

Indian Martial Arts by Master E. Edwards
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The following is a rendering of an article by Master E. Edwards that appeared on pages 12 – 14 of his 20th Anniversary Souvenir Program. Master Edward's website is www.kalari-payat.org.

Indian Martial Arts

Origin – Even at the dawn of man's existence, one of the first arts man was forced to learn, for self-preservation, was the art of self-defense and therefore origin of martial arts anywhere in the world will ultimately always be traced back to the origin of man. Early man had to learn not only to effectively defend himself against his enemies but also against marauding and carnivorous animals.

Mind, Body and Spirit – Among the various arts developed in India, recognized for her rich cultural heritage dating back several centuries before Christ, was the one pertaining to martial arts. Ancient Indian philosophies were handed down from generation to generation normally by word of mouth or written on palm leaf manuscripts, which incredibly are still available for inspection. These oral and written philosophies give us a clear indication that the sages of yore, apart from their usual study of religion and philosophy, never neglected the study of the human anatomy incorporating the mind, body and spirit. It is precisely from this study that the various sciences of war and the indigenous Ayurvedic medical treatment emerged.

Link between, Japanese, Chinese & Indian martial arts – In the southern peninsula of India there is clear evidence showing that martial arts were practiced during the 6th and 7th century. Sculpted forms in the ancient temples at Kanchipuram near Madras show complex disarming techniques as well as several weapons used during that period. There is also the exciting eyewitness account of Huang-Tsang, a Chinese pilgrim. This famous scholar and diplomat wrote in great detail about the weapons he saw during his journey through various parts of India. The Chinese and Japanese have acknowledged and traced back the history of their martial arts to Bodhidharma, an Indian Buddhist monk who traveled from Kanchipuram in South India to the *Shaolin* Monastery in China spreading and teaching the ancient martial arts. However, with the passage of time, modifications were inevitably made to the original arts based on personal preferences, experiences, esoteric requirements or specialized refinements leading to the evolvement of what is popularly known today as *Kung fu* and *Karate*. Several postures and techniques commonly used in all three martial arts verify and confirm this observation.

Battle Field Training honored in Folk Dance – The martial arts of South India are popularly known as “Kalari Payattu” in Kerala and “Kalari Payarchi” in Tamilnadu. Both words literally translated mean “Arena training.” It is therefore without a doubt that techniques learnt from this art were utilized on the field of battle and were part of the training for every soldier.

Indeed, the art became something of a mystical discipline with the warrior caste of the Nayars who were the equivalent of Japan's Samurai warriors. There is also an abundance of evidence connecting the folk and classical dances of the region with the martial arts. Several South Indian dances such as the Bharata Natyam and the Kathakali, a classical dance from Kerala, use several postures bearing a striking resemblance to those used in Kalari-Payattu.

An Indigenous Art – Kalari-Payat is not an imported art but an indigenous art that has been preserved and passed on from generation to generation. Judo, Karate, Kung-fu and the likes are all imported arts that have thrived from within the major cities where they were first introduced for the rich and powerful and then gradually spread throughout the countryside. However Indian martial arts, on the contrary, thrived in the villages and was only recently introduced to the major cities.

The rural population mainly practiced Kalari Payattu where the art is deeply embedded in the social and religious lives of the village people. This is especially true and more visible in the states of Tamilnadu and Kerala. However, with economic growth, prosperity and affluence, Kalari Payat has gradually spread to all the major cities throughout India and even to Western countries especially to those where practitioners have emigrated.

