

Cross-Cultural Relations between Dravidian India and Central China: New Evidences from the Tradition of Martial Art

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Abstract: The existence of Mahāyāna Buddhism in South India in the earliest centuries of its birth is not an undisputed claim. This article attempts to use a new source of evidence to prove that Mahāyāna Buddhism did indeed flourish in ancient times in Dravidian India, although historical evidence is considered insufficient to prove it. The author focuses on the similarities between Kalaripayattu, a martial art form practised in Dravidian India and Chuan-fa of China, considered as the fundamental martial art tradition, to explore and support his claim of the Mahāyāna tradition's roots in Southern India.

The existence of Mahāyāna Buddhism in South India can be mainly deduced from the more than 60 artefacts of Buddha and Bodhisattvas found in various places in the southern states of Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Andhra Pradesh. The Dravidian tradition should be seen as a distinct tradition from the rest of India for the expediency of the discussion in this article. We can see from Buddhist sources that the Dravidian tradition is not just a subculture of a pan-Indian super-culture, but a culture with its own specifics and attitudes. The Buddhist sources give evidence of a Tamil Buddhist literature in the Sangam Classics and also give confirmation about the origin and presence of eminent Mahāyāna scholars from the Dravidian region of India. The observations made by the 16th century Buddhist historian *Tārānātha*, who has written the history of Buddhism from Tibetan, Indian and Chinese sources, claim that most of the leading Mahāyāna Buddhist scholars are from Southern region of India: *Nāgarjuna*, who is the founder of the *Mādhyamika* school of Buddhism, was a native of Amaravati, the capital of the Satvahana Dynasty; *Āryadeva*, the principle disciple of *Nāgarjuna*, was a native of modern Sri Lanka; *Dignāga*, the founder of Buddhist logic and the *Dignāga* school of *Vijñānavada*, was a native of Kancheepuram; *Dharmakīrti*, another important Buddhist logician, was a native of a place called *Cūḍāmani* in South India; *Bhuddhapālita*, another important *Mādhyamika*, was a native of *Hamsakriḍa* at Tambal in the south India; *Bhavaviveka*, a prominent *Mādhyamika*, philosopher and one who propounded of the Swatantra school

of *Mādhyamika*, is considered to have come from the place called Malayara in South India; the great *Candrakīrti* also belongs to Samanta in South India; and the great Boddhidharma, about whom we are going to discuss in detail, is a native of *Kancheepuram*. The presence of such great scholars whose name is synonymous with the origin and development of this school of Buddhism is very substantiating evidence for the strong presence of *Mahāyānism* in the Dravidian region.

We have evidence from historical sources that clearly illustrates the spread of *Mahāyānism* in the *Chozha* country when the *Lankavatāra sūtra* failed in Sri Lanka. The *Lankavatāra sūtra*, a prominent Mahayana text, as the name suggests, was meant to introduce *Mahāyānism* into Sri Lanka by the Indian monks from *Nalanda*. Contrary to the expectation of the Mahayanists, it failed to impress the traditional Sri Lankan *Theravāda monks*. The Mahayana monks from mainland India had to face stiff resistance from the *Theravādins* and their rulers in Sri Lanka; as a result, the scholars fearing defeat returned to India. They were received with honour in the *Chozha* kingdom and allowed to stay and propagate their religion.¹

Another evidence of prominent importance is the historical evidence we can see — the Buddhist sculptures found in the *Chozha* region of Tamil Nadu with certain characteristic features, which cannot be found anywhere else in the world. The most important feature of this sculpture is the presence of *Uṣṇiṣa* in the crown of the head; it is the representation of called *uṣṇiṣa kamala* in the Tantric Buddhism, signifying the ultimate spiritual attainment of a *Tāntric*. All the Buddha sculptures found in this area are sitting in the *Dhāyāni* Buddhas in *sukhasana* posture, explicitly showing the four *Chakrās* that a *Tāntric* Buddhist endeavours to invoke. (Dasgupta, 1958). The classic feature of the Buddhist sculptures in Tamil Nadu is a contribution of Dravidian culture to the Buddhist tradition. One very interesting evidence of the presence of *Mahāyānism* is the reference of Buddhist logic introduced by *Dignāga* and *Dharmakīrti* (originally from Dravidian region) in the Tamil *Sangam* literature, *Manimekhalai*.

Here we introduce new evidence about the presence of *Mahāyāna* in Dravidian India from the available sources of martial art in Kerala and Tamil Nadu, and the sources available at Shaolin temple in Central China. The elements of *Tāntric* Buddhist discipline infused in the martial art tradition is not a subject of research in India, but it is studied extensively in China and other East Asian countries where *Mahāyāna* Buddhist religion is a living tradition. In the tradition of *Kalaripayattu* martial art, we can see the fundamental elements of *Tāntrism*, ingrained clearly in each stage of practice. We try to examine the elements of *Tāntrism* implicit in the martial art of *Kalaripayattu* and compare it with the *Tāntric* system accepted by the Chinese martial art *Chuan-fa*, the first Chinese martial art originated at the Shaolin temple and propitiated by the Buddhist religion in East Asia. The *Chuan-fa* is the primary source for the tradition of martial art.

Mural Paintings as the Symbol of Intercultural Axis of Martial Art

One crucial evidence of the existence of Mahāyānism in the Dravidian region of India is seen in the Shaolin temple in central China. There are two monumental 12-foot long mural paintings on the walls of the white garment hall where black-skinned monks engaged in the fistfight practice with light-skinned Chinese. This practice is confirmed as the practice of Chuan-fa martial art, which means 'way of the fist' in Chinese. Most art historians failed to explain the presence of dark-skinned people in the Chinese mural paintings, as dark-skinned people are not a part of the Chinese population. A close observation of these murals would reveal that the dark-skinned practitioners are all monks of high standard and they are, in fact, controlling the proceedings of the training. The failure of art as well as general historians to explain the presence of dark-skinned monks is a result of '*impropa-granda*' attributed to Dravidian studies in the Indological studies in modern times. We can see two strong viewpoints: first, the conception of Mahāyānism existing in this part of the world is not accepted completely by the academicians; and second, the people of the Dravidian region of India are of inferior disposition and for them to pioneer something as articulate as martial art is impossible. This method of stereotyping South Indians as people of mediocrity was part of the colonial legacy and part of the academic tradition that followed such a legacy. This was not the case in pre-colonial or pre-European India; the Buddhist historians laud the contribution by South Indians to the Mahāyāna tradition.

