

Dhanurveda to aikido

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"Now I've come to understand, that self-defense is defense against my self... that is to say, I'm my own worst enemy." (anonymous)

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1. Dhanurveda

Dhanurveda, science of fighting and war, is one of the Upavedas connected to Yajur Veda. It is mentioned also in Rig Veda 6.75.2 as Dhanav Vidya pertaining to bow and arrows, which are symbols of all weapons and missiles. All these weapons are to be used if absolutely necessary when all other peaceful and righteous methods have failed; to defend those who follow the varnashrama system when evil persons create obstructions in the spread of Vedic knowledge.

Dhanurveda was revealed by the Lord to sages Vishvamitra and Bhrigu, its original teachers. Another famous Dhanurveda teachers in Vedic times were Parashurama and Drona. They are prominent characters in classical epic Mahabharata, story of conflict among various kshatriya (warrior) lineages. Dhanurveda is considered the origin of Vajramushti, an empty-handed Indian martial art. Among ancient versions of Vedic martial arts derived from Dhanurveda belong Thang-ta (in Manipur, East India) and Kalaripayat, or Kalaripayattu (in Kerala, South India).

"Ranganiketan performances give samples of the music, dance, and martial arts of northeastern India. Thang-ta is a weapons-oriented form of martial arts that dates from the time of the Mahabharata. Both men and women learn these arts from an early age. With precision and strength, Ranganiketan artists demonstrate the various forms of Thang-ta, using swords, shields, scimitars, and occasionally their bare hands."¹

2. Kalaripayat and Kalarichikilsa²

Kalaripayat is formed from two words, kalari (battleground, later oval arena analogous to dojo) and payat (martial art, training). Like the temple, the kalari is considered a sacred place. Especially revered is the south-west corner called the poothara, which is reserved for the reigning deity and here the weapons are stored under his/her protection. Next to this is the guruthara, the place where a lamp is kept burning in reverence to all the gurus of the kalari.

Classical literary sources (like Dhanurveda, Agni Purana, Natyashastra, Hasthangastham and Sakraniti) say that an ancient warrior named Parashurama was the first guru (master) of this art. (Kalaripayat has different styles which are generally classified into two: southern-Keralan Thekkan and northern-Keralan Vadakken, or Vattakkan. Vadakken kalaripayat was introduced by Parashurama. Thekkan kalaripayat consists of self-defence art introduced by sage Agastya. This

particular system gives more importance to the physical exercises, unarmed combat and to the knowledge of vital point striking than the skill in weaponry.)

It is believed that Parashurama and his warriors taught their secrets to four of the most aristocratic brahmanas. These in turn trained others and picked 21 experts from among those trained warriors. These 21 warriors established 21 Kalaris to protect the land and maintain peace.

Kalari became an integral part of the socio-political system of medieval Kerala. Medieval principalities and chieftain families maintained a military group of their own. Kalarippayattu training was undergone by almost every youth of the Nair caste - the Kerala warrior caste like the Samurai of Japan.

It is believed that Bodhidharma (a prince from Tamil Nadu, South India, who became a Buddhist monk) introduced Kalari to China and Japan after incorporating changes. There Kalari evolved into modern day Kung Fu and later to Karate. Golden age of Kalaripayat was from the 13th century to the 18th century. In 1793 the British East India Company banned it and it gradually became almost extinct. However, it continued to be practiced in secret by a handful of stalwart adherents, and it is due to their perseverance to keep this tradition alive that the present-day practitioners continue to teach the mother of the worlds martial arts.

The development of physical culture is an important task of every community. In physical culture, strength of mind is the driving power. The aim of Kalari is not only self-defense and offense, but also strength of mind through physical exercises. The strength of mind is the strength of body. This enables oneself to stand up to the challenges in life and discipline mind and body.

Kalaripayat is a unique blend of physical, mental and spiritual practices. The training follows strict rituals and guidelines. The Gurukkal (master) gives physical as well as moral training to the students. He guides his students in such a way that they are ready to face anything on earth. Knowledge of this kind is not passed on indiscriminately to anyone, but only those with a disciplined life who guarantee that the knowledge will not be misused.

The concept of Kalari develops from 3 levels:

Meythari (physical exercise). Sequences of exercise including twists and turns of the body, leaps and poses. They enable the student to master balance and co-ordination, the principles of movement in space and to understand the continuous flow of energy in the body.

Kolthari (physical coordination). It involves training with wooden weapons. Practice enables the student to gain control. Even a small wooden object can become an efficient instrument in the hands of practitioner and he can overpower even a heavily armed adversary.

Ankathari (complete fighting). This is a combat training with weapons like the Kadaras (dagger), Udaval and Paricha (sword and shield), Kuntham (spear), Gadha (mace), Mazhu (axe), and Urumi (a long flexible sword). It is the final phase of training.