Medical Knowledge – It is not only customary but also mandatory for Masters (also known as Gurukkal or Asans) to have certain basic medical knowledge. Villagers in India still consider these Masters as 'Doctors'. It is inevitable because of the nature of the art that a practitioner of Kalari Payat who constantly aspires to perfect all the techniques over a long period to increasingly become more knowledgeable of medicine, natural healing (by using herbs and potions) and prevention of diseases. Indeed most Masters often become famous chiropractors and herbalists. This medical knowledge is obviously very convenient and useful as minor bruises, sprains and cuts can easily be treated by even young novices aspiring to become Masters. However, to progress to the position of Master they must expand their field of knowledge to include bone setting, muscular ailments, nervous disorders, treatment of internal injuries, etc. Apart from using this knowledge to treat students for injuries it can also be very useful for identifying an opponent's vulnerable and vital pressure points in combat.

Massages – There are various forms of massages using herbal oils of a special variety decanted personally by the Master using a secret formula to treat not only the sick but also for improving the general health of the students. One major system is the foot massage which is a deep and powerful massage using the weight of the Master. The Master works his feet over the well-oiled body and balances his own weight by holding on to a rope stretched across the room. Massages are normally directed towards the student's back and limbs pushing outwards from the center of the body. It is done after applying liberal amounts of herbal oil on the body. Nearly all Masters have their own herbal garden to preserve the authenticity of the herbs.

Different Styles – There are two major styles known as the Northern and Southern Styles originating from Kerala and Tamil Nadu [*but note here that Zarilli asserts that there are three such main styles. Northern Style (in Malabar region of Kozhikode and Kannur), Central Style (in Kochi) and Southern Style (in Travancore & Trivandrum)*]. In both styles the art is mainly composed of four branches of combat technique. These are unarmed training, training with sticks of various lengths, training with a range of deadly weapons, and finally training to strike at vital points. All training commences with the initial warming up exercises to prevent muscular injury and increase heart rate. The training of the secret technique of striking at the vital points known as Marma-Adi is only reserved for advanced students specially chosen by the Master on the basis of his intimate knowledge of their personality and character and his unwavering confidence that they will only use this technique for self-defense. This technique is not taught to all students because its indiscriminate use can lead to fatalities. Teaching goes on throughout the year except during the dry season between January to April. Immediately after the onset of the monsoon the teaching restarts again usually commencing with a traditional oil massage.

Northern Style – The Northern style is mainly practiced by the Nayars of Kerala who constitute the warrior class. Lessons are conducted in a building known as the Kalari with fixed dimensions – (42 feet by 21 feet) with thick walls usually made of mud and a floor normally 3 feet below ground level. The property, normally owned by the Master, also houses the dispensary and massage parlor. According to tradition, training was always indoors and only at night to maintain secrecy. The Northern style is characterized by very high jumping and kicking techniques, long strides, low stances and blows and locks delivered by arms and hands that are almost fully extended. Extremely strenuous gymnastic techniques, probably taken from Yoga, are also found in the training regimen.

Southern Style – The Tamils mainly practice the Southern style. This style is generally practiced outdoors during daylight hours. Certain Masters use outdoor pits or hollows as training grounds but others often teach under the cool shade of coconut palms in the vicinity of their houses. Many also have training grounds in nearby villages frequently moving around training different groups. The Southern style contains more circular movements and lacks the grace and depth of the northern movements. Strikes and blows are usually delivered with the palm of the hands open and the arms bent and there are hardly any high kicks or jumps. However it must be mentioned that this style has a more solid stance and can deliver a powerful force by using the arms, shoulders and torso. Generally speaking the Southern style is less energetic than the Northern style.

Training – Training usually begins around the age of ten although many do take up the art even past their teens or even when they are middle aged or more. The latter are usually those who have been advised by the Master to take up the art as a means of improving their health or to deal with some particular ailment. For this group as mentioned earlier it is advisable to undergo a daily massage by the Master to loosen muscles and tendons in preparation for the strenuous exertion of training.

Salutations and Warm ups – The training invariably starts with “Kalari Vandanam”, meaning salutations to the art of Kalari, where each student pays obeisance to mother earth and the master. The salutation consists of a series of complex moves in the course of which they make fighting gestures, whilst moving in circles and tenderly touching the ground. In ancient times students also kissed the feet of their Master. The class then forms two lines facing each other and [the students] work their way through a rigorous set of warming up exercises to stretch and tone muscles, tendons and joints. Some of the exercises are of course the usual western press ups and sit ups but there are several exclusively Indian exercises.