One major research project conducted to explain these murals was done by the Human Genetic Centre of the University of Texas in 1998. The findings of this project show the nature of research in this field. One of the important findings about the dark-skinned monks is that their origin could be from the African connection that existed between countries in the African continent and the people of central China. This conclusion is supported by evidence such as this: in the *Xi-an* city of Central China, there are huge terracotta warriors of dark complexion and also in the same location, there are 100 pyramids located in a 100 km area. Supplementing these are research reports available to show that there was historical evidence for the African influence in the *Shang* and *Chau* Dynasties of Central China.

One does not need to dispute this argument for showing the impropriety of the conclusion about the presence of dark-skinned monks as originating from Africa. As a central civilisation and a prominent trading country, the relationship between the Chinese civilisation and other prominent civilisations in the ancient world is an undisputed truth, but the presence of the dark-skinned monks in the murals needs a more authentic explanation than just showing that there were African people in the central regions of China.

In the ancient world, for centuries, China and India have enjoyed very strong and successful cultural relations and people-to-people interaction. This relationship slowly developed and manifested into other areas of human interaction and that relationship most importantly necessitated the migration of Buddhist philosophy and religion into mainland China. Chinese Buddhist

sources say that one of the things that migrated together with Buddhism into the land of China is a *Tāntric* spiritual training system called *Vajramukti-naṭana*, which is said to be the source of the origin of martial arts. We see here the connection between *Vajramukti-naṭana*, with its close relation to the martial art tradition that existed in the Dravidian region of India. The connection of martial arts in both the civilisations is not just a coincidental similarity but explains the long history of *Mahāyānism* in the Dravidian region of India and it also implicitly gives a better perspective about the dark-skinned people in the Chinese murals. It is very prudent to look into the practical method of the Kalaripayattu martial art and the Chuan-fa martial art of China to understand these aspects better.

The Shaolin temple history says that it was founded by an Indian monk, Boddhidharma, from south India. At this centre of Buddhism, the most famous movement in the Buddhist tradition has started, the movement of the *Chian* school (Japanese: Zen) of Buddhism; Boddhidharma is the great patriarch of this great movement. His name *Ta-Mo* (Boddhidharma is known as *Ta-Mo* in China) also substantiates the Dravidian connection as it means in Chinese, the 'great Black'. In Japan, he is known as *Daruma* and revered as the father of Zen (the Japanese for *Chian*). This aspect of Indo-Chinese intercultural exchange and Indian influence through *Mahāyāna* to the Chinese martial art and the presence of black-skinned monks teaching the art of fist fighting, (Indians monks teaching the Chinese monks) is opined by Howard Reid and Michael Croache, in their co-authored book *The Way of the Warrior* (1986). This work describes the historical development of martial art as a tradition in Asian countries and comments that Kalaripayattu is the original form of martial art — all other martial arts have fundamental allegiance to this martial art.

Boddhidharma's Contribution to the Development of Chuan-Fa

The knowledge about martial art (development of fighting skills as an art) and its importance as a spiritual discipline has actually been identified by modern scholars in China at the Shaolin temple. At this centre of early Buddhism in China, martial arts were taught as a discipline to the monks. These practices, it is observed by many Sinologists, not only improve physical capability but also enhance meditative skills. The Shaolin temple history confirms that with the introduction of martial arts into the spiritual practice of the monks, *Ta-mo* (Boddhidharma) gave a new dimension to the martial art tradition. The Shaolin history hails him as a patriarch of *Mahāyāna* Buddhism in China.

His legendary journey from India is depicted as: he who came from the Dravidian region of south India after traversing thousands of miles through the Tibetan plateau and arrived at the Hunan province where we find the Shaolin temple. (Suzuki, 1930: 45). The legend also says that Boddhidharma at the age of 79 introduced a new curriculum to the monks where physical exercises were an important part; and later these exercises were instrumental in inculcating superior meditative techniques. The martial art tradition in China and other parts of East Asia believes that with the introduction of

Buddhist philosophy, the traditional Wu-shu (martial art) of China developed into a new phase — that such skills could be used for spiritual well-being and for acquiring superior meditative skills. The introduction of Shaolin Wu shu has changed the purpose of the practice of traditional Wu-shu (martial art) from a mere training to acquire skills to fight to a spiritual technique that could promote superior meditative skills and control the basic instincts to fight. Historical records say that the existence of Wu shu as an exercise system in China dates to the 3rd century B.C., where doctors used to suggest such exercises to tone up the body. Thus, Wu-shu originated as an exercise system, then developed into a fighting art and matured in the Shaolin temple as a spiritual training system that promotes a control on the instinct to fight.

Shaolin is the centre of Chi-an meditation (Zen), which developed later as a prominent school of Buddhism in East Asian countries. (Croucher, 1986: 24). The practice of martial skills is a part of every tradition as it promotes better health, superior powers to defend oneself from offenders, but martial art as a technique to promote spiritual virtue is a contribution of the Shaolin Chi-an tradition. When we try to find the real rationale behind the use of martial art as a spiritual technique, we can find that the philosophical view is envisioned in *Mādhyamika* Buddhist philosophy (a school of Mahāyāna Buddhism). This expanse of knowledge with regard to human existence is what makes Buddhist philosophy unique.

The Mahāyānist view on spiritual training is found to be more effective than the normal moral training meant to suppress or surpass the basic instincts. The moral training given is normally, in other traditions, meant to save oneself from the grappling effect of such basic human instincts and it is recommended to achieve this through constant and balanced meditative training. In contrast, the early Mahayanists were more rational and direct in their approach and identified the power of instincts to hound a person psychologically and bring him to submission eventually. Thus, the method of removing a thorn using another is applied and found to be very effective. The method of such meditative training doesn't mean a complete annihilation of such basic instincts, since it means only an effective control on such instincts.

The progression of martial art skills in the Mahāyāna tradition has another phase worth reviewing. When a person endeavours to travel from South India to China, he would be traversing thousands of miles through the inhospitable terrains infested with wild animals, thieves and wild nature. The monks who travelled from South India to such far off lands might have perfected martial art skills to support and protect themselves both physically and mentally to sustain the odds of the travel. This aspect is further clarified from the evidence available in the murals. The same practices can be seen in almost the same way in the Kalaripayattu tradition and is strongly founded on the principles of *Tāntrism*; interestingly, the *Tāntric* principles are the basis of the spiritual tradition of Mahāyāna Buddhism. In this context, a comparison of these two systems of martial arts warrants a careful study.

