as small beasts do on seeing a lion.

Physical exercise makes good-looking even the person deprived of youth and beauty. Physical exercise, in one who does it assiduously, digests all food, even the most inappropriate, turned sour or still crude without provoking the humors. For assiduous physical exercise is beneficial to a strong man who eats unctuous foods (*snigdhabhojin*).

It is especially beneficial to him in the winter and spring. But in all seasons, every day, a man seeking his own good should take physical exercise only to the half limit of his strength, as otherwise it kills.

When the *Vayu* hitherto properly located in the heart (*hrdi*) comes to the mouth of the man practicing physical exercise, it is the sign (*laksana*) of *balardha*, of his having used half of his strength.

Age, strength, body, place, time, and food: It is only after duly considering these factors, that one should engage in physical exercise, as otherwise it may bring disease.

– Zimmermann, 1986

Another antique authority, Vagbhata, wrote that a “harmonious and solid condition of the body results from gymnastics” followed by massage (Vogel, 1965:90).

The health benefits of regular exercise and massage are a commonplace of the martial art among today's practitioners. As one student told me:

I practice *kalaripayattu* to maintain health of the body. I can enjoy when I practice. When I exercise and then take a bath, I feel very energetic at work and sleep well. There is a big difference in my body when I come [to practice in the *kalari*] and when I don't. After practicing for three years, I have not had any fever or headache or any other diseases. I think the practice of *kalaripayattu* helps us to have preventive action in our body. The body can resist these usual and typical diseases.

Practice is traditionally regulated by *rtucarya* or "the art of adapting one's diet and conduct to the cycle of the seasons" (Zimmermann, 1979:13; 1980). The most intensive period of training is the rainy season from June through August, which is "neither too hot nor too cold." In a discussion about training with Govindankutty Nayar, he told me:

During this season it is good for the body to have oil and sweat. This is also the best season for massage (*uliccil*). It provides protection for the body. If one were to exercise during the hot season (April-May), he would feel weak and lack energy.

Vigorous practice is considered appropriate to monsoon season because more energy is thought to be available at this time. In this cool season the heat produced by vigorous exercise and massage is counterbalanced by the seasonal accumulation of phlegm (*kapha*). By contrast, the hot summer season is characterized by accumulation of the wind humor (*vata*), and in this period exercise should be avoided. Exercise and massage also increase the circulation of the wind humor (*vata*) throughout the body, and this, too, counterbalances the accumulation of phlegm during the monsoon.

The special restrictions which traditionally circumscribed training maintain balance among the three humors. Since the body is "heated" by vigorous exercise, other activities must counterbalance this heating effect. For example, sexual activity expends vital energy and increases *vata*. If this accumulation of *vata* is combined with vigorous exercise (also producing *vata* and heat), it would create a humoral imbalance. Therefore, sexual activity was traditionally proscribed during this intense monsoon period of practice.

Exercise should always be within the limits of one's age and basic constitution. Exertion beyond one's normal limits causes an imbalance which can become pathological. Training is, therefore, a long-term process in which one's capacity may be enhanced.

The daily application of specially prepared oil is thought to add flexibility and strength to muscles, joints, and ligaments. Seasonal massage (*uliccil*) and restrictions on behavior and diet are also understood to enhance the ease and fluidity of movement.²³

Specially prepared herbal oils are applied before exercise to produce sweat from internal body heat. The oil keeps the heat from dissipating and its medicinal properties seep into the body through pores opened by sweating. Oil applied after exercise begins would introduce a mixture of sweat and oil through the open pores, and this would produce a cooling effect leading to a humoral imbalance.

The sweating oiled body should not be exposed to direct sunlight or to outdoor wind; therefore, the place of training is ideally constructed as a pit that protects the practitioner from sun and wind. The flow of air remains above the trainees, keeping the building cool and fresh, with no wind on the trainees' bodies.

The exercise, sweating, and oil massage stimulate all forms of the wind humor to course through the body. Long-term practice enhances the ability to endure fatigue through balancing the three humors and cultivates a characteristic internal and external ease of movement and body fluidity. The accomplished practitioner's movements flow (*olukku*). These techniques "clear up the channels and nourish the body fluids and tissues" (Zimmermann, 1988:19) and are centered in the abdomen since the navel region is considered the point from which channels of the body flow.

