



## Beyond the Weapons: The Philosophy of *Kalaripayattu*, a South Indian Martial Art

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### Abstract

*Kalaripayattu*, a traditional martial art that has evolved over centuries in the southern Indian state of Kerala, offers a rich tapestry of physical practice, ritualistic elements, and philosophical underpinnings. Beyond its function as a combat system, *Kalaripayattu* embodies a unique ideology that intertwines the body, mind, and spirit. While the philosophical dimensions of other martial arts have been extensively explored, *Kalaripayattu* remains a largely untapped wellspring of philosophical inquiry. This study identifies the intricate interplay between martial practice, ritualistic performances, and the underlying philosophy of this martial performance. Drawing on Merleau-Ponty's concept of 'lived body,' this study explores the non-dualistic nature of *Kalaripayattu*, demonstrating how it transcends the traditional mind-body dichotomy. By examining the various dimensions of this art form, the essay aims to illuminate its significance as a cultural and intellectual pursuit that transcends mere physical combat. This study employs a multifaceted method, combining detailed fieldwork with historical research.

**Keywords:** Martial art, *Kalaripayattu*, Kerala, body, mind, rituals

### Introduction

*Kalaripayattu*, a traditional martial practice originating from Kerala, a southern Indian state, can be understood in multiple ways. *Kalaripayattu* can be defined as an ancient martial art deeply rooted

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in Kerala's culture and legacy. This art nurtures the mind, body, and spirit and benefits athletes and performers beyond its practical applications. *Kalaripayattu* weaves a complex, intricate fabric of physical mastery, ritualistic tradition, and profound philosophical thought. Beyond its combat function, *Kalaripayattu* embodies a unique ideology that harmonizes the body, mind, and spirit. *Kalaripayattu*, a unique form of body art, is acquired solely through rigorous training. Considered a divine martial art by its teachers known as *Kalari Gurukkanmar*, *Kalaripayattu* is synonymous with Kerala's cultural identity, embodying its power and beauty. Moreover, *Kalaripayattu* is widely considered the progenitor of various martial arts. While other martial arts have received significant attention in philosophical studies (Chun & Connor, 1994; Hagakure, 1716; Herrigel, 1972; Oyama, 1993; Cheng, 2005; Yongxin, 2018), *Kalaripayattu* often remains overlooked. This study delves into the philosophical underpinnings of *Kalaripayattu*, positing that it is a ritualized bodily performance rather than solely a martial art. This study provides a comprehensive approach, blending intensive participant observation with historical analysis. Drawing on Merleau-Ponty's idea of the "lived body" this study demonstrates the non-dualist nature of a unique martial rooted in Indian tradition (Merleau-Ponty, 2002, p.153).

### **Sources for the Study of *Kalaripayattu***

*Kalaripayattu*, an ancient Indian martial art, has a rich and complex history despite limited written records. Several sources offer valuable insights into its origins and development. Unfortunately, there are no direct epigraphical<sup>1</sup> sources specifically mentioning *Kalaripayattu*. Some ancient inscriptions, particularly those from the Chola and Pandya dynasties in South India, reference martial arts and warriors. These references suggest that martial practices were prevalent in the region during those periods, although they do not specifically identify *Kalaripayattu*. Inscriptions often mention various types of weapons, such as swords, spears, bows, and arrows, used in different stages of *Kalaripayattu* practices. These references provide evidence of the existence of martial traditions and the use of weapons in ancient India. They also describe military campaigns, battles, and the organization of armies. These references suggest the importance of martial training and skill in ancient Indian societies (Dikshitar, 1999).

*Kalaripayattu* has a rich oral tradition, exemplified by the *Vadakkan Pattukal*, or Northern Ballads of Kerala (Zarrilli, 1992). These folklore and legends, often involving mythical figures, heroic warriors, and secret training techniques, provide a glimpse into the cultural and spiritual significance of the art. Palm leaf texts preserved by families practicing *Kalaripayattu* are considered valuable sources for studying this traditional martial art. Moreover, travelogues also help reconstruct this martial art's history (Zarrilli, 2005).

### **Understanding the Term *Kalaripayattu*.**

C.V. Narayanan Nair, a distinguished practitioner of *Kalaripayattu*, interprets the term *Kalaripayattu* in English as "The Art of Fencing" (Zarrilli, 2005). He explains that *Kalaripayattu* comprises two Malayalam words: *Kalari* and *Payattu* (Zarrilli, 1998). In Malayalam, *Kalari* denotes an open space, threshing floor, or battlefield, and it is derived from the Tamil word *Kalam*, which means an arena or place of assembly. Specifically, in martial arts, *Kalari* refers to a dedicated space for training. On the other hand, *Payattu* is related to the Tamil term *payilamil*, which means to train, and in Malayalam, it is associated with *Pailuka*, meaning to learn or speak. The term *Payattuka* conveys the act of practicing martial skills or fencing. Malayalam lexicon notes that the compound word '*Kalaripayattu*' was first used in Ulloor Parameswaran Nair's early twentieth-century drama titled *Amba* (1964, p.28).