The exercise taught by Boddhidharma is, according to Chinese sources, *Vajramukti-naṭana*, a type of dance where manliness is expressed in a characteristic manner. It is similar to the Lama dance of Tibet. We can see

that the Dravidian martial art of Kalaripayattu is a more articulate form of the *Vajramukti-naṭana*, for there is an interesting resemblance between the Kalaripayattu martial art and the Shaolin Chung-Fa. The reputation of Boddhidharma as the father of martial arts is not only in the Buddhist context but also in other traditions such as Taoist martial art, Tai-Chi Chuan. Though different systems of martial art follow different traditions, the spirit of martial art remains the same. For instance, Tai-chi Chuan accepts the spirit of Shaolin Chung-fa, yet it follows the Taoist philosophy. In the Indian context, we observe that the introduction of *Tāntra* and related spiritual training is much earlier than the time of Boddhidharma. In this background, let us examine the original martial arts of India and the *Tāntric* principles that support the martial art of Kalaripayattu

Tāntric Dimension of Kalaripayattu

The term Kalari is used widely in the Malayalam language as the system — the centre of learning — where one can acquire education. The term *ezhuthu-kalari* denotes a centre where one can learn language and Mathematics, or *Aṭṭakalari* where theatrical arts like Koodiyattam, Koothu, Oṭṭamthullal, etc., are taught. The expression Kalari is synonymous with the institution of school, where students can assemble together and knowledge can be acquired from an expert or Guru. The Kalaris as active centres of learning existed in Kerala until the colonial times when a new western model of schooling system was introduced as active centres of learning.

The discussion here is about the *Payattu-kalari*, the place where fighting is taught. This institution still exists and now the term is synonymous with the martial arts taught at these centres. The historical evidence available from early colonial historians like Varthema, Logan and Whiteway,² shows that the practice of martial art Kalaripayattu was widely popular and well established with almost all people in Kerala transcending caste and communal lines. Even women were allowed to practise this art. The opinion of these historians and the widespread view is that this particular art is taught to people in order to recruit them later for the fighting force. This understanding about the practice of Kalaripayattu, as a fighting art comes because the state of Kerala was divided into small principalities that fought wars among themselves and Kalaripayattu fighters were suitably available recruits. The wars fought between those principalities were mostly duels or limited wars conducted at a predetermined place where fighters assembled and fought one-to-one wars.³ In an organised army, the use of such fighters is negligible. The training and practice of Kalaripayattu is a highly evolved technique and skill but of little use to a fighting force.

As we know, in the case of a fighting force, what is required is not individual skills and technique but the ability of the fighting force to act as a unit and execute well-defined military strategies. But if settling of disputes is conducted in the form of duels, then these fighters, the ones who excel in individual skills, could excel better than any trained fighting force, because the martial art skills are effective in one-to-one duels than in a strategically formulated military. We have evidence from historical facts, from the written history of Kerala, that when these Kalaripayattu fighters had to confront

organised armies, they ran away; and as a result, the invading army had a virtual runaway victory. (Menon, 1909: 4). We cannot find any evidence of using such trained fighters in the Army from classical Indian military manuals like *Agnipurana* or *Dhanurveda*, which otherwise elaborately describe the training of the fighting force; maintenance of the force, both man and animals; and the command structure and other essentials for the upkeep of the military. Nowhere in these manuals or other similar sources is there a mention of the development of personal skills, similar to that of martial arts, of individuals as a fighting unit. Therefore, the claim that the Kalaripayattu fighters were trained to join the army can be dismissed.

There are two major trends in Kalaripayattu; the first is the Northern school, which is prevalent in Northern Kerala or Malabar region; and the other is the southern school, mainly in the erstwhile Travancore state, which includes the Tirunelveli and Kanyakumari districts of modern Tamil Nadu. In martial art terminology, the northern system is based on the principle of hard technique, while the southern system follows the soft techniques primarily, even though these systems use both the techniques characteristically. The traditional Kalaripayattu training happens in the place called *Kuzhi-kalari*, of which the structure is shown in the picture (see, picture 2). The other places where the practice of Kalaripayattu is performed – the *Tara-kalari* and *Anga-kalari* — are an embellishment of the basic structure of the *Kuzhi-kalari*.

As shown in the picture, the description signifies the physio-spiritual space of the Kalaripayattu martial art on which the system operates. It can be similar to the *mandala* of the *Tāntric* system. This diagram clearly explains the foundation of Kalaripayattu. The description of *mandala* as the fundamental facet of *Tāntric* system — it describes the philosophical angle of the various practices — is suitably attributable to this diagram. For a practitioner, the *mandala* is a personal interactive spiritual guide. He is dedicated to the institution of this art by submitting himself to the physio-spiritual space (*mandala*) on which he has to practice this art, such that transcending this limit would call for severe punishment. We can see the construction of the space is strictly based on *Tāntric* architecture and is very unique. The Gods and the spiritual dimensions of the space are intended to express implicit meaning of the institution of Kalaripayattu.

The dimensions of *Kuzhi-kalari* are strictly based on a scale that normally follows as: the total space is 42/21 feet area; the entrance should always face the east and the main door is 5.5 feet wide, situated on the right-centre corner of the structure, and called the *Simhayoni*. The floor of the Kalari should be 3.5 feet below the ground level, and the floor is made of wet red clay meant to give enough cushioning effect to the practitioner so that he won't be hurt from the floor. Moreover, the depth of the floor protects the practitioner from winds that could hamper his body temperature. On the west left-end corner is the place for the main deity of the Kalari, known as *Pūthara*, who represents the supreme deity (Goddess) of the Kalari martial art system. This representation is of non-human form, comprising seven steps of varying size and is in the form of circles embedded to form a conic shape (see, picture 3). The represented form inside the Kalari is 1/4 of the

conic form as shown in the picture 2. The top end (top circle) of the conic-shaped form is the place for a lamp, kept lighted always. There are other seven deities in the Kalari, which are located as: 1.5 feet from the *Pūthara* is *Ganapatisthana*; 1.5 feet again is the *Gurustana*; 1.5 feet further is the place of 21 *Moolagurus* (principle Gurus) of Kalari; again 1.5 feet is the place for the 21 schools of Kalari; right side of the west end is the deity called Anthimakalan (Hanuman, in the case of southern Kalari) and right side of the east end is the Goddess Bhadrakali. The last two deities could be representing the fundamental purpose of *Tāntric* practice — that of death and fearlessness: the Antimakalan, the end of time, indicates death and Bhadrakali, the frightening mother goddess, stands for fearlessness. It can be interpreted that with the awareness of death one should venture into the difficult path of life using the best of one's resources. This is one of the most important messages of Kalaripayattu martial art.

The significance of the last two deities can be interpreted as the basic principle of Kalari — fearlessness represented by Bhadrakali and death represented by Anthimakalan. The centre of the Kalari is a rectangle-shaped diagram with 64 divisions, called Homatthara, (see, picture 2), the place where sacrifices, generally, are conducted. The exact significance of this diagram is not explained based on *Tāntric* doctrines. This place is very auspicious and important with regard to the practice of Kalaripayattu, as the *Śatrusamhāra hōma*, the most important spiritual practice of Kalari and all other activities with regard to initiation and passing out of students are conducted here.

