



KALARIPPAYAT

An ancient tradition of martial training and physical culture unique to Kerala.

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Kalaripayat is one of the oldest living traditions of martial training in the world, having its roots in the *Dhanurveda*, the ancient Indian science of warfare. Martial training and self disciplining through a ritualistic and spiritual process of learning, is synthesized in the Kalaripayat tradition which found its roots in Kerala, the southern most state of India. In Malayalam, the name **kalaripayat** means martial training inside a *kalari* or arena. The word kalari signifying the training premises is derived from the Sanskrit term *khloorika* which stands for 'military training ground'.

HISTORY

Traditional palm leaf manuscripts available on Kalaripayat refer to the warrior sage **Parasurama** of the Hindu mythology as the first guru of Kalaripayat. Legend is that Parasurama after retrieving the land of Kerala from the ocean, taught this martial art to his 21 disciples in order to protect the land and to maintain peace. Though exact proofs of various stages of evolution of the tradition is still being traced, available historical evidences show that the form as practiced today was firmly established in the Kerala society during the 9th through 12th centuries A.D. Travelogues of the 14 and 16 th century foreign travelers to Kerala like Duarte barbosa and the popular ballads of northern Malabar describe Kalaripayat as an integral part of the medieval Kerala society playing a vital role in the education of the youth and the training of the warriors. During this period when Kerala consisted of several small feudal principalities in constant clashes, Kalaripayat as a highly developed martial training and physical culture system attained great prominence. No village was without a kalari near the temple pond run by a known master who was reverally addressed as the **Gurukkal**.

THE INSTITUTION OF KALARI

Uniqueness of the institution of the kalari is clearly evident in its specialized architecture and the elaborate rituals associated with the process of learning. The kalari is always built East- West in direction about 4 feet below ground level, closed on all sides except for a small door on the eastern side. General measurements of the kalari are 42' length and 21' width and 21' height. This special cocoon like architecture is greatly suited for physical training in the tropical climate of Kerala. The kalari is not a mere arena for martial training but is also a temple of learning and religious worship. The presiding deity of the tradition is a combination of **Siva and Sakthi**, symbolized in the form of a divine

7 stepped platform for flowers called poothara. Other Hindu deities and the **Gurupeedam**, a representing the entire line of past gurus are also present in the Kalari. To a student of Kalaripayat the ritualistic and spiritual atmosphere in the Kalari plays an important role in forming his character and moral attitude.

TRAINING

The training of the student in the kalari begins at a very early age of 9 years with an initiation ritual performed by the gurukkal. Attendance in the kalari is made a part of the daily routine of the student and he goes through a series of symbolic rituals every day, before and after practice to acquire discipline and concentration. Kalaripayat training is mainly divided into three parts called **Meithari, Kolthari** and **Ankathari**. Wearing a Katcha or loin cloth and smearing his body with oil, the student after prostrating before the deities and the



Gurukkal begins his initial training with the meithari. In the meithari or body preparative exercises, the student learns 8 leg types of leg exercises, 8 body postures or **vativukal**, 4 types of leaps and other flexibility exercises. In the advanced stages of meithari the student is taught 12 sequences of body control exercise sequences called **Meipayats** which help him to understand his balance and the continuous flow of energy in the body.



The second phase is known as **kolthari** which involves training in wooden weapons like kettukari or the 12 span staff, **Cheruvati** 3 span staff etc. **Ottakkol**, the third weapon taught in kolthari to a student plays a pivotal role in the progress of his training. Ottakkol is a special curved wooden weapon which serves as a training instrument with many marma secrets hidden inside the 18 intricate sequences forming a stepping stone to the advanced Kalaripayat techniques. Various sequences of kolthari lead one to the proper understanding of mind and body in action. These techniques aim to make the weapons

an extension of the body. Several years of continuous, persistent and dedicated practice under the close supervision of the Gurukkal is essential to reach this stage.

The third and final phase of training is **ankathari** or combat training with metallic weapons. This begins with **Kattaram** or dagger which is a knife shaped weapon for duels at close quarters. Several locks and many elements of barehanded fighting techniques are taught in these sequences. **Sword and shield** were the primary weapons of the medieval kerala soldier. As the supreme combat weapons in the Kalaripayat system, sword and shield training makes total use of the full range of body movements learned in the preliminary physical culture training. The techniques of sword and shield range from very artistically codified sequences of mutual salutations between the combatants to the dynamic sequences of puliyankam or leopard fight. References of many of the present day Kalaripayat sword and shield techniques can be seen in the 4th century texts of agnipuranam having it's origins in the vedas. The techniques of **Urumi** or the flexible sword is an extension of the sequences learned in the sword and shield to be used in mass clashes of warriors.