Learning requires ritual stretching and flexing exercises to achieve balance and concentration. From the unarmed kicks and punches, Kalaripayat warriors graduate to use sticks, swords, spears and daggers and study the "marmas" (the 107 vital spots on the human body where a blow can kill). The place of practice and training is called a "Kalari". It has the elements of a school, gymnasium and temple. To train the student's character series of symbolic rituals are practiced every day.

Verum Kaythari (unarmed combat) is a postgraduate course in Kalaripayat. An unarmed combatant fights with an armed enemy and puts him down through various techniques like Ozhivukal (skipping), Irrakkam (stepping back), Kayattam (stepping forward), Thada (blocking) Pidutham (catching) and Marmam (blows and hitting at the vital points of the body). Thus the entire body becomes a weapon.

Marma adi, unlike some other martial art forms, cannot be learnt in regular schools. The technique, handed down from one generation to the next within a family, is taught only to the most exceptional and dedicated students. It is possible to find marma masters in some gurukkals (teachers) of kalaripayat in Kerala.

Kalarichikilsa is based on identifying marmas ('vital spots') which are treated with massages and Ayurvedic oils and herbs. Marma treatment is available only in Kerala. The system takes 8-10 years to learn and is used for three basic purposes: healing, massaging and increasing physical flexibility. A student can heal independently after he completes his course and works as an apprentice with his guru for two to three years. Though this ancient art is gradually finding its way into the mainstream of life, it has retained its exclusivity through a strong guru-disciple tradition. This knowledge is used in acupressure and acupuncture as well as in the system SCARS, hand-to-hand combat for United States Operations Forces Army/Navy/Air Force, allegedly the most efficient combat system.

[To Heal and/or To Harm: The Vital Spots \(Marmam/Varmam\) in Two South Indian Martial Traditions](#) - academic essay by Dr Phillip B. Zarrilli

3. Bodhidharma: India's contribution to China³

Daruma, also known as Bodhidharma, Daruma Taishi, Lohan and Ta Mo, the 28th patriarch of Buddhism and the 1st patriarch of Zen, was born around 440 in Kanchipuram, south of Chennai (Madras) in South India, a small but thriving Buddhist province at that time. He was born into the kshatriya caste and was the third child of King Sugandha. He became a meditation student of Prajnatarā, the 27th patriarch of Buddhism. It was Prajnatarā that changed the young disciple's name from Bodhitara to Bodhidharma and directed him to carry the teachings to China.

On arrival in China around 520 upon being received by the Emperor Wu of the Ling dynasty, Bodhidharma preached the "doctrine of emptiness". Emperor Wu didn't "get it" and angrily banished him from his palace.

Daruma traveled to Mt. Shao-shih in the Sung mountain range (Honan Province) where he founded Sil-lum (Shaolin) temple and spent nine years meditating in front of a wall. This gave him one of his nicknames, "the wall-gazing brahmana" - even though he was from the warrior, not the brahmana class. In his meditation he was purportedly so in tune with nature that he could hear the conversation of ants. To prevent himself from falling asleep Daruma is reputed to have plucked out his eyelid and thrown it to the ground where a tea tree grew. To this day, consuming tea is a ritual that spans the cultures where Zen is practiced culminating in the ritualized tea ceremony (sado) of the Samurai.

Daruma undoubtedly instructed his students in some form of yoga and is reputedly the creator of one of the oldest forms - "the 18 Hands of Lohan" which became known as Chuan-fa system, generally called Kung fu (lit. "mastery"). Extant wall paintings and murals at the Honan Shaolin Temple in North East China show ethnic Indian monks sparring and training in boxing skills with Chinese monks, supporting the view that Bodhidharma's exercises were in fact martial arts of his homeland - India. In all his years he taught relatively few and he felt there were only two students worth teaching, Hui-k'o (his successor) and Tao-yu, who is said to have understood the way but never taught.

Before his death Daruma entrusted the robe and bowl of the lineage to Hui-k'o who became the 2nd patriarch of Zen. Daruma was interred at Loyang. Three years later he was supposedly seen walking with one sandal hung on a huge staff and told the official he was going back to India. Reports of this meeting led to the opening of his tomb, inside of which all they found was a single sandal.

Today Daruma dolls are popular all over the Orient. If you tip them over they automatically return to an upright position. Daruma is quoted as starting and ending each day with the same saying, "To fall seven times, to rise eight times - life starts from now." (In Japanese, "Nanakorobi Yaoki, Jinsei Wa Kore Kara Da".)

4. Samurai and Bushido

One of the prominent Vedic kingdoms was Japan, where kshatriyas were called Samurai. They followed Bushido, a strict code of behavior. Their abilities stemmed from strict upbringing.

"I remembered an example my spiritual master, Shrila Prabhupada, had once used to describe the attentiveness of a devotee. Samurai warriors, he described, were trained by their martial arts guru to sleep so lightly that the slightest sound would wake them and put them on guard. At night the guru would silently creep up and bring a bamboo switch swiftly down across the disciple's legs. It would get to the point where the disciple could hear the swish of his guru's stick, awaken, and roll instantly out of range before the switch hit the ground."⁴

Bushido consists of eight main aspects:

Jin - to develop a sympathetic understanding of the people

Gi - to preserve correct ethics

Chu - to show loyalty to one's master

Ko - to care for one's parents

Rei - to show respect for others

Chi - to enhance wisdom by broadening one's knowledge

Shin - to be truthful at all times

Tei - to care for the aged and those of a humble station

Bhagavad-gita 18.44: "Heroism, power, determination, resourcefulness, courage in battle, generosity and leadership are the natural qualities of work for the kshatriyas."