The non-human representation of the main deity explains a unique dimension in the conception of spirituality that it is not seeking to realise or merge with a reality that is trans-empirical, but to realise the perfection of psychic and physical aspects in a human being. According to Chōgyam Trungpa, the well-known *Tāntric* from Tibet: "In the *Tāntric* tradition, it is said that the discovery of the *vajra* body — the innate nature of indestructible being — within one's physical system and within one's psychological system is the ultimate experience."⁴ The connotations of the main deity can be many, but here we explain it on the basis of *Tāntric* doctrines.

If the representation stands for the *mandala*, then the seven steps are the *mudra* illustrations, representing the seven *dhatu*s that constitute the human body. The Indian system of physiology considers that the human body is constituted of seven apparent constituent elements and its upkeep is of prime importance in maintaining health. The fundamental premise of analysis for determining a healthy body starts from observing the functioning of these vital elements. The seven *dhatu*s are as follows: blood, bones, marrow, fat, nerves (*nādi*), flesh and semen. Each step on the *Pūthara* represents each of these elements and the lamp at the top is considered to represent *ojus*, which is a non-identifiable element that signifies the perfection of the functioning of these identifiable elements. On the psychic level, these steps represent the seven conscious centres identified in the practice of Yoga, which starts from *mūlādhāra chakra*, *svādhiṣṭhāna chakra*, *maṇipūraka chakra*, *Anāhara chakra*, *viśuddha chakra*, *Ājñā chakra*, ending in *sahasrāra padma chakra*. The lamp at the top represents the perfect union of *kaya-śakti*. The logic of

yogic practice is that one can attain supreme concentration and *stiraprajñā* (wisdom) with the proper training of mind and body, which means that training is given to the psycho-physical personality of the practitioner. This means that the wisdom that the practice seeks to achieve is not contemplative knowledge achieved through insight meditation and so on, but the emphasis is to augment the bodily form of consciousness (*kāyika manas*).⁵ This in Chinese records is stated as *kāya-jīva*. The segregation of the body and mind — dualism is not permanent as the body state is supported by a consciousness that can be understood only through such psycho-experimental practices such as martial art.

Body Consciousness (*kāya-jīva*)

The idea of body consciousness (*kāya-jīva*) and its importance for maintaining harmonious life is the prime concern of martial arts practice. It is observed by Yogis that the control faculties of the mind are effectively possible only by uniting it with the body consciousness. In the Buddhist perspective, attaining perfection by cleansing the mind to attain *prajñā* is the accepted method. We can see here that both these purposes are served effectively with the practice of martial art. The *kāya-jīva* conception enunciated in the earlier Buddhist sources in China throw more light on our discussion on the practice of Kalaripayattu. According to Ngaboshi Tomio: "The life force (*Vibhūtvā*) of physical growth continues until its renewal capacity is exhausted and then, usually solely, diminishes until physical death perfectly functioning life energy vibrates and radiates its energy outward... We would assume that the perfectly functioning life energy confers with it some form of physical power or strength.... A fully functioning life energy is an inner quality of balance and harmony."⁶ In the Buddhist tradition of martial arts practice, the conception of *kāya-jīva* is held very high, that by inculcating stylised physical practices like martial arts and *naṭana* (the dance similar to war dance) one could develop harmony in functioning of the body by perfecting the *kāya-jīva* or body-consciousness.

The body-consciousness can be understood as the perfect functioning of the seven *dhatu*s (constituent part of the human body the blood, bones, fat, marrow, flesh, nerves and semen); and the harmonious balance of the life energy manifested as the balanced functioning of the five *prāṇas* in the body. The life energy (*prāṇa*) in the chest region is called *prāṇa-vāyu*, the abdominal region is *apāna-vāyu*, the one that pervades the whole body is *vyāna-vāyu*, the one that is responsible for the intake of air into the lungs and food into the stomach is *udāna vāyu* and that which is responsible for the circulation is *samāna vāyu*. The perfect functioning of these energies in the body is possible only by proper physical practices. We know from yoga that the Asana part followed by *Prāṇāyama* makes a person ready for the practice of *Samādhi*. The practice of Kalaripayattu is also meant to harmonise the functioning of the physical body and achieve body consciousness (*kāya-jīva*) by stabilising the energies in the body.

The knowledge about the ducts (*nādis*) through which the life energy passes in the body is a traditional knowledge available in ancient India and China, and it is observed that perfect functioning of these *nādis* are possible

only through conditioning exercises. This is done through medicines and massage or manipulation of the junctions and joints of these nadies. In Indian physiological terms, these are called *marma* points, commonly known as acupressure points. These points are used in the practice of martial arts, and in medical treatment as it helps a practitioner acquire superior control over the opponent and also to cure an injury or physical malfunctioning.

The Methods to Channelise Body Consciousness

The training also follows the same process of development that the student is given, in order to develop his physical faculties step by step. This is done along with a thorough body massage by the Guru. The massage, in certain cases, is very heavy and in some cases, it is done with the legs — this channelises the life energy (the *prāṇas*) in the body. After these practices, a student naturally attains the conditioning required for the actual practice of the martial art. Once the body attains the natural suppleness and agility, he receives the required maturity for the body to permeate body-consciousness (*kāya-jīva*). The foundation of Kalaripayattu, like all other martial arts, is structured movements called *maipayat*, which are based on certain foundational stances drawn from the stances of animals like the elephant, horse, crocodile, boar, fish, peacock, snake and lion. (Balakrishnan, 1994: 28). Maipayat practice is associated with a lot of jumping and kicking movements that are typical to the practice of the Kalaripayattu.

The next stage of practice is done with the help of minor weapons such as long stick followed by sticks of varying lengths — 1 foot to 3 feet long. This is done mainly to help the practitioner enhance his concentration and attention such that he has to confront real and actual weapons and a moment of failure of concentration would cost his life. After the practitioner has perfected the practice with sticks where he is taught to attack and defend simultaneously, he is taught to use weapons that are more lethal. Here also the practitioner perfects his concentration to a very high degree; he is drawn into the doorstep of life and death. The main focus of this practice is to teach the practitioner about the movements of the opponent and negotiate suitable movements; consequently, the practitioner develops superior concentration both in his mind and body. The perfection of body consciousness (*kāya-jīva*) with the help of mind power (*cit-śakti*) is achieved through these practices.