The benefits of practice are not restricted to the effect on the body of humors and saps. Among some masters, health is viewed as equally dependent on maintaining equanimity among all aspects of one's life including body, mind, and behavior. There is a fluid exchange among all three. The same student who told me about the perceived benefits to his physical health gained by practice, continued by telling me that

practice also increases stamina and concentration. Since I joined the *kalari* I have been able to obtain a high degree of concentration in my daily routines. Above all, it has helped me to be calm in the midst of the people with whom I associate. In my experience *kalaripayattu* practice leads both to natural resistance in the body and to better behavior.

Ideally, according to some masters, in addition to physical health, one naturally begins to develop a calm and stable mental state. As Master Govindankutty Nayar told me:

If you perform the exercises correctly and have the proper grip, then you begin to "enjoy" practice. By doing this the whole body finds enjoyment. The mind won't be wandering here and there. You can do it with full confidence and courage. Your mind won't be in a "flurry" (*sambhramam*). Sometimes, in combat, one might become flustered. If an opponent is powerful, one might become nervous; so, slowly you must develop this ability to be calm, to have mental peace.

What is most gratifying for an individual is when the mind is in a calm and stable state. What is ungratifying is when the mind is unstable and easily distracted.

This can be easily understood if you think about it. The water is calm and stable, with no movement. If a small stone is dropped into it, a wave comes, and it will be sad—it disturbs the calm. The mind should be stable with no disturbance. Only those who follow a strict routine in their lives can have such mental calm.

According to this interpretation, the student who practices forms correctly, coordinates breath with exercise, and develops one-point focus should eventually begin to experience a more calm and stable disposition.

The mental calm resulting from practice is said to give one “mental courage” (*manodhairyam*), i.e., “the power to face anything that is dangerous to my health or mind. If I am confident of my art and health, then only can I have mental power (*manasakti*).” Mental equilibrium can be “read” in each person’s face. “If one faces an attack, relaxation of the face reflects mental equilibrium” achieved through daily practice.

Some students and masters of *kalaripayattu* perceive their increased mental calm not as something esoteric, but very useful in daily life. The ideal student of *kalaripayattu* gains control of his emotions and, through increasing development of mental calm and courage, becomes “concentrated with a strong will.” The student should develop the intuitive ability to follow the common code of conduct traditionally assumed by the *kalaripayattu* practitioner.

In Kerala, there is a folk expression which summarizes the martial practitioner’s ideal state of psychophysiological/pneumatic accomplishment explored here—a state in which the “body becomes all eyes” (*meyyu kannakuka*). One reading of the “body as all eyes” is as the yogic/Ayurvedic bodymind, which intuitively responds to the sensory environment and which is healthful and fluid in its congruency. It is the animal-body in which there is unmediated, uncensored, immediate response to stimuli. Like Brahma, the “thousand eyed,” the practitioner who is accomplished can “see” everywhere around him, intuitively sensing danger in the environment and responding immediately. In a world where power was traditionally assumed to be unstable, capricious, and immanent, such immediate response would have been essential to counteracting not only a thrust to the stomach, but also the possibility of an “attack” by simply looking or pointing.

CONCLUSION:

BODILY PRACTICE, MORALITY, AND CRAFTING THE “SELF”

Although the yogic and Ayurvedic assumptions which inform practice among the masters for whom the “body becomes all eyes” is relevant to practice today, we should not assume that all of the entailments of the body, mind, practice, agency, and power discussed in the ethnographic present are necessarily the same as those of a *kalaripayattu* practitioner in the middle

ages or antiquity. In an era when the necessity of actualizing one's powers in combat have been narrowed from a panoply of forces and powers locally immanent on the field of battle and/or the duel platform to the usually hypothetical arena of application on the streets, the demonstration stage, the training space, and/or the treatment room, the powers that might be visited upon one and/or those on which one might call are decidedly more tame and mundane, if no less important, than in the past. *Kalarippayattu* practitioners today no longer pledge themselves to death on behalf of a ruler, nor do they form "suicide squads" which literally sacrifice themselves on the "glorious" battlefield of death, nor need they content in a life or death situation with opponents who may have gained access to esoteric, seemingly magical powers and abilities.

