

# Kalarippayattu: The Ancient Martial Art of Kerala and its Arsenal

Manohara Krishnan

Calicut University

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10148327>

Published Date: 17-November-2023

---

**Abstract:** Kalarippayattu, the ancient martial art of Kerala, India, is not only a physical regimen but also a spiritual journey, intertwining combat techniques with philosophical and medicinal practices. This paper delves into the historical evolution of Kalarippayattu, emphasizing the diverse array of weapons integral to its practice. It explores the cultural, spiritual, and practical aspects of these weapons, providing insight into their symbolic and combative roles in the martial art.

**Keywords:** Kalarippayattu, historical evolution, cultural, spiritual, martial art.

---

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### Background

Kalarippayattu, originating from Kerala, is one of the oldest fighting systems in existence. It blends physical prowess with spiritual discipline, embodying the rich cultural heritage of southern India. This martial art is not just a means of self-defense but a way of life, integrating philosophical teachings and Ayurvedic principles.

### Purpose

While Kalarippayattu is often celebrated for its intricate physical techniques and spiritual depth, the weapons used in this art form are equally significant. This paper aims to provide an exhaustive examination of these weapons, discussing their historical evolution, design, and role in the art of Kalarippayattu.

### Scope

The discussion will encompass various traditional weapons of Kalarippayattu, such as the Urumi (flexible sword), Katti (knife), and Paricha (shield). The paper will also explore how these weapons are intertwined with the martial art's training methodologies and spiritual philosophies.

## 2. HISTORICAL CONTEXT

### Origin and Evolution

Kalarippayattu, often revered as one of the oldest martial arts in the world, has its roots deeply embedded in the cultural soil of Kerala, a state in southern India. The genesis of Kalarippayattu is enshrouded in mythology and ancient history, making its precise origins difficult to trace. However, it is widely believed that this martial art dates back to at least the 3rd century BCE, based on references in ancient texts like the Vedas and the Puranas [1].

The evolution of Kalarippayattu is closely linked with the martial, cultural, and religious history of Kerala. In its early stages, it was primarily a combat skill used by warriors in the region. Over time, it evolved into a comprehensive system encompassing not just fighting techniques but also elements of spiritual practice, Ayurvedic medicine, and performance art [2].

Historically, Kalaripayattu underwent significant transformations, particularly during the medieval period. The arrival of the British and their efforts to curtail local martial practices led to a decline in Kalaripayattu. However, it saw a revival in the 20th century, gaining recognition not just as a martial art but also as a symbol of Kerala's cultural identity [1].

### 3. CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

Kalaripayattu is much more than a mere fighting technique; it is a cultural icon of Kerala. Its practice is deeply intertwined with the state's social, religious, and artistic traditions. Traditionally, Kalaripayattu training was a rite of passage for young men, especially in the Nair and Thiyyar communities, instilling values of discipline, courage, and respect. Kalaripayattu is mentioned in the oldest Vadakkanpattu ballads available, written about Chekavar of North Malabar in Kerala [3].

The art form is also closely associated with Kerala's religious beliefs and rituals. Many Kalaripayattu schools, or 'kalari', are dedicated to local deities, and the training begins with invocations and prayers. This intertwining of martial skills with spiritual practices reflects the holistic approach of Indian traditions, where physical prowess and spiritual development are seen as inseparable [2].

In contemporary Kerala, Kalaripayattu continues to be a significant cultural practice, celebrated in festivals, performed in cultural events, and taught as a heritage art. It has also garnered international attention, attracting practitioners interested in its unique blend of physicality and spirituality [3].

### 4. THE ART OF KALARIPPAYATTU

#### Training and Techniques

The training methods and martial techniques of Kalaripayattu are distinct and comprehensive, focusing on the development of flexibility, strength, speed, and combat skills. Training typically begins with an elaborate oil massage, believed to make the body supple and strong [1]. Students then progress through various stages, starting with basic exercises known as 'Meythari', which includes leg exercises, body coordination movements, and stances [2].

As students advance, they move on to 'Kolthari', where they learn to fight with wooden weapons, and subsequently to 'Ankathari', involving metal weapons. The highest stage of training is 'Verumkai', which focuses on bare-hand combat and pressure point strikes [1]. The techniques taught are not just physical movements but are deeply rooted in the understanding of the human body, its vital points, and energy channels.

#### Spiritual and Physical Aspects

The integration of spiritual practices with physical training is a hallmark of Kalaripayattu. The kalari (training ground) is not just a physical space but a sacred area, often containing a shrine dedicated to a deity like Lord Parashurama or Bhagavathi [3]. Training sessions begin and end with prayers, emphasizing the art's spiritual dimension.