Development of More Meditative Skills (*Cit-Śakti*)

When the *guru* is certain and sure about the disciple's physical agility, meditative skills and his ability to read the movements of the opponent, he is given practice to face an armed opponent without arms. This is one of the most strenuous practices where the student is asked to concentrate on dodging techniques where the emphasis is to evade the attacker's movements and deactivate the advantage he has in being armed. These movements should be precise in such a way that it is formulated and executed by judging precisely while looking at the eyes of the attacker. Since all the movements of the attacker are defeated with calculated and precise movements, the attacker understands the ineffectiveness of his belligerence; and consequently, a fear

begins to develop in his mind. The advantage the attacker enjoyed is lost, as the unarmed opponent proves unconquerable. This is one of the main purposes of the practice of martial art — that the ignorance and arrogance that drive one to fight and dominate would, in fact, turn into fear and persuade him to find other methods to remove his ignorance and frustration. The catharsis one seeks from fighting, in fact, transforms to fear and disappointment and, thus, he searches other methods for purging his anger.

The empty-hand method, taught as one of the last techniques of the martial art, teaches a practitioner to use all available methods to attack and defend with a supreme meditative mind, as he looks at the opponent's eye and executes suitable movements. In this practice, the method adopted is to execute both hard and soft techniques expeditiously in attack and defence. The attacks are executed using hard techniques — that of moving fast and executing direct attacks, but the defence uses soft techniques, where the defender moves away from the attack and defuses the strength of the attacker. If the defence evades the attack from a specific point, the attacker loses his balance and poise and the strength he applied to the attack acts as a disadvantage for him. In this technique, the attacker is defeated using his powers of aggression and is not defended against by equal or superior strength.

The Technique of *Marma-Adi*

We have already discussed that the knowledge and technique of *marma* points is used in martial art in a very distinctive manner, for both curing and taming a person from his deluded mind. In the process of taming, they are used as the target of attack. This method of using minimal force at vital points (*marma* points) of the body helps a practitioner disarm or dissuade an opponent with minimal force and effort, as he uses his fingers or a small stick to strike at these points to generate severe pain, which results in partial paralysis or severe pain in the attacker's body. The technique could successfully disengage a person's resolve to engage in any form of combat as a solution to settle disputes. He seeks other methods for settling grievances.

The Buddhist texts cite that the causes that generate hatred and anger come from the mind's dispositional tendencies working together with feeling and ignorance. This practice helps the practitioner understand the depth of his dispositional tendency towards anger and hatred that prompt him to take a resolve to fight and conquer; at the same time, he activates his body-consciousness (*kāya-jīva*) by enhancing the natural reflective actions. A practitioner of Kalaripayattu attains superior power in his body, more so than a normal human being, or in other words he attains *kāya-siddhi*. The representation of the Goddess explains the fundamental philosophical position of this martial art. The Goddess of Kalari is not a fearsome deity who is thirsty for retribution and revenge, but a benign and compassionate mother who exemplifies the perfection of mind and body (the *cit śakti* and *kāya śakti*).

The southern school of Kalari is more original and follows Dravidian tradition; while the northern Kalari is strongly influenced by Brahmanical traditions. The distinct characteristic of the northern school is the use of

hard weapons and the dependence on hard techniques; the weapons used are those mentioned in canonical military manuals like *Agnipurana* and *Dhanurveda*. On the other hand, the southern Kalari is mostly dependent on soft techniques and is executed by bare hands, occasionally employing weapons as an extension of the arm. In its practice of structured movements and the use of bare hands as its main aspects, the southern Kalari should be seen as the original form of this art. The stylised movements of the body and well-executed attack and defence stances make this system of martial art comparable to dance movements or *Vajramukti-naṭana*.

The Philosophical Implication of the Empty Hand Method

The conception of one-to-one combat and related techniques like hand-to-hand combat combines techniques of wrestling, throws, and hand strikes and comes prior to the martial art tradition. The practice was adopted in the Buddhist tradition in early India and from here the conception of *vajramukti* meaning thunderbolt closed-clasped-hands originated. The weapon *vajra* belongs to Indra signifying speed, power and efficiency.⁷ These *vajramukti* practices were used in dances that show rhythmic moments with steady and energetic steps expressing vitality and aggression. Such dances are very popular in Kerala where Kalaripayattu is popularly practised: Padayani, theyyam, parichamuttu-kali, etc., are good examples for such dances. The main feature of these dances is that they are very manly and energetic movements are expressed charmingly.

These *vajramukti* practices, both unarmed combat and dances, are meant to create body awareness, which according to Buddhist perspective creates an awareness against self-mortification as spiritual method. Consequently, the practice makes the practitioner aware of the inherent dispositional tendencies that could hold back harmony of body and mind. The total acquirement of wisdom is not just the meditative power one develops through insight meditation but through perfecting his body consciousness. To illustrate this aspect differently, the path to enlightenment is not only through wisdom (*prajñā*) but wisdom commingled with suitable means (*upāya*). Here the *upāya* is the *vajramukti* practices. This is seen clearly when we say that the perfection one achieves through insight meditation is united with body consciousness (*kāya-jīva*). Here, *vajramukti* (clasped fist) acts as the supreme *upāya* that establishes the harmony between mind and body.

In the tradition of Buddhist *Tāntrism*, enlightenment is achieved by uniting *prajñā* with suitable *upāyas*. In this regard, the second century *Mahāyānist* scholar Āryadeva said: "When two pieces of wood are rubbed against each other fire originates. It is pure in the beginning, in the middle and in the end, it illuminates the objects of the world; in the same manner, when *prajñā* and *upāya* are brought together they produce yogic knowledge of pure nature."⁸ The enlightenment achieved through the means of uniting the *prajñā* and *upāya* is perfect throughout as it reveals the world of phenomena as the way it appears before our understanding. The mind would not be deluded with a multiplicity of thought constructs (*kalapanajalam*) that makes the apparent world real and eternal. Here, we see that the martial art practices enunciated in Chinese literature and those observed in the tradition of

Kalaripayattu are the superior means that can unite the consciousness of the mind and the consciousness of the body. The empty-handed method adopted in the Kalaripayattu and in the Chuan-Fa of Chinese arts is based on the principle of *Vajramukti-naṭana* (clasped hand movements). The *mandala* of this esoteric practice, in China, is supported by gods like *vajradhara* (he who holds the thunderbolt), *vajrapani* (hands of the thunderbolt) and various Chinese and Mongolian Bodhisattvas. In most of the countries where martial art spiritual practices are prominent, many Bodhisattvas are depicted in combat positions and poses of hand limb. The Chinese equivalent for *vajramukti* (thunderbolt of clasped hands) is Chuan -Fa (Japanese: Kempo). This term is used in the context of ritualised movement, which contains the principles of health preservation, weaponless self-defence and meditative insight.⁹