With rare exception, the practice of *kalarippayattu* today has become more about actualizing and harnessing one's bodymind and powers for use in daily life and, therefore, in shaping certain kinds of "selves" rather than about preparing for an actual fight to the death. As students advance under the guidance of some of today's masters, they are expected to be able to control their feelings and emotions and to develop the ability to resist the "temptations of modern life." As one student put it, "You won't go for corruption." If one practices assiduously and correctly, he will "naturally develop wisdom and not go astray," i.e., he will avoid alcohol and drugs and be of "good character."²⁴

One master, well trained in both *kalarippayattu* and yoga, asserted that if one learns *kalarippayattu* properly, then "he should gain release from unhappiness"; however, he also noted soberly, "Many practitioners have turned out to be wasters, drunks, and of bad morals." He cited the example of Chandu from the northern ballads, the infamous antihero who, bought off by money and a promise of the affection of a beautiful young woman, betrayed his cousin, Aromar. For this master, Chandu is an example of the type of *kalari* master who possesses a dark (*tamasa*) constitution. The ideal *kalarippayattu* teacher "has a good or truthful (*satvika*) constitution. If the master has a truthful constitution, it will be a blessing for the student. But," this master asked me rhetorically as he spoke from bitter personal experience, "if some masters do possess a dark constitution, what will not happen? There will be a split (*sthanabransam*) between student and master. Everything will become confused (*alangolappeduka*)!"

These examples illustrate two apparently contradictory assumptions: practice is one means of fundamentally altering one's basic, inhering nature (*gunam*) and behavior; however, one's fundamental nature and behavior is understood to be given by one's *gunam*. According to this set of assumptions, the proportion of the three *gunam* varies from individual to individual, so people are ranked accordingly to their own makeup and the corresponding "behavioral code (*dharma*) held appropriate to the disposition of those *gun[am]*" (Davis, 1976:6). *Gunam* has been defined as "property" or "quality" (Gundert, 1982:332), "radical material substances" (Davis, 1976:6), or "subtle qualities, attributes, or strands" (Marriott, 1980:1). The three *gunam* include goodness or truth (*satva*), passion (*rajasa*), and darkness (*tamasa*).²⁵

It is still usually assumed that all persons belong to specific birth-groups (*jati*) defined by the inhering qualities of one's substance and accompanying behavioral code. As one older master told me, "The three *gunam* are according to *sastra*. Brahmins are *satva*; ksatriyas are *rajasa*; and Nayars [as

sudras] are usually associated with *tamasa*.” Although fundamentally *tamasa* by birth, Nayers and other practitioners of *kalarippayattu* must possess the *rajasa* element as a manifestation of the energetic, active quality necessary to develop a strong will characteristic of an heroic (*vira*) demeanor (*bhava*) and likewise the *satva* characteristic of mental calm. Both are needed to remain determined, yet calm, in the face of combat.²⁶

One’s fundamental *gunam* is determined at birth according to the substances mixed by the parents, the specific time of birth, and the influence of the stars and the gods (Marriott, 1980:5).²⁷ However, as Master Govindankutty Nayar told me, “Among every person the combination of the three *gunam* varies.” Among those of the *satva* type, the predominant *gunam* varies according to the individual.

Arjuna as the Son of Indra is predominantly *rajasa*, but with all his meditational practices he tended to gain *satva*. Bhima as the son of Vayu has strength and power. His power is more from his strength than skill. Therefore, he is more *tamasa* than Arjuna, and there is also an element of the demon in his skill.

Although the fundamental combination of *gunam* is thought to be determined at birth, it is still possible for some persons to change their *gunam*. Govindankutty Nayar explained further:

It is possible to alter the three *gunam*. But if a person has a predominance of one of the *gunam*, he will do all things with that personality.

One can alter the three *gunam* through his *karma* or through the nature of his actions. *Kalarippayattu* is one way of altering the *gunam*, but it depends on the involvement of the person practicing. If you watch three different students in the *kalari*, you can see change in some, but in others there will be no change.

He illustrated his point with the following story:

One man who was hideous was always hurting others while practicing *kalarippayattu*. He was a *tamasa* type. Others will be gentle and quiet, and some may even be too *satva* to practice the martial art. Only after a very very long practice the *gunam* may begin to change. There are reasons for the change: when one gets more self-confidence, he becomes softer and is less prone to anger [associated with *tamasa*]—the mind becomes much calmer. One becomes calmer because of practice, especially through breath

idealized discourse of the self and person constituted by practice and actualized when "the body is all eyes." However, there are numerous historical and contemporary examples of practitioners who transgress or fail to actualize this experiential and behavioral ideal.