### **Origin of the *Kalaripayattu***

*Kalaripayattu*, an ancient martial art with roots extending to antiquity, has undergone a dynamic evolution, reflecting the shifting currents of society. *Keralolpathy* narratives, legendary chronicles of Kerala, offer various accounts of *Kalaripayattu*'s origins. Two prominent myths prevalent in northern and southern Kerala center on the mythical figures of Parasurama and Lord Shiva. According to one myth, Parasurama, the creator of Kerala, brought thirty-two Brahmin families to the newly reclaimed land and taught them the arts of combat and archery. Another myth traces *Kalaripayattu*'s origins to Lord Shiva and his divine dance, the Sivatanandava (Kanaran Gurukkal, personal communication, June 7, 2009). While traditional narratives attribute their origin to the Hindu saint Agastya or the Dhanurveda, historians have questioned the authenticity of these

claims (Zarrilli, 2005). Ganesh argues that the Brahmin authors of these narratives had vested interests in linking local traditions to Brahmanism (2011). Kunjan Pillai (1970) proposed that *Kalaripayattu* evolved during the Chola-Chera war, a theory disputed by other scholars. K. Vijayakumar, in his work *Kalaripayattu: Keralathinte Saktiyum Sountharyavum*, suggests that *Kalaripayattu* emerged in the Sangam period (2000). Historical accounts from travelers corroborate the prowess of *Kalaripayattu* warriors (Zarrilli, 2005). Folk songs also provide valuable insights into the art's evolution. While some narratives suggest that *Kalaripayattu*'s origins may be rooted in the fighting techniques of animals, the exact origins of this ancient martial art remain a subject of ongoing scholarly debate and research.

### **The Construction of Kalari**

*Kalari* refers to the space or ground where *Kalaripayattu*, the traditional martial art of Kerala, is practiced. *Kalari* is a holy space where practitioners train, learn, and hone their skills. The distinct architectural styles of *Kalari* training grounds across Kerala reflect the diverse philosophies and practices of *Kalaripayattu*. The construction of a *Kalari* is often based on the principles of *Thachu Sastra*. *Thachu Sastra* is an ancient Indian architectural treatise that outlines specific guidelines for building structures, including *Kalari* (Karunan Gurukkal, personal communication, October 18, 2015). These principles are believed to influence the space's energy flow and overall atmosphere. While *Kalaripayattu* exhibits variations across different regions of Kerala, the core principles remain consistent. However, distinct differences in footwork and the structure of *Kalari* are evident.

There are two types of *Kalari* for practicing *Kalaripayattu*: *Cheru Kalari* and *Kuzhi Kalari* or *Pit Kalari*. Both serve as platforms for practicing physical and weapon training. For centuries, *Kuzhi Kalari* has been widely used for training the *Vadakkan Style*, or Northern Style, of *Kalaripayattu*, which is prevalent in the northern regions of Kerala. (Othenann Gurukkal, personal communication, July 13, 2014). A *Kalari*, the training ground for the ancient Indian martial art of *Kalaripayattu*, is typically constructed as a rectangular pit dug into the ground. This pit, measuring approximately forty-two feet in length and twenty-one feet in width, is excavated to a depth of six feet. The excavated



mud is then compacted to create a level floor. A thatched roof is constructed over the Kalari to provide shelter from the elements. This roof is supported by two main pillars, each at twenty-one feet. These pillars are erected on the eastern and western sides of the *Kalari*, ensuring complete coverage of the training area. This traditional design of the *Kalari* reflects the practical needs of martial art training, providing a sheltered and controlled environment for practicing various techniques and sparring. Practically, these *Kalaris*, situated in pits, help regulate practitioners' body temperatures. Furthermore, the mud used in these *Kalaris* is beneficial as it poses no risk of causing skin diseases (Karunan Gurukkal, personal communication, October 18, 2015).

The philosophical aspects of *Kuzhi Kalari* can indeed be quite profound. *Kuzhi Kalari* offers a unique perspective on the interconnectedness of humans and nature. The practice, rooted in the natural environment, provides a tangible connection to the earth and its elements. *Kuzhi Kalari's* unique training environment is deeply connected to the natural world. The primary training ground is mud, a natural element that offers resistance and grounding. This earthy substance fosters a connection to the planet and its natural rhythms. Furthermore, *Kuzhi Kalari* practices often occur in open, natural settings, exposing practitioners to the elements. This exposure can create a strong sense of connection to the natural environment. Traditional *Kuzhi Kalari* implements are often crafted from natural materials, such as wood and bamboo. This use of natural materials strengthens the practitioner's connection to the earth. The philosophical implications of *Kuzhi Kalari's* reliance on natural elements can be explored through lenses such as ecopsychology<sup>2</sup>, and animism<sup>3</sup> (Vakoch & Castrillon, 2014; Farrer, 2020). *Kuzhi Kalari* could be seen as a form of ecopsychological practice, promoting a sense of connection to nature and well-being. *Kuzhi Kalari* might be seen as a practice that honors the spirits of the natural elements. By exploring the nature-human connection in *Kuzhi Kalari*, we can better understand the practice's cultural significance, its potential benefits for physical and mental health, and its role in fostering a sustainable relationship with the natural world.

## **Cherukalari**

*Cherukalari* refers to the traditional training space or gymnasium used in the martial art of *Kalaripayattu*. *Cherukalari* are typically smaller, more intimate training spaces often located near family temples or *Tharavadus*<sup>4</sup> in the southern part of Kerala, often constructed in the southern direction of the *Tharavadus* (Karunan Gurukkal, personal communication, October 18, 2015). It was traditionally used for teaching the foundational techniques and principles of *Kalaripayattu* in a more controlled and focused environment. This association with temples or family homes reflects the deep-rooted cultural and spiritual significance of *Kalaripayattu* in Kerala.