The use of clasped hands can be explained by the fact that when one has to protect himself from unexpected attack, the immediate protection comes from the hand. Buddhist thinkers understood this problem perfectly and introduced self-defence as a method not just to enhance meditative skills, but also to protect the person who engages in the benign activity of protecting others. The immediate weapon available to a person is his clasped hand and if the use of it is perfected through martial art practice, he can protect himself from any attack. The primary strike is at the ignorance, frustration and fear of the opponent. It is said in *Śāntideva's Śikṣa sammuccaya*: "With a bodily practice directed by the impulse of renunciation, one relinquishes all acquisitiveness.... Then we must duly preserve the self even if sacrificed to others.... O Sariputra, one must preserve one's self when one intends to preserve others."¹⁰ This can be interpreted in other words: if a person intends to attack another human being, he is under the spell of severe ignorance, fear and hatred. It is observed that with the spell of severe mental distortion, the man who resolves to fight estimates the capability of the opponent as inferior to him. So when the attacker attacks again and again, the defender, using some techniques, evades or averts the movements of the attacker. A reciprocating fear begins to dominate the mind of the attacker. The kind of fear that dominated his mind while taking a resolve to attack would now dawn in his mind differently. When the mind understands the limitations of dispositionally conditioned activities, then it consciously learns to remove dispositions like anger, ignorance and fear that instigated him to fight. Thus, it is widely believed that learning martial arts make a man and his surroundings more peaceful and harmonious.

Implications of Muṣṭi Mudra and Tiger Striking

The prominence and symbolic value of the clasped hand as the prime representation (*mudra*) in the practice of martial arts can be seen in the practice of many martial arts around the world: the Japanese arts of Kempo (Chuan-Fa), Aikido, judo and the Indian art of Kalaripayattu. The use of *muṣṭi-mudra*, clasped hands formed after *namaskara-mudra* (salutation posture) is very important in the practice of Kalaripayattu, as the defender bows before the opponent in salutation posture and turns the hands to sturdy fists. The bowing before the opponent signifies the respect given to the human aspect of the person and the clasped fist denotes the opposition expressed to the ignorance and anger that

has impelled the opponent to fight. Here, the aggression is not shown to the opponent but to his ignorance and the brute tendency to fight and dominate. This expression finds its most effective manifestation when the practitioner uses the technique of *Marma-adi* to disarm the opponent. Here, using minimal force and limited aggression, the practitioner could inflict severe pain in the body of the opponent, so that the opponent either gets paralysed or becomes unconscious due to severe pain.

This technique of *Marma-adi* is similar to the 'tiger striking' in the Chuan-Fa. The basic principles of tiger striking of Chuan-Fa and the empty-hand method of the Kalaripayattu are similar, where the emphasis is mainly on developing efficacy in administering fast hand blows directed toward the neutral centres of an opponent's body and its psychic energy structures. According to S.N. Tomio: "This was the name given to the specialised technique of *vajramukti* concerned with manipulating, or causing changes within, the body's vital points (*marma* points). This name was retained unaltered in China and simply transliterated into the native tongue as Po Fu. It was said to have been used by *Kuo Chi Yi* (Japanese: *Koku Kyu ki*) of the *Hou Han* Dynasty and to have been incorporated in a system later named *Chang Shou Men* (Japanese: *Cho Te Mon*). This title means extending hands and referred to Yi's ability to defend himself from persons standing a long distance away. It was said he could 'extend' the 'power' of his hands and disarm people long before they could close in on him. This ability was an advanced technique of the Po Fu method."¹¹

Ethical Implication of Po Fu and *Marma-adi*.

It is interesting to evaluate the ethical dimensions of martial art from the practice of *Marma-adi* and Po Fu. These practices are the defining features of the martial art tradition, which put across the essential doctrine of martial arts: that the practitioner before attempting to practise this should have attained sufficient spiritual and physical maturity. This is absolutely necessary in order to execute such difficult practices. It is said in the *Dharmasangari* that, a tranquility of body, a lightness in body, a tranquillity in consciousness, a lightness in consciousness and continues to pair both mind and body in a similar manner including pleasantness and fitness. The integral quality of mind/body relations is obviously acknowledged. The *marma* points - *Chiu So* (Chinese) *Kyusho* (Japanese) - are the points at which the ducts (*nādis*), which carry life energy, are very vulnerable, so striking at these points could be fatal. We see here that a lay practitioner may not be able to execute perfectly the practice *Po Fu* or *Marma-adi* and thus it is taught only to students who have attained control on their mental and physical faculties. We can understand here that both the Kalari practitioner and the Chuan-Fa practitioner have essentially attained superior mental and physical maturity so that they can use these for the eradication of suffering from the world. Acarya Asanga says in *Vajra-uṣṇīṣa sūtra* that even violent means — if required — can be used against a tyrant who is under the influence of ignorance and pride and enjoys killing weaker folk. The message of these spiritual warriors is not for dominating other weaker folk, or working with

someone to spread imperialist designs, or to satiate his own tendency to fight and dominate but to protect the weak in this world of sufferings. As a loud pronouncement of the ethical side of martial arts, a characteristic medical system is practised together with the Kalaripayattu and Chuan-Fa martial art traditions; and in some cases the centres of martial art are known as centres of medicine.

Kalarimarma Therapy and Chiu So System of Medicine

Kalarimarma therapy is a well-developed medical system attached with the Kalaripayattu School (*dojo*) and most Kalari Gurus are practitioners of this system of medicine. The basic principles of this system are based on *Tāntric* medicine where treatment is given to enhance the efficiency of the *nādis* (ducts) through which life energy passes in the body. The holistic view of *Tāntric* medicine makes it a distinct system and an elaborate form of this system is the *Siddha* tradition of medicine widely practised in Dravidian India. It is considered that the life power (*śakti*), which causes perfection of body and mind, if failing to function naturally, can cause diseases. The flow of that energy in the body is conspicuous in certain points called *marma* points (Tamil: *varma*); the knowledge of *marma* therapy is very elaborate and almost all diseases find treatment here.

Medicine and physiotherapy are given to augment that energy. One of the important aspects of this treatment system is the knowledge of 108 vital points in the body; and these points are connected with vital organs like the heart, liver, brain etc. Manipulating these points with a certain degree of pressure could result in boosting the function of these organs and in curing diseases. This system of medicine is, in more than many ways, similar to the Acupuncture and Acupressure system of Chinese medicine where too 108 points are used for treatment.

