Kalari and Vaittiyacālai:
Medicine and Martial Arts Intertwined

Roman Sieler

Abstract
Varmakkalai, ‘the art of the vital spots’, combines therapeutic and martial techniques: Varmam spots are of combative relevance, but also applicable in curing ailments. This paper depicts how far this South Indian practice figures simultaneously in the kalari, the training ground where combat techniques called varma ati, ‘hitting the vital spots’, are taught, and in the vaittiyacālai, the dispensary for varma maruttuvam, ‘vital spot treatments’. Injuries incurred in the kalari are addressed in the vaittiyacālai, and apprentices’ learning progress in one surrounding can be measured by their prowess in the other. Both physical and mental skills acquired combine in a kind of psycho-somatic intuition—the medical and martial competence of practitioners. Such intersections of medicine and martial practices are not normally recognised by ‘Western’ taxonomies or educational models, which tend to segregate such aspects, labelling one as ‘arts’ or ‘sports’ and the other as ‘science’. However, this paper describes the very combination of medically and militarily relevant aspects of varmam as not only complementary, but as the most decisive feature of varmakkalai.

Keywords
martial arts, indigenous medicine, Siddha medicine, South India, Tamil Nadu, varmakkalai, vital spots

Varmakkalai is ‘the art [kalai] of the vital spots [varmam]’. Practised in Kanyakumari, the southernmost district of Tamil Nadu state and of mainland India, it combines therapeutic and combat techniques in a mutually enhancing, complementary fashion. Varmam are vulnerable points of the body, which can be used for therapy, as well as for incapacitating an opponent. Such an intersection of medicine and martial practices is recognised neither by ‘Western’ thought and taxonomy nor by Indian institutionalised forms of education. This is exemplified by academic classifications and educational models, which tend to segregate both aspects, labelling one as ‘arts’ or ‘sports’, and the other as ‘science’. Therapeutic techniques of varmakkalai are thus recognised as a sub-branch of the indigenous, codified South Indian form of health care of Siddha medicine, and adapted to an official curriculum—albeit by muting its martial art components. The hereditary practitioners of
varmakkalai, called ācāns, however, maintain that the intersection of fighting and healing is crucial to their practice. This paper analyses the symbiotic relationship between two apparently antithetical systems and calls into question the rigid distinction between martial arts and medicine in popular thought and academic writing on South Asia.

The mutually supportive combination of medicine and martial arts in varmakkalai is illustrated by observing how most practices surrounding the vital spots figure simultaneously in the kalari, the training ground of martial practices, where combat techniques called varma aṭi (‘striking the vital spots’) are taught, and in the vaittiyacālai, the dispensary for varma maruttuvam or ‘vital spot treatments’. Injuries incurred in the kalari training ground are addressed with therapies in the vaittiyacālai dispensary. Moreover, all practices related to both settings enhance a varmakkalai student’s overall skills, and the progress in one can be gauged by efficacy gained in the other. For instance, transmission of knowledge includes Yoga and meditative exercises; these augment mental strength, needed to effectively heal patients on the one hand, and to confidently confront opponents on the other. Moreover, physical strength is required for both combat and medical practices. Blows, kicks, blocks and handling of weapons require physical stamina, and the same is true for administering massages and vital spots manipulations. In the course of training, both physical strength (uṭal cakti) and mental progression (maṇa cakti) of students combine and produce a kind of psychosomatic intuition (maṇa utti)—the medical/martial competence of ācāns.\(^1\) All this underscores the assertions of practitioners that varmakkalai must consist of both medical and martial practices.

This paper therefore suggests that ‘medicine’ and ‘martial arts’ should not be treated as too rigid analytical categories of scholarly description, defined in too narrow terms, but as problematic dichotomies. This may hold true not only for varmakkalai, but for many Asian forms of practice in general, as an apparent similarity between the vital spots and numerous Asian (in particular Chinese) therapeutic, martial and self-cultivation exercises suggests.

**Kalari and vaittiyacālai: interrelated spheres**

The data for this paper was gathered through interviews, participant observation and, to some extent, apprenticeship throughout 2008 and 2009, during research for a dissertation on varmakkalai as part of Siddha medicine in the

---

\(^1\) Original terms given in italics are transliterations from Tamil, except where noted otherwise.
South of Tamil Nadu. Siddha medicine is an indigenous, codified Indian form of health care, similar to the better-known Ayurveda. Found primarily in India’s Tamil-speaking south, but also in other countries with considerable Tamil populations, it makes use of a wide range of herbal, mineral and iatrochemical substances as well as esoteric forms of healing. Scholarly explorations of Siddha medicine are rare in any regard and sub-disciplines such as varmakkalai are only little known. One reason for this dearth of information may be the secrecy surrounding Siddha in general as well as many aspects of vital spots in particular. Nevertheless, I was lucky enough upon entering my field of research—a small town in Kanyakumari district, just about an half-hour drive from the subcontinent’s southernmost extension—to initially be allowed to observe, and finally to learn, selected techniques from one exponent of varmakkalai, Velayudhan ācān. Although mainly interested in medical aspects, I soon realised that the two settings of kalari and vaittiyacālai are closely related, as are healing and fighting for practitioners. Training ground and dispensary are interlinked spatially and with regard to the main actors who perform in them. Similar ritual and hierarchical behaviour characterises life in the kalari and the vaittiyacālai, and, importantly, the varmam spots are central in both.