## ***Kalaripayattu* as a Ritual Art**

Zarrilli (1998) argues that Asian art is not simply ritual art but is a form of ritual performance art. He emphasizes that a key characteristic of Asian martial arts is transforming an individual from an unrefined, novice, and inept youth into a proficient, knowledgeable, and highly skilled warrior characterized by enhanced focus and integration (Zarrilli, 1998). Priest and Young assert that Asian martial arts were designed to manifest philosophical ideas (Priest & Young, 2008). *Kalari* centers often include places of worship dedicated to deities and ancestors, such as *Poothara*, *Guruthara*, and *Aydhathara*. *Poothara* is considered the seat of the *Kalari* goddess, while *Guruthara*, located near *Poothara*, honors the memory of the ancient preceptors who played a crucial role in the development of *Kalaripayattu*. *Poothara* symbolizes the seven chakras, or energy centers, in the human subtle body. A conical mound of compacted clay is placed atop the highest step of this structure, which serves as the altar for worshipping Goddess *Kalarari Paradevatha*, also known as the Goddess of *Kalari*, the patron deity of *Kalaripayattu*, with floral offerings. *Poothara* is a sacred space where rituals and offerings are performed, reinforcing the spiritual significance of *Kalaripayattu*. The chakras are believed to be energy centers that connect the physical body to the mind and spirit. (Meenakshi Gurukkal, personal communication, August 20, 2015).

This suggests that *Kalaripayattu* emphasizes the interconnectedness of these aspects. By focusing on the seven chakras, *Kalaripayattu*

promotes a holistic approach to well-being, aiming to balance physical, mental, and spiritual aspects. The practice of *Kalaripayattu* can be seen as a spiritual journey to activate and balance the chakras to achieve enlightenment or self-realization. The association of *Poothara* with the seven chakras suggests that *Kalaripayattu* is more than just a martial art; it is a holistic practice that aims to cultivate both physical prowess and spiritual development.

The worship of the Goddess of *Kalari* at *Poothara* emphasizes the importance of the divine feminine in *Kalaripayattu*. The goddesses are often associated with power, protection, and overcoming obstacles, reflecting the challenges faced in martial art training. The *Ayudhathara*, a seemingly simple structure in the *Kalari* ground, is imbued with a deeper significance, visualizing the philosophical principles underlying *Kalaripayattu*. The *Ayudhathara* is a constant reminder of the dual nature of weapons, their potential for destruction and protection, and the responsibility of the practitioner to wield them with reverence and care. More than just a physical space, the *Ayudhathara* represents the delicate balance between the destructive and protective forces inherent in weapons. It also signifies the practitioner's inner harmony and capacity to navigate potential danger with equanimity. The *Ayudhathara* is more than just a physical object in a *Kalari* ground. It is a potent symbol that encapsulates the philosophical dimensions of *Kalaripayattu*, representing respect, balance, discipline, and spiritual growth. *Guruthara* is a special area within a *Kalari* ground dedicated to the memory of deceased *Gurukkals* (teachers) of *Kalaripayattu*. It serves as a place of reverence, respect, and remembrance for those who have contributed significantly to the preservation and transmission of this ancient martial art. The *Guruthara* is a tangible expression of gratitude and respect for the *Gurukkals* who have dedicated their lives to teaching and preserving *Kalaripayattu*. (Sajil Gurukkal, personal communication, August 15, 2015). It is often considered a sacred space where practitioners can connect with the spiritual essence of their predecessors and seek inspiration. The *Guruthara* is an essential component of a *Kalari* ground, serving as a reminder of the rich heritage and lineage of *Kalaripayattu*. It is where practitioners can connect with the past, honor their teachers, and draw inspiration for their martial arts journey (Othenann Gurukkal, personal communication, July 13, 2014).

The *Gurukkal*, or Kalari teacher, prepares the Kalari by lighting the *Kalariviakku*, or Kalari lamp, on the *Poothara* before the students arrive. He then performs Pujas or rituals with flowers. Upon entering the *Kalari*, the students touch the feet of the *Gurukkal* as a gesture of respect and to receive blessings. One of the most prominent philosophical views of the *Gurukkal* is as a spiritual guide. The teacher-student or the *Gurukkal-Shishya* relationship is often seen as a sacred bond, similar to the *Guru-disciple* relationship in other Indian traditions like yoga and Vedanta. The *Gurukkal* is often considered a source of spiritual enlightenment, capable of guiding students toward self-realization and spiritual liberation. The *Gurukkal* provides ethical guidance, teaching students right and wrong, discipline, and respect. The *Gurukkal-Shishya* relationship in *Kalaripayattu* is a sacred covenant rooted in reverence, loyalty, and a mutual dedication to upholding and perpetuating the tradition's philosophical and martial wisdom. The relationship between the *Guru* (teacher) and *Shishya* (disciple) in *Kalaripayattu* is a cornerstone of its practice, embodying a profound spiritual and philosophical dimension. This sacred bond transcends mere instruction and forms a lifelong partnership rooted in reverence, discipline, and a shared commitment to preserving the martial art's rich heritage. The *Guru*, as the custodian of the tradition, is entrusted with upholding the dharma of *Kalaripayattu*. This entails teaching the martial arts with integrity and ensuring its ethical application and transmission to worthy disciples. The *Guru's* role extends beyond martial instruction, encompassing spiritual guidance, moral education, and the cultivation of character. The *shishya*, in turn, is expected to demonstrate unwavering devotion, respect, and obedience to the *Guru*. This entails diligent adherence to the *Guru's* teachings, rigorous discipline, and a deep appreciation for the *Guru's* wisdom and experience. The *shishya's* commitment to the *Guru* and the tradition is seen as a reflection of their own spiritual aspirations and personal growth. The *Guru-shishya* relationship serves as a vehicle for spiritual development. The *Guru* acts as a mentor, guiding the disciple not only in martial art but also in personal and ethical growth. Through instruction in meditation techniques, philosophical concepts, and ethical principles, the *Guru* helps the *shishya* cultivate a holistic understanding of the martial art and its underlying philosophy. By fostering a lineage of knowledge and