There can be many similarities between the practice of traditional Chinese medicine and the traditional medicine popular in the Dravidian region of India. Both systems use the knowledge of vital points (*marma* or Chiu So) in their therapy scheme, which is done through channelling the life energy through the ducts (*nādis*) by manipulating, massaging or through acupuncture and acupressure methods. The ninth chapter of *Mahavairocana Sutra* describes the use of *Vajra-suci* (thunderbolt needle and thunderbolt hands) used for canalising the life energy. Like their Indian counterparts, the Chuan-Fa masters too act as therapists.

In the words of S.N. Tomio: "Chuan-Fa preserved many Indian techniques in their original forms. It calls the skill of vital point energy alteration *Tien Hsueh Fa* and asserts it as a purely therapeutic technique, to be used as an alternative to the needle therapy of acupuncture. The trained hands and fingers of a Chuan Fa exponent were as capable of manipulating the vital points in a patient's body as an ordinary doctor's metal needles."¹² Martial art medical systems all over the world use the same methods and most of them are conceptually similar to Chuan-Fa. A detailed analysis of the *mandala* of both systems shows strong similarities, which strengthens our argument on the relationship between these systems.

As discussed earlier, the Kalaripayattu *mandala* is not conceptually explained properly. Except the main deity — the goddess of Kalaripayattu — the other deities' spiritual functions are not explained clearly. But the conception of Goddess is explained as the representation of the human body that is seeking to find perfection after attaining body-consciousness (*kāya-jīva*), or it represents the seven stages the practitioner has to develop to attain perfection in his consciousness through strenuous and determined practice. The representation of the Goddess, therefore, can be explained as perfection in the functioning of body and mind in a harmonious manner.

On the other hand, in the case of Chuan-Fa, the *Vajradhatu Mahamandala* is explained completely. Here too, the explanation gives an understanding of the fundamental principle of martial art practice — that a practitioner outdoes all those impediments that could hamper his effort to attain body consciousness (*kāya-jīva*) and harmony in the functioning of body and mind.

Vajradhatu Mahamandala as Spiritual Foundation of Chuan-Fa

The *Vajradhatu Mahamandala*, the northern quarter, is traditionally ruled by *vajramukti* and its guardian, the Buddha *Amoghasiddhi* (Chinese: *Pu Kung*), is the embodiment of the Buddha wisdom concerning enlightened activity and creation. He is surrounded by four Maha-Bodhisattvas, each of whom holds his arms in classical and dynamic *vajramukti* poses of both mystical expression and physical defensive readiness called *mudras* or *Hastat*.

Each of the Maha-Bodhisattvas embodies the perfecting qualities of *Mahavairocana's* wisdom and are named *Vajrakarma*, *Vajrayaksa*, *Vajraraksa*, and *Vajrasandhi*. *Vajraraksa* sits to the right of *Amoghasiddhi*, his hands raised above the head; *Vajrayaksa* sits to the left of *Amoghasiddhi*, his hands forming fists; *Vajrakarma* sits in front of *Amoghasiddhi*, his hands raised to chest level and in fists with the first knuckles protruding; *Vajrasandhi* sits behind *Amoghasiddhi*, his hands parallel to each other in fists and in front of the chest.

The *Vajrasandhi* Bodhisattva signifies the highest and last of the sixteen stages to perfection, each of which is represented by groups of four Bodhisattvas. At the thirteenth stage, the perfection of bodily activities is obtained; at the fourteenth, laziness is overcome by the adoption of the perfect practice of strenuous exertion, and at the fifteenth, all evil or demonic forces are completely subjugated and expelled. In the sixteenth and last stage, the practitioners' mind, body and speech merge with those of *Mahavairocana* Buddha. The functional meaning of the other deities in the Kalaripayattu is not described in this manner, however the conception of the main deity, the Goddess of Kalaripayattu, is described perfectly, and the conception is the same as that of the *Mahavairocana* Bodhisattva.

The martial art practice and the meditation scheme of Zen also expresses the same aspect as Kalari and Chuan-Fa — that the practice of martial art and the training of meditation goes hand in hand as both compliment each other. A monk can sit hours together in meditation without any feeling of weariness or exhaustion as the martial arts practice nurtures his body consciousness and sharpens his mind. To quote Taisen Deshimaru, a great grand Master of

Kempo, the original Japanese martial art: "Every fight should be fought as if life were at stake, even when you are fighting with an wooden sword...One stroke and it is over: one dead man — sometimes two. It all happens in a flash. And in that flash the mind decides the technique and the body follows. In all modern sports, there is a pause, but in the martial arts there is no pause. If you wait, ever so little, you are lost... The mind must be constantly concentrated on the whole situation, ready to act or react." (Taisen, 1982: 8).

The practice of Zen goes hand in hand, because the practice of martial arts activates the *shin* (mind) that makes the way to Zen easy. According to Zen doctrines, gradual practice and sudden enlightenment is possible only through *Zazen* (meditation) together with martial art practices. Desimaru says again: "Concentrate here and now that way, we become fresh, new, yesterday's *Zazen* is not the same as today's. *Zazen* must always be fresh; you must not rest during *Zazen*, nor while you are training in a martial art."¹³ We can see many interesting features of these martial arts from the various aspects connected with them. The medical systems developed together with these arts have many resemblances.