Nowhere is this better witnessed than in the example of the infamous figure of one of the medieval practitioners of *kalarippayattu*, the well-known Tacholi Otenan, immortalized in the northern ballads (*vadakkan pattukal*) and most recently in popular Malayalam films and comic books. In one of the many escapades of this Malayali cultural hero, the proud, vain, often hot-headed Tacholi was deputed by a local ruler to collect three years' back rent from a landholding family in the Kodumala area where the powerful young woman of the Kunki family was holding sway and refusing to come forward with rent due the ruler. Tacholi used his expertise in attacking the body's vital spots (*marmam*) to subdue her with a cattle prod. Tacholi's direct action immediately tamed and controlled this rebellious young woman. In this and other instances, Tacholi's predominantly *rajasic* type of behavior, characteristic of "the passionate and impulsive" warrior (*kshatriya*), (Kakar, 1982:249)³⁰ was legitimized by his acting in the service to the power of the local ruler.

Tacholi is perhaps the best example of the potentially erratic, *rajasic* personality whose use of the martial practitioner's powers is as capricious as the nature of that constellation of powers itself. What Tacholi and his numerous contemporary counterparts in Kerala today illustrate is the fact that any set of martial techniques and the powers to which practice leads an individual are circumscribed, shaped, and actualized by the idiosyncratic temperament of the individual. No matter how esoteric the techniques, no matter how subtle the powers, no matter how apparently controlled the bodymind, all such martial and meditational powers are actualized by persons who are more or less responsible to the moral use or abuse of those powers in particular socio-political circumstances. This is nowhere more evident than in the unfortunate fact that a few masters are even using *kalarippayattu* today to train students for communal violence against Hindus and/or Muslims. To reiterate a point that Kondo makes, *kalarippayattu* becomes one means of "crafting" a particular self and therefore is a "culturally, historically specific pathway . . . to self-realization . . . [and/or] domination" (Kondo, 1990:305).

The "body as all eyes," as a special, virtuoso body of practice, is not separate from the daily body inhabited by the practitioner. Rather, it is one mode of incorporation which is constitutive of the practitioner's horizon of experience (in a sense that Connerton illustrates in his writings). Along with other modes of incorporation and cultural practice, *kalarippayattu* is, as anthropologist Michelle Rosaldo explains, "the very stuff of which our subjectivities are created" (Rosaldo, 1984:150). It helps shape one's perceptions, experience, and behavior. The *kalarippayattu* student training in self-control and restraint in a *kalari* where Muslims, Christians, and Hindus are welcome to train together today will be different from the *kalarippayattu* student secretly trained in an exclusively Muslim or Hindu environment where hate may be bred.

As discussed earlier, practice itself and the subjectivity it helps create are not static, but rather open to manipulation and interpretation in the interplay between the constantly altering horizons of individual subjectivities;

the interplay between the metaphors, images, and representations of the body culturally available; the interpretation of the body, experience, and practice articulated by individual masters; and the socio-political and economic environments. Sometimes the "self" crafted and the use to which that self puts its martial powers and practices are for a larger good – all too often today they are not.



NOTES

¹ This essay is based on six extended trips to Kerala, India; on extensive interviews with over fifty masters; and on fifteen years of training, practice, and teaching of the discipline described. The most recent research trips were made possible by a Fulbright Senior Research Fellowship (1993) and by an American Institute of Indian Studies and NEH Senior Research Fellowship (1988-89). In the essay, I restrict myself to *kalarippayattu* and do not address the complex history of the closely related Tamil martial art, *varma ati*. For a brief discussion of the latter see Zarrilli (1992).

² I have explored this subject and the closely related issue of positionality and representation in two forthcoming essays (Zarrilli, in press a and b).

³ By no means do all practitioners or theorists of "new age" somatic disciplines fit this simple stereotype. A number of practitioners and theorists of somatic disciplines are perfectly aware of these problems of reification and romanticization of the "east" and, therefore, choose to resist such oversimplification in their own practice and thought. For example, see Don Hanlon Johnson's important work on the body (1992, 1994).