skill transmission, the *Guru-shishya* bond ensures the perpetuation of *Kalaripayattu's parampara* (tradition). Through the guidance of the *Guru*, the *shishya* becomes a custodian of the tradition, passing on the martial art and its associated philosophy to future generations. The *Guru-shishya* relationship is a lifelong commitment. Even after the *shishya* attains proficiency in the martial art, the bond endures. The *Guru* remains a source of inspiration and guidance, while the *shishya* continues to seek the *Guru's* wisdom and support. This enduring connection reflects the profound depth and significance of the *Guru-Shishya* bond in *Kalaripayattu*. Rituals create a sense of hierarchy and social standing within a community (Bell, 1995). In *Kalaripayattu*, rituals elevate the *Gurukkal* to a position of authority, often equating them with divine figures within the *Kalari*. This elevated status enables the *Gurukkal* to assert their power over *shishyas* or students, reinforcing the hierarchical *Guru-Shishya* relationship (Sajil Gurukkal, personal communication, August 15, 2015).

Before commencing *Kalaripayattu* training with the *Thozuthu*, or prayer to the *Kalari* deity, students traditionally wear loincloths and apply medicinal oil to their bodies. Wearing loin cloths and applying medicinal oil before *Kalaripayattu* training, coupled with the *Thozuthu*, holds significant philosophical implications. Wearing a loin cloth and applying medicinal oil can be seen as a form of physical purification, preparing the body for rigorous training. The ritualistic nature of these practices can help to create a focused and meditative state of mind, essential for effective martial art training. These pre-training rituals are integral to the tradition of *Kalaripayattu*, demonstrating respect for ancient practices and customs. Such rituals can foster a sense of community and belonging among practitioners. The *Thozuthu* connects the practitioner to the divine, seeking blessings and protection for the training session. The *Kalari* itself can be seen as a sacred space, and these rituals help to create a reverent atmosphere. The practice of these rituals demonstrates discipline and self-control, essential qualities for martial art training. The combination of physical preparation and spiritual rituals emphasizes the mind-body connection in *Kalaripayattu* (Meenakshi Gurukkal, personal communication, August 20, 2015).

### **Lighting the traditional lamp in the *Kalari***

Light, as a symbol of power and energy, could be seen as a fitting metaphor for the art form's intensity and speed. In many cultures, light is associated with gods or deities. In the context of *Kalari*, it could symbolize the divine power or spiritual energy that practitioners seek to harness. The holy lamp, or *Vilakku*, is typically placed in a specific position within the *Poothara*, which is the central training area in a *Kalari*. This ritualistic act holds significant meaning within the martial art tradition. In the context of *Kalari*, it could symbolize the divine power or spiritual energy that practitioners seek to harness. Light often signifies a sudden, powerful force. Similarly, *Kalari* training aims to develop inner strength and the ability to unleash it forcefully when needed. The lamp's light is believed to purify the training space and protect practitioners from negative energies. The act of lighting the lamp helps practitioners establish a sense of focus and concentration, preparing them mentally for the training session. Research on light, darkness, and sacred architecture highlights that the "holy" light serves to dramatize spiritual states and influence the emotional experience of individuals within sacred spaces; they also emphasize that faith plays a crucial role in determining how light and darkness are utilized to enhance spiritual experiences in these settings (Geva & Mukherji, 2007, p.511).

### **Impure Body**

*Kalaripayattu*, a self-defense martial art, is theoretically accessible to everyone regardless of gender. However, its practices often reflect traditional gender roles. While the *Kalari* deity is a goddess, women are still prohibited from entering the *Kalari* during menstruation, reinforcing a notion of female impurity that can hinder their full participation. The concept of 'impurity' in ancient art forms like *Kalaripayattu* is a complex interplay of cultural, social, and spiritual factors. Historically, women were often considered spiritually and religiously impure due to their menstrual cycle and childbirth (Dhruvarajan, 2002). The notion of a woman's body being 'impure' during menstruation has played a significant role in determining the role of women in these arts. Many cultures believe a pure body is essential for spiritual attainment. Considering menstruation as a

sign of impurity aligns with this belief. The topic of martial arts and menstruation has been a controversial issue for many years. While some traditions have restrictions, others have embraced women's participation during this biological phase.