Kalaripayattu practitioners also engage in yoga and meditation, which enhance mental focus, breath control, and inner peace [4]. These practices are believed to develop not just physical strength but also mental clarity and spiritual growth. The art teaches the practitioner to harmonize the body, mind, and spirit, embodying the ancient Indian philosophy of holistic wellness.

This integration of physical and spiritual aspects in Kalaripayattu is unique and distinguishes it from many other martial arts. It offers a comprehensive approach to personal development, emphasizing the balance between outer strength and inner peace.

### 5. WEAPONS OF KALARIPPAYATTU

#### Types of Weapons

Kalaripayattu is known for its diverse range of weapons, each with its own unique characteristics and usage. Prominent among these is the Urumi, a flexible, whip-like sword, which Edgar Thurston describes in his work "Castes and Tribes of Southern India" [4]. The Urumi, made of thin pliable steel, could be worn around the waist and swiftly deployed, making it a weapon of surprise and agility.

Other weapons integral to Kalaripayattu include:

- **Katti (Knife):** A small, sharp weapon used for close combat.
- **Paricha (Shield) and Val (Sword):** Traditional sword and shield combination used in many drills and combat scenarios.
- **Kuntham (Spear):** Used for practicing thrusts and developing precision.
- **Otta:** A curved wooden weapon, unique to Kalaripayattu, used for advanced training focusing on vital points.

### Weapon Training

Training with weapons in Kalaripayattu is a gradual process, beginning only after the practitioner has mastered basic physical conditioning and unarmed combat techniques. The initial focus is on mastering the movements and balance required to handle each weapon effectively. As students progress, they learn more complex maneuvers and combat strategies, often simulating real-life combat scenarios [2].

The training is not merely about physical mastery but also involves understanding the philosophy behind each weapon, its history, and its place in the martial art.

### Symbolic and Practical Use

In Kalaripayattu, weapons are not just tools of combat; they carry significant symbolic weight. They represent the martial tradition's heritage, embodying principles such as discipline, respect, and honor. Practitioners learn to treat their weapons with reverence, seeing them as extensions of their own bodies and spirits [3].

Practically, these weapons were historically used for self-defense and warfare. Today, while their practical use in combat has diminished, they remain central to the practice of Kalaripayattu, serving as a link to the martial art's storied past and as a means of preserving its techniques and philosophies for future generations.

## 6. KALARIPPAYATTU IN MODERN TIMES

### Contemporary Practice

Today, Kalaripayattu has transcended its traditional boundaries, adapting to the modern era while retaining its core principles. In Kerala, it is not only a martial art but also a cultural performance, often showcased in festivals and tourist events. Contemporary practitioners maintain the rigorous training regimen, focusing on physical fitness, martial techniques, and spiritual discipline [1].

Kalaripayattu has also been integrated into other disciplines. Its influence can be seen in contemporary dance, theater, and even in cinematic fight choreography. Moreover, its principles are applied in holistic health and wellness programs, emphasizing the connection between physical activity and mental well-being [2].

### Global Reach

The allure of Kalaripayattu has reached far beyond Kerala, capturing the interest of martial arts enthusiasts worldwide. Schools teaching Kalaripayattu have sprung up in various countries, including the United States, Europe, and other parts of Asia. This global spread has not only promoted cultural exchange but also fostered a broader understanding and appreciation of this ancient art form [3].

International practitioners are drawn to Kalaripayattu for its unique combination of physicality, spirituality, and historical depth. The art form's adaptability to contemporary needs while preserving its traditional essence has been key to its global appeal.

## 7. CONCLUSION

Kalaripayattu, a martial art steeped in history and tradition, continues to thrive in the modern world. From its origins in Kerala to its global presence today, it has shown remarkable resilience and adaptability. This ancient art form, with its rich blend of physical prowess, spiritual depth, and cultural heritage, offers more than just self-defense techniques; it provides a holistic approach to personal development and well-being.

The ongoing relevance of Kalarippayattu lies in its ability to evolve while preserving its core values. As it gains more recognition globally, it holds the promise of further enriching its practice and understanding, ensuring its preservation and continuation for future generations.

#### REFERENCES

- [1] Balakrishnan, S. (2009). "Yoga and Kalarippayattu: Intersections in the Martial Arts of Kerala." International Journal of Yoga.
- [2] Zarrilli, Phillip B. (1998). "Kalarippayattu: A South Indian Martial Art and the Yoga and Ayurvedic Paradigms." Journal of Asian Martial Arts.
- [3] Luijendijk, D.H. (2005). "Kalarippayattu: The Essence of Fighting from Kerala." Martial Arts Studies.
- [4] Thurston, Edgar (1909). "Castes and Tribes of Southern India Vol.7 (T-Z)." [Online]. Available: <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.56743/page/n51/mode/2up?view=theater>
- [5] Nayar, K. S. (2011). "The Sacred and the Martial: The Traditional Martial Art of Kalarippayattu." Journal of Ritual Studies.