⁴ In part, our reading of India as the romantic, feminized, nonviolent (i.e., Gandhian) "Other" has too long precluded reading the *Bhagavad Gita* in its appropriate larger *Mahabharata* context, that is, as part of a text in which the arts of war are practiced for the larger good.

⁵ Regarding South Asian notions of the self as a "dividual" rather than "individual," see in particular Marriott (1976, 1977, 1990).

⁶ K.K.N. Kurup has clearly established the continuity of this ancient Sangam practice with his descriptions of the deification of local medieval Kerala heroes still worshipped today in *teyyam* ritual performances of the Cannannore region of north Malabar (1973, 1977). John R. Freeman's recent research on *teyyam* focuses on the history and phenomenological dimensions of this mode of popular Hindu religious practice and its relationship to *kalarippayattu* (1991).

⁷ M.R. Balakrishna Warriar argues that the sage Parasurama was the "leader of the first Aryan colony in Kerala" (1955:24). The fighting sage may be a mythological remembrance of Kerala's fighting yatra brahmins, discussed below.

⁸ P.C. Chakravarti, drawing on the *Mahabharata*, the *Sarabhanga Jataka*, Alexander's chronicles, and the records of succeeding centuries, points out that "the popular notion that the military profession was the exclusive monopoly of the Ksatriya caste is wholly without foundation" (1972:78-79).

⁹ Narayanan has clearly established continuity between the Kerala *cattar* of the *salai* and the *cattar* mentioned in this work (1973:29).

¹⁰ A.K.B. Pillai attributes the transformation from patrilineal to matrilineal descent and the development of significant differences in marriage relationships among Nayars and royal lineages to the period of the hundred-year war (1987:15). The matrilineal system first appeared "in Northern Kerala and the upper part of Central Kerala, where the Namputiri Brahmins were most powerful, and among caste groups from which the Namputiris took wives" (1987:80-81; Pillai, 1970:309-310).

¹¹ Within living memory of *yatra* brahmins today are performances of the brahmin entertainment, *yatrakali*, one part of which included the demonstration of martial skills. *Yatrakali* texts record verbal commands (*vayttari*) which are identical to the commands still used in *kalarippayattu* practice.

¹² Transcribed from a master's handwritten manuscript (1983).

¹³ In the post-Cera era, the armies were composed of bodies of soldiers known as *munurruvar* (the three hundred), *anuruvar* (five hundred), etc., also often known as *caver* pledged to death in service to their rulers. M.G.S. Narayanan has pointed out that the *caver* were a continuation of the royal bodyguards prescribed in the *Arthashastra* "from the families of heritable servants with high connections, good education, firm loyalty, and long service" (1977:99).

¹⁴ From his survey of extant Dhanur Vedic texts, none of which is older than the Dhanur Veda chapters (249-252) of the encyclopedia *Agni Purana* dating no earlier than the eighth century A.D., historian G.N. Pant reaches a similar conclusion and surmises an original Dhanur Veda text attributed to Siva and dating from the period prior to or at least contemporary with the epics (c. 1200-600 B.C.) (1978:3-5).

¹⁵ Other passages in *Agni Purana* are concerned with topics related to warfare and martial practice, but they do not focus on fighting skills per se. Examples include (1) rituals to be performed by brahman priests designed to give protection and/or success in battle (M.N. Dutt Shastri, 1967:840, 539); (2) construction of forts (Gangadharan, 1985:576-578); (3) instructions for military expeditions (Gangadharan, 1985:594); and (4) battle formations and deployments of constituent parts of an army (Gangadharan, 1985: 612-615; 629-635). For a comprehensive discussion of the art of warfare in ancient India see Chakravati, 1972.

¹⁶ Harvey P. Alper defines *mantras* as "impersonal...often practical...irrational...polyvalent instruments of power" (1989:3, 6). Alper's excellent collection of essays presents a diverse set of studies on *mantra*.

¹⁷ Translated by Gautam Dasgupta.

¹⁸ See *The Mahabharata*, Vol. 2, translated and edited by J.A.B. van Buitenen, "The Book of the Forest," 38.1-42.1 (1975:296-303). All quotations from the story below are from the van Buitenen translation.

¹⁹ A similar pattern of development of powers is also found in *teyyam*. See Freeman (1991).