### ***Kalaripayattu* as a union of body and mind**

The practice of martial arts has been shown to improve the performance of both groups and individuals through enhanced health and fitness from regular exercise and improved confidence, self-esteem, teamwork, and interpersonal skills (Cynarski & Lee-Barron, 2014). Based on the study of Shaolin martial arts, Neskovic argues that body movements become potent sites for the exploration of human existence, character development, and spiritual growth (Neskovic, 2024). Mind-body unity, a cornerstone of numerous Asian martial arts and philosophical traditions, is also a fundamental tenet of *Kalaripayattu*, recognizing the interdependence of the physical and mental aspects of human experience. It is believed that the mind and body must work in harmony to achieve optimal performance and mastery of the martial art. Practitioners focus on cultivating a strong connection between their mental and physical states. This involves meditation, visualization, and breath control to enhance focus, coordination, and awareness. *Kalaripayattu* emphasizes maintaining balance and harmony in the body. This requires a deep understanding of one's physical capabilities and limitations, achieved through physical training and mental discipline. The unity of mind and body is also a path to spiritual growth. Practitioners believe that by harmonizing their physical and mental energies, they can tap into a deeper level of consciousness and self-understanding. Non-dualism is a philosophical concept that posits that the ultimate reality is undivided and without separate parts (Ward, 1998). This contrasts Descartes' dualism, which separates the mind and body; non-dualism suggests that the mind and body are interconnected and interdependent aspects of a unified whole (Descartes et al., 1993). While many philosophies view the mind and body as distinct, *Kalaripayattu* takes a non-dualistic approach. It asserts that the mind and body are fundamentally interconnected. Practitioners seek to transcend the illusion of duality and experience a state of oneness. The emphasis on balance and harmony in *Kalaripayattu* reflects the

philosophical principle of *sāmyābhāva* (equanimity). This principle suggests that a balanced and harmonious state of mind is essential for spiritual and material well-being (Abdhul Khadar Gurukkal, personal communication, November 18 2014). Skilled *Kalaripayattu* practitioners often describe a state of flow or spontaneity during combat. This state of being present and fully engaged at the moment aligns with the non-dualistic perspective of unity and interconnectedness.

The mind-body unity philosophy, central to Indian thought, is evident in the structured progression of the *Kalaripayattu* curriculum. *Kalaripayattu* begins with *Maipayattu*, a training phase emphasizing foot and hand exercises. *Maipayattu* consists of different body exercises. This initial stage helps individuals develop the physical skills and experience necessary for further progress in martial arts. *Ayudhapayattu*, the second stage of *Kalaripayattu*, involves training with weapons. *Kalaripayattu* practices utilize various types of weapons, including swords, *Churika*, spears, bows, and arrows, in different stages of training relationship (Sajil Gurukkal, personal communication, August 15, 2015). In *Kalaripayattu*, weapons serve as more than just tools for combat. They hold deep symbolic and spiritual significance, reflecting the art's philosophy and principles. *Churika*, a special metal weapon, represents physical strength, courage, and the ability to assert oneself. This weapon symbolizes the power of thought, the ability to see beyond the immediate, and the pursuit of higher ideals. Students learn to use various implements like sticks, swords, knives, and maces, among others. This stage of *Kalaripayattu* is more intense and aggressive than *Maipayattu*. The third and most aggressive stage of *Kalaripayattu* is *Verumkali*, where students practice unarmed combat, focusing solely on their physical skills and techniques. *Verumkali* demonstrates the enhanced environmental awareness, physical fitness, and mind-body unity that a practitioner develops, ultimately leading to the ability to overcome adversaries. (Abdhul Khadar Gurukkal, personal communication, November 18 2014). Many martial arts philosophies emphasize the importance of letting go of ego and self-centeredness. This aligns with the non-dualistic view that the ego is a false sense of self that separates us from the interconnectedness of all things. A skilled *Kalaripayattu* practitioner is expected to cultivate a sense of *Swathikam*, translated



as 'self-respect' or 'dignity.' This involves maintaining a sense of self-worth without ego or arrogance.

The concept of the 'body becoming eyes' in *Kalaripayattu* represents an enhanced state of awareness and perception. It signifies a state where the practitioner's entire body is attuned to its surroundings, allowing it to anticipate and react to threats or opportunities with extraordinary speed and precision. This metaphor is rooted in the emphasis on mind-body unity. When the practitioner achieves a deep connection between their physical and mental states, they can develop a heightened sense of awareness beyond their visual field. This heightened awareness enables them to 'see' with their entire body, allowing them to perceive subtle cues and movements that might otherwise go unnoticed. Practitioners develop exceptional peripheral vision to maintain awareness of their surroundings without head turns. *Kalaripayattu* emphasizes reading body language and posture to predict an opponent's intentions. By cultivating a deep connection with their bodies, practitioners can harness their intuition and instincts, allowing them to respond instinctively to dangerous situations. In principle, the concept of the body becoming eyes in *Kalaripayattu* is about developing a holistic and intuitive approach to combat. It is a testament to the martial art's emphasis on mind-body unity and the power of heightened awareness (Karunan Gurukkal, personal communication, October 18, 2015).

In Taoism, *Wu Wei* (effortless action) embodies non-duality, where actions arise spontaneously and without resistance (Slingerland, 2006). *Kalaripayattu* practitioners have shared that their training helps them reduce stress by letting go of the need for control, enhancing their creativity by allowing themselves to flow with the natural rhythm of events, and fostering a sense of fulfillment. This aligns with the goal of martial art training: to cultivate a state where techniques flow naturally, without conscious effort, akin to entering a flow state. In certain traditions, martial art are regarded not just as physical training but as a spiritual journey toward enlightenment. Zen and Shaolin practices integrate meditation, mindfulness, and deep self-reflection, embodying nondual teachings that break down the barrier between subject and object (Shi-Yongxin, 2018). Similarly,

*Kalaripayattu* involves meditation, with skilled practitioners seeking enlightenment through the harmonious unity of mind and body.