The complex and rich repertoire of Kalaripayat weaponry also includes highly accurate techniques of **Spear** fighting and the classical sequences of **Mace** combat the weapon of the epic heroes. There is also the **Marapitcha Kuntham**, a duel between a swordsman and a man armed with spear demanding distinct skills depending on the weapon handled by each.



Many advanced elements of empty hand fighting is taught in the different sequences of **Kathiyum Thalayum** in which one learns to defend oneself with a common 2 meter long cloth on one's own shoulder.

THE GURUKKALS



Kottackal Kanaran Gurukkal **C V Narayanan Nair Gurukkal** **C V Govindan Kutty Nair Gurukkal**

The kalari Gurukkal plays a dual role of a martial art master as well as a healer or physician. Long years of practice as a student, accomplishment in training, trust of his chosen master and the right aptitude transforms a student into a Gurukal who runs a Kalari. He undergoes special teachings under his master in medication and mantras and the kalari system of medicine known as a kalari chikitsa. This is a system of medicine based on Ayurveda specializing in treatment of orthopedic and neuro-muscular ailments like fractures, sprains back pain, spondylosis etc. Unlike the traditional Ayurvedic physician, the kalari Gurukkals actually do the treatments like bone settings and massages using specially formulated oils and herbs. The foundation for the kalari chikitsa training for the Gurukkals is laid on the rare and unique system of whole body feet and hand massage known as uzhichal taught to the Gurukkals as part of their advanced training. This method of Uzhichal besides being used for treatments also helps to improve muscular texture, flexibility and stimulates circulation and is an important tool in maintaining the health of the Kalaripayat practitioner. The Gurukkal also undertakes specialized studies in the science of Marmas (vital spots) in which he learns treatment of injuries to vital points and specific applications in training. The Gurukkal is revered by the students as the direct representative of the entire line of Gurus of the tradition and is responsible in creating the proper environment for nurturing the process of self disciplining in the student.

CULTURAL CONTRIBUTIONS

Being the forerunner of many performing traditions of kerala, Kalaripayat has contributed greatly to the development of many well known classical and rural art forms like Kathakali, Theyyam and many other folk traditions. The actor training process in Kathakali has drawn considerably from Kalaripayat in the methods of physical training and choreography, where an actor uses his body as the basic medium of expression. This concept of body training aimed at perfect psycho-physical integration has attracted considerable interest from dance, acting and performance circles in the western countries and the C.V.N.Kalari has collaborated with many international organizations in this field and receives many students from abroad every year.

REVIVAL OF KALARIPPAYAT

With the advent of the British rule in India, kalaries were suppressed by the law and the practice of Kalaripayat was forbidden due to which Kalaripayat almost became extinct. In the early 1900's, the life long and dedicated efforts of late **Shri. Kottackal kanaran Gurukkul**, late **Shri. C.V.Narayanan Nair** and late **Shri C.V.Balan Nair** among other masters were instrumental in reviving this great heritage. They gathered knowledge of the dying schools and popularized it by giving stage demonstrations of the art of Kalaripayat and by establishing many kalaries all over northern kerala. **The C.V.N. Kalari** in Thiruvananthapuram was established in 1956 by **Sri CV Govindan Kutty Nair Gurukkal** following the line of late shri C.V.Narayanan Nair and has been engaged in preserving this great tradition in its true spirits and values. C.V.N Kalari is a traditional year round training centre for Kalaripayat at Thiruvananthapuram and organizes performances and workshops of Kalaripayat in many countries abroad and in India. The teams from the C.V.N. Kalari has represented India in many prestigious international festivals like the festivals of India in the United Kingdom, France, USSR and China and also in many theatre and dance festivals in Japan, Germany, France and UK. The Kalari also organizes short performances and work shops for interested groups in side the Kalari.

For details of performance, workshops and more information on the art of Kalaripayat - Write to G Sathyannarayanan, Secretary, CVN Kalari Sangham, Fort P O Thiruvananthapuram. Kerala. INDIA 695023 Ph: 0471 2474182 web: www.cvnkalari.net /www.kalaripayat.in Email : mail@cvnkalari.net