

Kalaripayattu

Kalaripayattu is the term given to the oldest martial arts form founded in the state of Kerala in India's southwest. The word, Kalaripayattu, broken down means: *kalari* or "place of training" and *payattu*, "exercise". Kalaripayattu only began to be considered a martial art in 20th century during the revival of the sport (Green 2001a). Kalaripayattu, historically, is said to date back to the 11th century during a prolonged period of turmoil in the kingdom of Cera. During this time groups of Brahmins trained themselves and others in art of warfare and supported the war with the Colas. After the fall of the Cera kingdom, and the region of Kerala was divided, a group of Brahmins continued to practice their military art. The *cattar* or *yatra*, the sub-caste of brahmins also called "half-brahmins" for their devotion to the practice of arms combat, proceeded to teach, train, fight and dominate in the martial arts for centuries. *Keralopathi*, the legendary Kerala Brahmin chronicle tells of how the *brahmakshatra*, (the land where Brahmins take on Ksatriya roles) was given by Parasurama, and given instruction that the *ardhabrahmana* (half-brahmins) should fulfill military roles such as guards or soldiers (Mills 23-24). Parasurama, a warrior sage, is said to be the founder of Kerala and the first in the lineage of teaching families. Along with the *yatras*, other caste groups were trained in the art of Kalaripayattu. The Nayars were both soldiers and personal physical therapists to high-ranking officials such as district rulers or the local *raja*. The ideals of Kalaripayattu are also said to date back to the time of the Vedas. The concept of vital points (*marman*) can be traced back to the *Rg Veda*, in the story where the god Indra slays the demon Vrtra by attacking his vital spot with his *vajra* (thunderbolt) (Green 2001a).

During British rule Kalarippayattu experienced a decline because of an increase in military technologies such as firearms. It survived through the teachings of a few masters throughout the region, especially in the northern area. In 1920 Kalarippayattu started to revive with a sudden interest in the local art forms. Then in 1958, a few years after Kerala became a state government, the Kerala Kalarippayat Association was formed making Kalarippayattu an official sport. However, Kalarippayattu was still an unknown sport for most of the next few decades. Over the years that Kalarippayattu has been in practice, many forms and styles of it have emerged such as Arappukai, Pillartanni, Vatten, etc. However, many styles were lost, especially in the 19th century where there was a drive to strip power away from the Noyars and centralize power using European institutional models. Nowadays, there are three styles recognized by the Kerala Kalarippayat Association: Northern, Central and Southern, all named for their geographical region (Green 2001a).

Practitioners of Kalarippayattu focus on strict training methods and meditative practices to link the body and mind together. The basis of Kalarippayattu is the knowledge of the three “bodies of practice”: The first is the fluid body of humors and saps attained by rigorous seasonal training. The second is knowledge of the body, composed of bone, muscle, and vital spots. The third is the manifestation of the interior body through yogic practices to awaken the inner “serpent power (*kundalini sakti*) (Green 2001a). The learning of these practices are essential in creating the ideal state where “The body becomes all eyes”, which is a state of heightened awareness of all your surroundings and being able to act on impulse and instinct, much like an animal (McDonald 1570-1571).

Training in the art of Kalarippayattu is done in a *kalari*, which traditionally would be a pit dug in the ground, however, modern practitioners go to gyms (McDonald 1569). The *kalari*

itself is seen as a temple, with varying number of deities that are worshipped daily during the training season (Green 2001a). Training is traditionally started at age 7 and is for boys and girls. The training season is carried out during the cool monsoon season (June – August) (Zarrilli 25). Clothing prescribed is usually a loin cloth for males and loose fitting clothes for women. Entering the *kalari* is much like entering a Hindu temple: enter with your right foot first, and touch your forehead and chest with your right hand. The student crosses the *kalari* and pays respect and performs *puja* (worship) to the guardian deity of the *kalari*. Practice usually begins by oiling the body (McDonald 1570) and then start going through body exercise sequences (*meippayattu*) which link yoga *asana*-like poses, steps, kicks, jumps and turns and hand-arm coordination's performed in increasing speed and difficulty. The poses are designed after dynamic animals such as the horse, peacock, serpent and so on (Green 2001b). When students are ready physically, spiritually and ethically, they are allowed to move onto weapons training. It starts with wooden weapons such as the long staff, and then is moved on to combat weapons like swords, and spears. Ideally, if practitioners are ready, the weapon should become an extension of their body-mind. Armed combat, much like un-armed combat is designed to attack and defend the body's vital spots (Green 2001a). During the training period, special dietary, behavioral and observances are taken on that resemble one of the eight limbs of Patanjali's yoga. These may include never sleeping during the day and not staying awake at night, no sexual intercourse during training, to never misuse what is learned, and to be a good person (Zarrilli 25).

Along with physical exercise, meditation and massage are important aspects of Kalaripayattu training. Meditation is a way to increase concentration, and through different methods one can attain a higher form of one-point concentration. One method is to repeat particular mantras. Past masters of Kalaripayattu possessed *mantra* "tool boxes", with *mantras*

each having its own purpose such as one to worship a specific deity or another that has healing properties used during treatment of wounds. Before exercises begin, students are to massage oil on themselves and during training, full body massages are given by the master's feet as he holds onto ropes suspended from the ceiling. These massages are done so that it will stimulate a person's wind humor and create more flexibility and fluidity in the body (Green 2001a).

Although Kalaripayattu is a martial art, it has many other applications other than self defense. Constant discipline calms the three humors in the body: wind, phlegm, and fire. Knowledge of these humors is important to a practitioner of Kalaripayattu because when you know about the body it is easier to train and to treat injuries (Zarrilli 36). The concept of vital spots is important to both self-defense and medicine. In the 2nd century when Susruta wrote the classic Sanskrit medical text, 107 vital spots had been discovered to aid surgical intervention. With the knowledge of the vital spots, a master could injure or kill someone in a "counter application" of the previous use by striking a vital spot, or avoid them during therapeutic massages. Kalaripayattu, although a martial art, is also an important cultural aspect of Kerala and is on constant display in duels, displays of talent, or cultural applications such as dance and dance-dramas. So diverse is its use, that it is even used in a Christian dance-drama form, Cavittu Natakam displaying the Christian heroes St. George and Charlemagne (Green 2001a).

Martial arts, whether it is in Japan or India, are based on its key principles and devotional attitudes. Kalaripayattu is the unique martial art of the Kerala area and has been developing for thousands of years. Its ideals of exercise and meditation have been used in many other ways and in many other areas from medicine to warfare and even drama. The diverse use of Kalaripayattu is a testament to this dynamic and powerful martial art and to the culture that developed it.

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