Merleau-Ponty (2002), in his work *Phenomenology of Perception*, emphasizes the embodied nature of human existence, refuting Descartes' idea of the mind as distinct from the body. He proposed that the body is not just an object among other objects but is central to how we perceive and engage with the world. Contrary to Descartes' notion of the mind as a distinct entity interacting with the body, Merleau-Ponty proposed a more integrated view. He introduced the concept of the "lived body," suggesting that our bodies are not passive recipients of sensory information but active participants in shaping our perception (Merleau-Ponty, 2002). Our embodied experiences, such as walking, touching, and seeing, are not merely mental events but involve a complex interplay of bodily sensations, perceptions, and actions. Merleau-Ponty's (2002) critique of dualism challenged the traditional philosophical understanding of the mind and body as separate entities. By emphasizing the interconnectedness of our embodied experiences, he offered a more holistic and nuanced perspective on human consciousness. In *Kalaripayattu*, practitioners develop a deep sense of their bodies as extensions of their minds. They learn to perceive the world through their bodies, understanding distances, angles, and movements intuitively. This aligns with Merleau-Ponty's idea that the body is not merely an object but a central part of our perceptual experience. Practitioners learn to control their bodies through their minds and their minds through their bodies. This challenges the dualistic notion of the mind as a separate entity interacting with the body. A skilled *Kalaripayattu* practitioner moves with fluidity and spontaneity, and their actions emerge naturally from a deep understanding of their body and the environment. This echoes Merleau-Ponty's concept of the body as a spontaneous action and perception source. *Kalaripayattu* training fosters a sense of unity between the mind and body. This challenges the dualistic notion of the mind as a separate entity interacting with the body. *Kalaripayattu* often incorporates elements of nature into its training. This emphasizes the human body's interconnectedness with the natural world, aligning with Merleau-Ponty's idea of the body as embedded in its environment. Ultimately, *Kalaripayattu* demonstrates Merleau-Ponty's philosophical ideas. By emphasizing

the embodied nature of perception, the integration of mind and body, and the individual's relationship with the natural world, this martial art illustrates how human consciousness can be viewed through the perspective of the lived body.

### **Chavitti uzhichil**

*Chavitti uzhichil* is a unique form of massage therapy closely associated with *Kalaripayattu*. *Kalaripayattu* practitioners also had the traditional role of massagers in *Chavitti uzhichil*. As the name suggests, *chavitti* means "to tread" or "to stomp," indicating that the massager uses their feet to apply pressure to specific points on the body. In *Kalaripayattu*, *Marmas* (vital points) hold great importance. Applying pressure to these points regulates the body's energy flow and promotes healing. After the rigorous training sessions in *Kalaripayattu*, *Chavitti uzhichil* helps revitalize the body and remove toxins. This massage helps to develop the immune system and improve overall health. This massaging benefits not only physical health but also mental well-being. It helps calm the mind and reduce stress. Before the therapy begins, the body is anointed with oil. The massager uses their feet to apply pressure on various *Marma* points on the body. Stretching and pulling of muscles are also incorporated into the therapy. The massager performs a foot massage using their feet, which helps improve blood circulation and relax the muscles. *Chavitti Uzhichil* was historically performed within the confines of a *Kalari*. Traditionally, *Kalaripayattu* students were required to complete *Chavitti Uzhichil* as a prerequisite to begin their martial art training. Although *Chavitti Uzhichil* adheres to some Ayurvedic principles, it differs from general Ayurvedic massage practices, often incorporating deeper tissue work and techniques specific to its historical context. *Chavitti Uzhichil* often uses natural oils and herbs, reflecting the belief in the healing power of nature. The gentle art of touch, a cornerstone of human interaction, holds immense potential to influence our psychological and emotional states. *Chavitti Uzhichil* harnesses this potential, employing touch as a therapeutic modality to induce relaxation, dispel stress, and cultivate a profound sense of connectedness (Abdhul Khadar Gurukkal, personal communication, November 18 2014).

## Kacha

The *Kacha*, a traditional garment wrapped around the waist, embodies the deep-rooted traditions of *Kalaripayattu*. In *Kalaripayattu*, the *Kacha*, a traditional cotton cloth wrapped around the waist, is more than just a garment. It symbolizes the rich heritage of this ancient Indian martial art. The act of wrapping itself demands discipline and focus, mirroring the mental fortitude and concentration essential for *Kalaripayattu* practice. Beyond its symbolic significance, the *Kacha*'s tight fit supports the lower abdomen and hips, enhancing physical performance and helping prevent injuries. Some traditions even ascribe a spiritual meaning to the *Kacha*, representing a practitioner's dedication to the art and connection to a higher power (Puthuppanam, 2005).

## *Kalaripayattu*: Regional Variations and Training Traditions

*Kalaripayattu*, a martial art originating from Kerala, India, exhibits diverse regional variations in techniques and training methodologies. The art can be broadly categorized into Northern, Central, and Southern styles. Northern *Kalaripayattu* emphasizes hero combat, focusing on techniques such as *Arappukkai*, *Pillathangi*, and *Vattenthiruppus*. Weaponry training constitutes a significant component of this style. Central *Kalaripayattu* is characterized by its distinctive square-patterned footwork. This style is closely linked to the historical practices of *Chaver* and *Mamangam*, and its mythology is traced back to the legendary Parasurama. Southern *Kalaripayattu*, also known as *Dranam Palli Sampradhaya*, prioritizes spontaneous combat over structured techniques and places less emphasis on weaponry. This style is associated with the mythological figure Agasthya *Kalaripayattu* (Meenakshi Gurukkal, personal communication, August 20, 2015). These elements collectively contribute to *Kalaripayattu* practitioners developing physical and mental prowess. Despite the regional variations in *Kalaripayattu*, a unifying principle underpins all three styles: the harmonious integration of mind and body. This fundamental concept, at the heart of the martial art, emphasizes the interdependence of physical prowess and mental acuity.