I would like to describe one such unique exercise called the “crocodile walk.” Students lie down in the press up position and then propel themselves ten yards or so forward balancing only on their hands and toes. For advanced students instead of the palms, the knuckles are made to take the weight of the body. From this position students “propel” backwards to their starting position. Coincidentally this movement is also used in the modern break-dance.

(m) Immobilizing an opponent – The gymnastic part of the program, which is approximately about half an hour, is not necessarily for any defensive movement. They are mainly used for achieving total fitness by improving muscle tone, flexibility, agility, suppleness, circulation and strength in relation to body weight. The student only then begins to practice unarmed combat, which is the real basis of Kalari Payattu. This includes grappling, locks, throws, and other methods of generally immobilizing an opponent. Students also learn the preliminary stage of identifying pressure points. Only the very few selected advanced students will be taught Marma Adi, a secret technique of using vital pressure points to disable and immobilize a vicious and berserk attacker. This technique can sometimes cause fatalities.

(n) Movement – One of the most important aspects of Kalari training is related to the mastering of pre-arranged sequences of movements that the student is expected to repeat continuously until a high level of attainment is achieved so that these movements can be used instinctively whenever required. These forms which can also be practiced with any weapon are called “Suvadu” and are impressive to observe reminding one of certain graceful dance movements. When performed with an opponent it produces what might be called a paired form of mock combat. This is choreographed and therefore entirely different from free form fighting. The main purpose of these forms is to instill self-discipline and to improve balance, timing and precision. Many forms also involve the execution in rapid succession of spectacular leaping turns, feints or sham attacks to divert attention or to deceive the opponent by ducking beneath kicks and jumping high over strikes. Apart from the traditional northern and southern styles there are original styles which individual Masters have created and developed on their own normally for use with weapons. This introduces a semblance of variety while retaining the general format prescribed by ancient literature on the subject.

Silambam (Stick-fighting) – Students only start learning to use the stick or the staff after they are considered adept in the earlier exercises and forms of Kalari Payattu. In Tamilnadu this aspect is normally treated as a separate martial art known as “Silambattam”. Literally translated, Silambam means stick and Aattam means play. However today most Masters of Kalari Payattu insist on incorporating Silambam as a part of the regular syllabus. Sticks range in size from around six inches to a little less than six feet and are usually made from bamboo or rattan. Advanced students use sticks made from a type of hardwood, which can stun, immobilize or hurt an opponent although at the same time avoiding serious injury. The longer sticks are usually held with one hand grasping the center and the other hand holding either end of the stick. However, there are also styles of combat where both hands grasp the stick at one end and wield it around rapidly so that hard blows can be showered upon an opponent. Holding the stick with each hand one third of the way along its length is usually effective for blocking. Low stances and a sort of rapid fire of blows and blocks typify the stick technique. Initially single and paired stick movements are practiced individually before free sparring between Master and students is allowed.

Resourcefulness – Once the student attains a high proficiency in the various aspects of Kalari Payattu there is hardly anything that he cannot use as a weapon for defense or even offense, For example even a large-sized handkerchief or a medium-sized towel can be used as effective weapons. A tightly knotted towel has for instance been known to have been hurled from a short distance stunning an opponent when hit on the face or head. These knotted towels have also been able to break into pieces four or five roof tiles held together. Kalari Payattu movements are also displayed during celebrations of a good harvest or religious ceremony to propitiate God. The harsh and furious movements of Kalari Payat are sometimes transformed into slow and sinuous graceful movements which classical dancers have freely borrowed for entertainment and celebration [*cf. the graceful movements of Capoeira Angola as compared to the rapid combat of Regional Capoeira.*]