Many of these qualities relate to the kshatriya quality of generosity, a quality which is often overlooked. Many qualities similar to these are mentioned in the Shrimad Bhagavata Purana in the stories of different rulers. King Prithu exhibited respect for women by regarding every woman as his mother.

Since kshatriyas are allowed to gamble, we don't so much think of truthfulness as a kshatriya quality, but king Yudhishtira was famous for his truthfulness.

In the Vedic society not only does the leader have to protect the aged and poor, he also protects all living beings, especially cows. Not only does he respect his parents, he also respects the brahmanas. In fact, the most important way that he enhances wisdom and broadens knowledge in his domain is to support the brahmanas and shudras in their work of constructing temples and schools where the brahmanas can instruct others.

Both the Vedic and Bushido version give a much heavier stress to developing broad social responsibility than the usual set of modern leadership principles, which are mostly geared toward businessmen and fund-raisers.

5. Bujutsu vs. budo

Doshu Kisshomaru Ueshiba, son of the aikido founder Morihei Ueshiba, says: "Japanese martial arts were originally inspired by the goal of victory on battlefields. But victory is short-termed. It comes quickly and quickly disappears. One may cheer in victorious fight. But this is not an ultimate fulfilling victory. In this way paradoxically people devote their life to training leading quickly to a goal - which lost its aroma.

"This paradox was solved in creating budo (path of martial arts), filled and empowered by aikido. Aikido teaches the Way of Absolute Victory based on the philosophy of non-fighting. Non-fighting means reduce aggression, militancy, personal destructive instincts and channel them into the power of creative love.

"In comparison with martial art this philosophy brings much more respect. But this is the essence of budo."

Kendo master Munenori Yagyu writes that the goal of martial training is to overcome six "diseases": desire for victory, desire to rely on technical ability, desire to show-off, desire to overcome an opponent psychically, desire to remain passive and wait for opponent's openings and desire to get rid of these "diseases".

Original thought to kill (satsujinken), typical for bujutsu, the warrior version, changed in budo into "let live, save life" (katsujinken). The best is not to recognize an opponent as an enemy and thus not to fight at all. In the fight one should hurt as little as possible. It is said that an aggressor is defeated in the moment of attack - by disturbing the order of the universe.

"We cannot break the laws but only break ourselves against the laws."

6. Birth of aikido

There were several schools of traditional sword-fighting techniques in Japan, like daito-ryu of Minamoto family. One of the last Samurai in this lineage, Sokaku Takeda, taught this art to Morihei Ueshiba (titled O-sensei, "Great Master"), who after mastering it - as well as several other martial arts - developed aikido (ai - harmony; ki - vital energy, prana⁵; do - way, dharma). Aikido includes sword (bokken), stick (jo), knife (tanto) and empty-hand techniques and embodies the real spirit of martial arts: protection against hurt (kshat-trayate), in other words, kshatriya-dharma. Its unique feature, unlike in other martial arts, is strict non-aggression - it has no real attack techniques.

There may be several purposes why to study aikido: defense, self-confidence, physical exercise and health, concentration, relaxation, to see an opponent as a partner, character cultivation, self-control, peace and self-realization. O-sensei created a slogan Masakatsu Agatsu ("True / correct victory is over oneself"). For him the goal of aikido was to "build a silver bridge of understanding among all people".

Kisshomaru Ueshiba said: "Heart of spiritual mastery is in change of I burdened by [false] ego into I free of [false] ego."

This is the goal of yoga. False ego (Sanskrit "ahankara") is the basis of samsara, continued attempts to gratify material desires.

"In spite of achieving the power to control in all directions and in spite of enjoying all types of dear sense gratification as much as possible, Hiranyakashipu was dissatisfied because instead of controlling his senses he remained their servant."⁶

7. Love as the goal

Master Ueshiba persistently stressed that martial art must act fruitfully, producing love, whose acting will lead to an idea, to a fruitful life.

In his words: "Budo doesn't aim at defeating the opponent by violence or by lethal weapons. It doesn't contain anything of mundane desire to destroy by weapons or by other unfruitful means. Real budo calls for bringing internal energy of the universe into an order protecting the world peace, which creates as well as maintains everything natural in its pure form. Exercising budo is, among other things, strengthening of one's body and soul, love from kami and also the Deity which creates, protects and nourishes everything in nature."

In one of his last talks he stated: "Aikido is real budo, working with love in the universe. It is the protector of all living beings. It is the means by which everything is given life and situated in its important place. It is that creative source not only of real martial arts but of all ideas nourishing growth and evolution."

8. References

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