## Postures and Movements in *Kalarippayattu*

Animal postures are the common and distinctive features of many Asian martial arts. These postures, often inspired by the movements of animals, are used to develop specific physical attributes, improve combat skills, and embody the spirit of the animal they represent. In Chinese martial arts, the “becoming-animal” phase involves rigorous bodily discipline, the cultivation of embodied power, and the mastery of lethal techniques (Farrer, 2023). *Kalaripayattu* is defined by its distinctive postures and movements. These fundamental elements serve as the cornerstone of the art, shaping its unique style and contributing to its remarkable effectiveness. *Kalaripayattu*, an age-old martial art hailing from Kerala, India, is renowned for its fluid and dynamic postures, known as *Vadivu*. These postures, inspired by the graceful movements of animals, form the foundation of the art, serving both as combat techniques and as a means of physical conditioning:

- 1) *Gaja Vadivu* (Elephant Posture): This grounded stance, reminiscent of a majestic elephant, provides stability and power for defensive maneuvers and forceful strikes.
- 2) *Simha Vadivu* (Lion Posture): With a crouched and forward-leaning stance, this posture channels the agility and predatory instincts of a lion, perfect for swift and decisive attacks.
- 3) *Ashwa Vadivu* (Horse Posture): Inspired by the swiftness and agility of a horse, this stance facilitates rapid movements, both forward and backward.
- 4) *Matsya Vadivu* (Fish Posture): This fluid posture, mimicking a fish’s graceful movements, emphasizes fluidity and adaptability in defence and attack.
- 5) *Varaha Vadivu* (Boar Posture): This aggressive stance, reminiscent of a charging boar, is ideal for delivering powerful and forceful attacks.
- 6) *Kukkuta Vadivu* (Rooster Posture): Balancing on one leg like a vigilant rooster, this posture demands precision and balance, both in attack and defense.

- 7) *Marjara Vadivu* (Cat Posture): This stealthy posture, inspired by a cat's agility and predatory instincts, is perfect for swift and unexpected attacks.
- 8) *Sarpa Vadivu* (Serpent Posture): Slithering low to the ground like a snake, this posture emphasizes evasion and surprise attacks. (*Kalaripayattu* (Meenakshi Gurukkal, personal communication, August 20, 2015).

Beyond their combat applications, these postures serve as a means to enhance flexibility, strength, and mental focus. The *Vadivu* are often inspired by animal movements, symbolizing the interconnectedness between humans and nature. Each posture challenges physical and mental limitations, fostering personal growth and self-discovery. The postures promote balance and equilibrium in the body, representing a similar pursuit of balance in various aspects of life. *Kalaripayattu* practitioners seamlessly transition between these *Vadivu* during combat, creating a captivating display of grace and power.

### ***Kalaripayattu As a Medicinal Practice***

A *Kalaripayattu Gurukkal*, once a revered figure in Keralan society, continues to play a vital role as a physician. Many people still seek the expertise of their local *Gurukkal* for various ailments. These martial art experts understand battle-related injuries and are adept at treating fractures, dislocations, contusions, and swellings. Moreover, their knowledge extends beyond physical trauma, as they are often successful in alleviating numbness, paralysis, general fatigue, and other nerve-related issues. Typically, *Kalaripayattu Gurukkals* employ a holistic approach to treatment, combining internal and external modalities. Like an Ayurvedic doctor, they might suggest traditional remedies for internal consumption. However, the *Gurukkal's* distinctive specialty is their knowledge of *Marmas* and *Nadis*. This knowledge is applied to a specialized form of massage known as *Kalari* massage or *Uzhichil*. Many *Gurukkals* are skilled in various *Kalari* massage systems, each designed for specific purposes. These massages are believed to be highly beneficial and often yield superior results compared to modern physical therapy techniques. One of the hallmarks of *Kalaripayattu* in Kerala is the profound knowledge of human anatomy and physiology possessed by the *Kalari Gurukkal* or

*Kalari* teachers. *Kalari* teachers often emphasize that *Kalari Chikitsa*, the healing system associated with *Kalaripayattu*, is not merely a subset of Ayurveda or Siddha medicine but a distinct and complementary system (Luijendijk, 2008). While drawing inspiration from these ancient Indian medical traditions, *Kalari Chikitsa* has evolved its own unique approach and techniques. Zarrilli has indeed asserted that *Kalari Chikitsa*, the healing system associated with *Kalaripayattu*, is not an entirely independent system. While *Kalari Chikitsa* has developed its own unique techniques and practices, it shares many elements with traditional Indian medical systems like Ayurveda and Siddha (Zarrilli, 1992).

According to *Kalari Gurukkal*, the body is more than a physical entity; it is also a vessel for the vital life force, which they refer to as prana. Prana courses through the body's *Nadis*<sup>5</sup>, or energy channels. In specific regions, these Nadis are situated near the skin's surface and are identified as *Marmas*. *Kalari Gurukkal* emphasizes that *Marmas* form the foundation of *Kalari* medical practices. *Kalari Gurukkal* highlights the importance of *Marma* knowledge to *Kalaripayattu* warriors, noting that this understanding played a crucial role in their victories and subsequent elevation to martial hero status in pre-colonial and colonial Kerala. Some of them shared that a person who knows the *Marmas* of a human body does not want to harm others. *Kalari Gurukkal* suggests that a deep knowledge of *Marmas* can lead to a profound respect for human life, making it challenging for such individuals to cause intentional harm (Kanaran Gurukkal, personal communication, on June 7, 2009).

