

Kalarippayattu From martial art to fitness regime

Mallika Iyer | Updated: Thursday, August 22, 2019, 02:32 PM IST



Mallika Iyer is amazed at how modern day health enthusiasts are turning ancient martial art form Kalarippayattu into a fitness regime

Unlike other ancient civilisations, India continues to retain and relive many of its old-world experiences. Kalarippayattu, an ancient form of martial arts from Kerala, has survived modern times, overcoming several challenges including a ban by the Raj. Today it is gaining recognition as a complete physical training system and as the progenitor of much famous martial art form Kung-Fu.

“No other martial arts practice competes with Kalarippayattu in its completeness, training system and application techniques,” says Belraj Soni, Kalarippayattu exponent and trainer at the Somaiya Institute in Mumbai. “Compiled centuries ago by great gurus, it focuses on sound mind and body,” he adds.

While Kalarippayattu traces its mythological origins to sages of yore like Parasuram and Agastya, it evolved as a form of training for warriors in combat techniques and use of weapons during the early centuries of the millennium.

“It is a rare combination of martial arts training, physical culture, self-defence and physiotherapy,” explains Soni adding, “It finds its roots in dhanurvedya, the ancient science of warfare and was learnt by warriors. Naturally, that is not the purpose here. My students gain by improving their physical fitness, balance and stamina. They also learn to concentrate better. Kalari makes them agile and flexible. There are many benefits of learning it.”

At the arena

The term kalari refers to place, threshing floor or battlefield. The term payattu means to exercise in arms or practice. Inspired by the raw strength and sinuous power of animals, the postures are named after animals like the tiger, snake, crocodile etc. The practice combines fluidity and power and the routine includes exercises and movements for the upper and lower body by making use of various postures intended to strengthen muscles.

The body is placed in various postures and positions in a planned set of permutations and combinations that will produce a variety of physiological as well as psychological changes. Added to these are systems of breathing, a variety of twists, kicks, squats, jumps and turns along with several positions of standing, lying, sitting, and moving. Patterns and movements in subtle succession activate different parts of the body.

“This kind of weaving of the dynamics of movement and form promotes fine circulation, quietens the mind and regulates emotion. The pattern and variety keeps the mind mentally stimulated and alert. It demands complete concentration and focus,” explains the teacher.

Not a warfare

People from all walks of life are turning to this form of martial arts for fitness today. Dancers, actors, and theatre artists approach Soni to improve their performing skills as also to become fit. Students of all ages can be found in his class. “I hail from a place in Kerala where Kalarippayattu and the northern ballads originated,” says Dilna Sreedhar, a PhD student in IIT Bombay, who has been pursuing the art form for several years. “When I moved to Mumbai, I was looking for

someone who could teach the authentic form of the art. Once I met Belraj Sir, I was deeply inspired by his dedication and passion for Kalaripayattu. The more I learnt," says Sreedhar, "it became a lifestyle for me more than a hobby. It helped me to understand the limitations of my body and mind and encouraged me to push my limits. I cannot explain in words what kalari means to me. It completes me."

While Kalaripayattu has helped practitioners and students improve their strength, breathing capacity, flexibility, endurance and overall health, it has also aided those with health problems to overcome their limitations.

Sumana Srinivasan, an arthritis patient, has been pursuing the art form for two-and-a-half years and believes the routine has helped her immensely. "I have been suffering from arthritis for about 15 years and exercise is very important for me to manage this condition. With kalari, I have been able to improve the range of movement and strengthen the muscles around my joints," she explains. Srinivasan takes care to perform only those routines that are manageable under her condition. However, she believes that pursuing this art form for exercise has helped her maintain a fairly active lifestyle in spite of her arthritis.

This is perhaps the only form of martial arts that focuses not just on physical training but also on treatment of the body. Kalari chikitsa which is an integral part of this form is used to treat sprains, fractures and other injuries as also for massages to improve strength. The student learns to identify the 64 marmas or vital spots in the body in order to be able to attend to one's injuries.

A way of life

That this art form has survived the technological advances is remarkable. While the militia of medieval times trained in kalaris when the martial art form was at its peak, the British outlawed the practice in 1792. However, devoted teachers continued to practice and teach this art form in secret and the knowledge and techniques did not die out.

“In Kerala, Kalarippayattu is a way of life. Children as young as six and seven – both boys as well as girls – join the kalari to obtain training. It has been so for centuries. It is an integral part of the culture,” explains Soni.

Kalarippayattu is said to have influenced other indigenous art forms like Kathakali and Theyyam. It is also said that Kung-Fu was inspired by Kalarippayattu. The Malabar coast had close trade connections with China since early times. Daruma Bodhidarma, a Buddhist monk and master of Kalarippayattu is said to have taken this art form from Kerala to China, where it evolved into Kung-Fu. “Kalarippayattu,” adds Soni with a smile, “is the mother of all martial arts.”

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