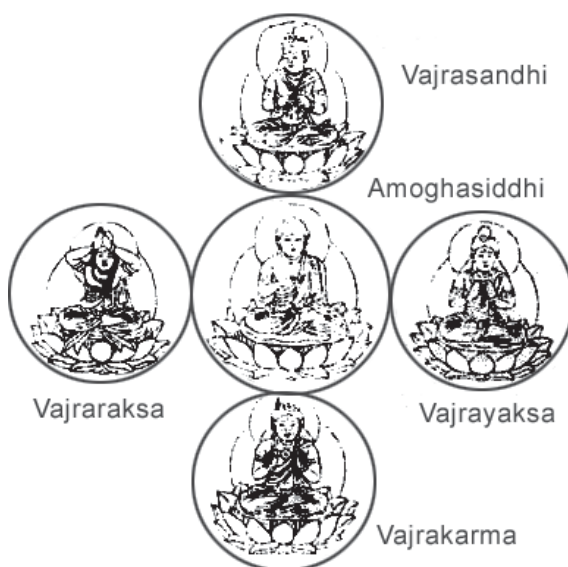
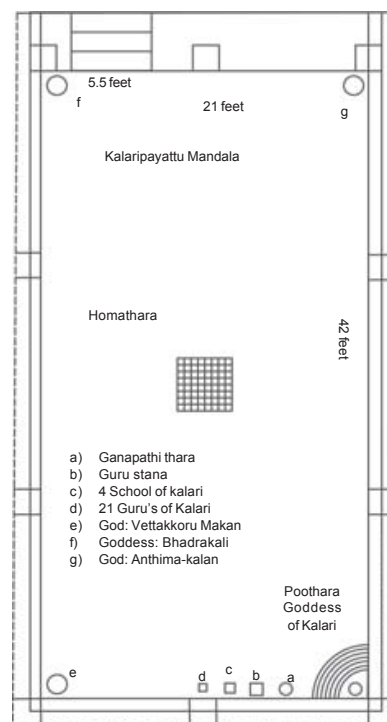
The tradition of martial arts is seen only in the Dravidian region of India especially in Tamil Nadu and Kerala. Though some minor forms of the art are practised elsewhere, they are not as articulate and perfect as the one practised in this region. So the evidence given in the Chinese sources and the available sources of information should be attributable to the Dravidian region. The mural paintings at the Shaolin temple reveal the history of a long cultural interaction between India and China in ancient times. The Chinese and other East Asian traditions of Buddhism consider India the repository of their culture. We can see the evidence of such interaction from so many sources and this study about the tradition of martial arts is one of the main contributing segments to that. The tradition of *Tāntrism* practiced in India and China has certain characteristic differences but in essential principles, the systems are almost the same. The influence of Buddhist *Tāntra* is evident in both the systems. The doctrinal difference is evident only in the exterior aspects, while internal aspects are almost the same. Both systems are meant to inculcate superior meditative skills by uniting the body consciousness (*kāya-jīva*) with reflective knowledge (*prajñā*). This knowledge about the conception of body consciousness is very ancient knowledge and its implications are not time-bound or culture-specific, as it has the internal strength of alleviating suffering.

The existence of *Mahāyāna* Buddhism in the Dravidian region would throw light on a lot of aspects with regard to culture, religion and the specific form of lifestyle practised in this region. The evidence we examined here is not just yet another argumentative point but one of the most important proofs that the Dravidian region has developed an original system of meditative technique that resulted in the origin of many great movements like Zen etc in the Buddhist tradition. We arrive at this conclusion with the available evidence that shows that there is no martial art, similar to *Kalaripayattu* and *Chuan-Fa* practised in any other part of India other than the Dravidian region.



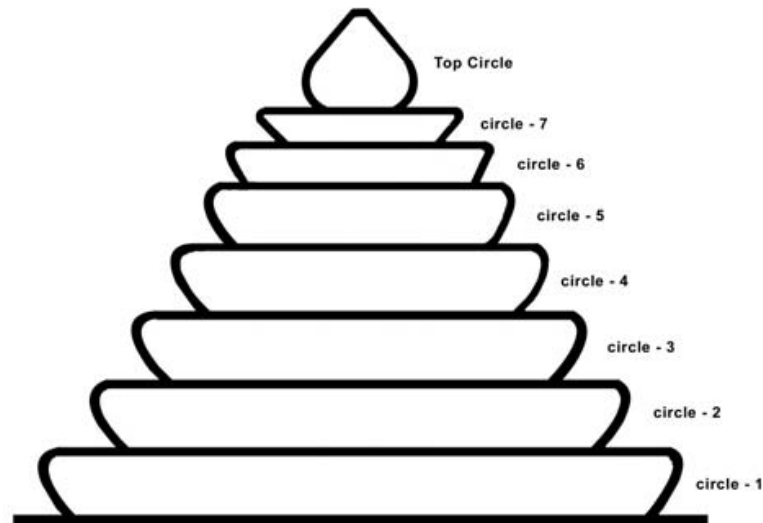
Pic - 1: Mural Paining at Shaolin temple

Pic - 2: A front view of Representation of the Goddess of Kalaripayattu.

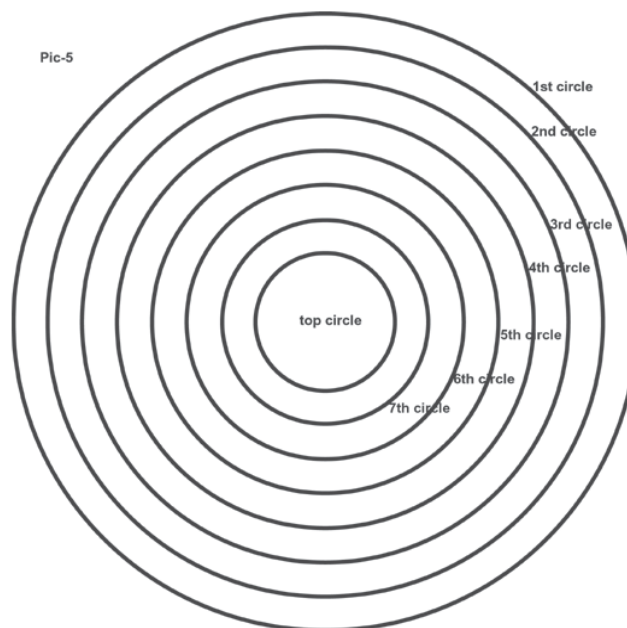


Pic - 3: Vajradhatu Maha-mandala of Chuan-Fa

Pic - 4: A front view of Goddess of Kalaripayattu



Pic - 5: A Top view of representation of the Goddess of Kalaripayattu



Notes

1. David J. Kalupahana, *A Short History of Buddhism*, p. 180.
2. The Western historians who have written the history of Kerala during colonial times.
3. These wars were meant to settle disputes in a friendly manner, as the fights were similar to a football tournament. The team of fighters who won would have authority over the one who lost and thus the disputes were settled, Varthema Ludovico Di. *The Travels of Ludovico Di*, Lisbon, 1503, p. 143.
4. Tomio Shibu Nagaboshi, op-cit, p. 134.
5. One of the reasons for the practice of Martial Art is that it is considered a method to enhance the functioning of bodily consciousness in the body. According to Shibu Nagaboshi Tomio: "In the Buddhist Chuan-Fa (*Kempo*), this type of language is termed in general as Kayaka-manas (body consciousness). This could be defined as a bodily state or condition, which, upon arising, has the capacity to take as one of its objects the production of a mental response. Like the mental-manas (mental consciousness) , it carries and is subject to those factors arising from causes and effects, and manifests, in physical forms, the patterning of each. Tomio Shibu Nagaboshi, op-cit, p.137.
6. *Ibid*, p. 139.
7. Tomio Shibu Nagaboshi, op-cit, p. 166.
8. *Cittavisuddhiprakarana of Āryadeva*, verse: 93
9. Tomio Shibu Nagaboshi, op-cit, p. 184.
10. Op-cit
11. Tomio Shibu Nagaboshi op-cit p. 208.
12. *Ibid*, p. 241
13. *Ibid*, p. 13

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