### **Beyond the Arsenal: *Kalaripayattu*'s Connection to Nature**

Ecophilosophy, also known as environmental philosophy, is a philosophical approach that examines the relationship between humans and the natural world. It addresses ethical, metaphysical, and social issues related to the environment. Ecophilosophy also explores the concept of intrinsic value in nature, meaning that nature has value in and of itself, regardless of its usefulness to humans (Naess, 1973). Respect for Nature, Balance and Harmony, Mind-Body Connection, Sustainability, and Community and Cooperation are the

key pillars of Ecophilosophy. These principles guide the philosophical exploration of the relationship between humans and the natural world, emphasizing the importance of living in harmony with nature and preserving its integrity. Environmental factors, including climate change, impact Chinese martial arts. (Zhang et al., 2024). *Kalaripayattu* provides a distinctive viewpoint on the convergence of martial art and Ecophilosophy. Through its emphasis on harmony, balance, and reverence for nature, martial art can foster a more harmonious and enduring connection between humanity and the environment. This aligns with the Ecophilosophical principles of a balanced relationship with nature. *Kalaripayattu* practitioners often incorporate elements of nature into their training, such as using natural features or practicing in natural surroundings. *Kuzhikalari*, a specific type of pit *Kalari*, substantiates this view. The soil used in *Kuzhikalari* is believed to have medicinal properties and is often used to treat injuries and scars sustained during training.

Moreover, *Kalaripayattu* is deeply intertwined with Ayurveda, the traditional Indian system of medicine, which emphasizes harmony with nature. This practice further highlights the connection between *Kalaripayattu* and the natural world, demonstrating how martial art integrates elements of nature into its training and healing practices. *Kalaripayattu* can promote sustainability by using natural materials for training equipment and minimizing environmental impact. The martial art often involves group training, fostering a sense of community and cooperation. This aligns with Ecophilosophical principles of collective action to protect the environment. *Kalaripayattu* often practices in groups, cultivating a sense of unity and cooperation within the community. The martial art often involves spiritual practices and a focus on inner peace, which can be seen as a way to connect with nature on a deeper level. The martial art values balance and harmony in both physical and mental aspects. This aligns with Eco philosophical principles of a balanced relationship with nature. *Kalaripayattu* prioritizes the mind-body connection, highlighting the significance of mental discipline and spiritual development. This echoes Eco philosophical approaches that stress the interconnectedness of humans and nature



## Conclusion

This study has explored the historical and philosophical underpinnings of Kerala's martial art called *Kalaripayattu* and investigated its intricate interplay between its martial, ritualistic, performative and medical dimensions. As an ancient martial practice, the essay tried to unravel the cultural and mythological legacy of *Kalaripayattu*, characterized by mental, physical, and spiritual well-being, in a disciplined way. This study has revealed the historical and philosophical foundations that have shaped *Kalaripayattu* into a practical fighting art and a valuable system of physical training for athletes, dancers, and performers today. The use of historical sources, texts, and participant observation unraveled the evolution and transformation of this martial art over centuries and its increasing relevance in various forms at present. The architectural style of *Kalari* and its diverse enactments across Kerala are unraveled through the mythical and philosophical background rooted in the regional history of Kerala. The reading of *Kalaripayattu* as a ritual art and a form of ritual performance sheds light into the space of *Kalari* characterized by its sacred character, where rituals associated with *Kalaripayattu* enable a unique reverent atmosphere, elevating this practice into a spiritual world. Practicing particular rituals demonstrates discipline, self-control, and essential qualities for martial arts training rooted in an indigenous culture. The combination of physical preparation and rituals emphasizes the mind-body connection in *Kalaripayattu*. As a spiritual space, *Kalaris* offers an emotional experience for individuals who acquire the practices within the sacred space. It is found that faith plays a crucial role in enhancing the spiritual experiences in these settings, as there are routinized ritual performances embodied in the *Kalari* space. The postures promote balance and equilibrium in the body, representing a similar pursuit of balance in various aspects of life's display of grace and power. The philosophical dimension also includes body movements and postures that become potent sites for exploring human existence, character development, and spiritual growth. The philosophy of *Kalaripayattu* encompasses traditional medical and wellness elements, as there are various therapeutic practices to induce relaxation, dispel stress, and cultivate a profound sense of connectedness. *Kalaripayattu* gains more relevance in contemporary times beyond the regional settings of Kerala precisely because of the philosophical underpinnings of

a holistic approach with multivalent dimensions of human life. In conclusion, *Kalaripayattu* exemplifies Merleau-Ponty's philosophical concept of the 'lived body' and the non-dualist nature of the human body and mind embedded in the Indian tradition. By emphasizing the embodied nature of perception, the unity of mind and body, and the interconnectedness of the individual with the natural world, this martial art provides a rich and compelling example of how human consciousness can be understood through the lens of the lived body.

### Endnotes

- 1 Epigraphy, the study of ancient inscriptions, provides valuable insights into historical events, social structures, and cultural practices
- 2 The study explores the relationship between humans and the natural environment.
- 3 the belief that all things, including natural objects.
- 4 Family home in Kerala
- 5 Nerves of the body

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