²⁰ I am following David Edward Shaner's attempt to provide a more appropriate non-dualistic account of the relationship between body and mind. "Although there may be mind-aspects and body-aspects within all lived experience, the presence of either one includes experientially the presence of the other" (1985:42-43). "Bodymind" refers to this "polar" and symbiotic, rather than dualistic relationship.

²¹ In the distant past, bow and arrow were also part of the *kalaripayattu* tradition. Unfortunately, they have long since died out and are no longer practiced.

²² It is impossible for me to either confirm or deny the existence of such subtle, esoteric powers. What is most important in terms of my argument here is that traditionally such powers were assumed to be actual and, therefore, remain part of the entire domain of powers with which a martial master might have to contend.

²³ A future essay will provide an in-depth description of this deep form of massage and its relationship to training and practice.

²⁴ This emphasis on shaping a "self" does not mean that *kalaripayattu*'s techniques are not potentially deadly. Among masters who emphasize the internal development and actualization of *sakti* and its application, these techniques can be used with extraordinarily frightening power and force.

²⁵ For further discussion of *gunam* and the Indian concept of the person, see Carter (1982), Daniel E.V. (1984), and Davis (1976).

²⁶ Linda Moore notes that "the *rajasik* quality of Nayers is seen in the idea of their fitness for war, the suitability of their natures for substances like liquor and meat, and their constant propensity to outbursts of anger" (1983:438). She also notes that "a move in the direction of *satva* is always possible for Nayers" (1983:438).

²⁷ *Gunam* type determined at birth is still considered important by most Malayalis today, especially when considering a suitable marriage partner with whom bodily fluids will be exchanged. Even for many educated Malayalis, who view caste as a social and political evil, to consider marriage to a partner outside one's birth-group and, therefore, to one born with a different *gunam* complex is unthinkable.

²⁸ Note that there is clearly an ideology at work in this particular interpretation of *gunam* which emphasizes control as the ideal behavioral model. Masters taught and served at the behest of local rulers. From the master's position of power within the *kalari*, he is given the power to read a particular student's behavior as *tamasa* and thereby to determine whether the student gains access to the potentially lethal techniques and secrets of practice by means of which one acquires potentially deadly powers of practice.

One lower caste (*Tiyya*) practitioner in his mid-twenties from a relatively poor family was perceived by his main teacher (of the *Nayar* caste) as a "troublemaker" who broke the rules and discipline required of students. In order to control the dissemination of techniques and insure that the techniques do not fall into the hands of malcontents or one's enemies, students are traditionally instructed not to practice outside the *kalari* or to ever show or teach the techniques to others. When the teacher found out that the student was practicing and teaching outside his *kalari* and the student resisted the master's attempts to impose discipline upon him, they had a falling out.

At this point the student struck out on his own using his expertise at *kalaripayattu* as a source of personal and social power. The former student sought out a new master of his own caste, who revealed secrets of his own lineage of practice; began to invent his own techniques of practice, which emphasized *kalaripayattu* as a practical self-defense system; and took in students of his own, whom he trained on vacant land next to his house. Unlike Eklavya of the *Mahabharata*, this student refused to accept the power and authority of his master.

²⁹ Although from a Tamil text, the following illustrates the explicit nature of commonplace instructions about when and how to act in the event of an unprovoked attack:

If somebody comes to attack you, you salute him with humility and evade his attack. God will save you from the first blow, and you should forgive him for this first attack. If the enemy attacks you a second time, evade the attack with techniques and take your master in your mind. Even then, if the enemy tries to hit you a third time, watch his movements carefully, and that insistent fool will come and fall into your lap.

Without forgetting the meaning of the above, do the "turn to the right and block the attack" (*valampiriyal tattukettum*); "turn to the left and block the attack" (*vidate idampiriyal tattumkettum*). If your attacker receives a blow when you are blocking, he will vomit suddenly [...]

While evading the attack of your enemy stay in a safe position and remember the advice of your master.

³⁰ In contrast to the unbridled impulses of the *rajasic* type, Kakar characterizes the *tamasic* type as "always appear[ing] sullen and dull to the ruling elites" (1982:249). Master Govindankutty Nayar's use of *tamasa* to describe students prone to quick anger and impetuous, rash behavior is equivalent to Kakar's *rajasic* type.

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