It is important to note that varmam spots appear to be a manifestation of a pan-South Asian theory of bodily loci. Vulnerable parts of the body and an accompanying semi-anatomical theory are reflected in ancient Vedic and Sanskrit sources, such as the Vedas, Upaniṣads and Purāṇas. Passages in the famous Indian epics, Rgveda, Mahābhārata and Rāmāyaṇa, all mention ‘marman’ spots. Generally found within depictions of war and battle, this term appears to mean ‘mortal/vulnerable/vital spot’, as this is the location or limb of the body to which a lethal blow can be executed, and as the Sanskrit root of marman, mr: ‘to die; causing to die’ indicates. Considering the warlike context of such spots in Vedic and Sanskrit literature, scholars have speculated that their theory has developed from a kind of military medicine and on

---

2 Research was funded by a research grant from the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD).

3 Exceptions include Daniel 1984; Hausman 1996; Sujatha 2009; Weiss 2009; Sébastia 2011 on Siddha medicine in general and Zarrilli 1992 on varmakkalai in particular.


5 All names of practitioners have been anonymised. Many ācāns offer medical services although it is sometimes unclear, or contended, whether they are legally allowed to do so. I wish to avoid possible difficulties which practitioners might face due to revealing their identities.


battlefields in ancient India. Even the ayurvedic compendium *Suśruta Saṃhitā* notes in this vein that ‘marman [are the points that] kill’ (Sanskrit *mārayantīti marmān yucyate*). While these marman spots do not enjoy a prominent therapeutic role in Ayurveda colleges today, and appear not to have had therapeutic value at all, but rather a prophylactic one, it is interesting to note that the varmam loci found in the extreme South of Tamil India intertwine both martial and medical use of such or similar bodily spots. Of interest are also the many parallels between varmam spots and their usage and acupuncture points—an aspect which suggests comparative analysis of South Asian and Chinese medical and martial practices in particular. However, despite pointing to such similarities, this paper focuses on the contemporary practice of varmakkalai in South India.

*The vaittiyacālai and the varma vaṛtiyar*

A *varma vaittiyacālai*, ‘vital spot dispensary’, is the place where varmam ailments are therapeutically addressed by health care specialists called ācāṇ or, more specifically, thanks to the medical procedures they specialise in, *varma vaṛtiyar*, ‘vital spot doctor’. They offer a wide range of treatments which stimulate vital spots by administering manual techniques, such as massages or manipulation of limbs. A wide range of ailments is addressed: from impact injuries and fractures to nerve-related problems, to countering unconscious states or treating cases of hemiplegia. Vital spot medicine is commonly regarded as part of Siddha medicine, one of the indigenous medicines of India, mainly found in the south-eastern state of Tamil Nadu. Although Siddha medicine has become adapted by and is being taught in colleges, most ācāṇs have enjoyed a hereditary training. They have learned as apprentices from accomplished practitioners, through a system of education known in South Asia as *guru-śisya-paramparā*, the lineage of guru and student. Varmakkalai is thus still largely a highly individual and localised practice, a circumstance that is probably owed to the restriction of related knowledge and its transmission within closed lineages.

---

10 Wujastyk 2009, p. 204.
11 *Varmam* spots, as well as other bodily loci used in combat and medicine in South India, deviate, at least in part, from the *marman* spots of classical ayurvedic literature. See Zarrilli 1998, pp. 154–200.
13 I therefore deliberately refrain from providing a chart of loci, since this would suggest a standardised system of vital spots. My data rather suggest that varmam spots are far from being
One of the most striking features of a varma vaittiyacālai is its provision to ensure secluded treatment procedures. Dispensaries have a back room or curtained space separating the activities inside from the observing gaze of uninvolved persons. In contrast to the procedure in most South Asian doctor-patient encounters, where relatives are generally present throughout diagnosis and treatment, ācāns avoid conducting their therapies observably, as prescribed by palm-leaf manuscripts on varmam. For instance, the Varmakkaṇṇāṭi (‘mirror of vital spots’) notes that an ācān should only attempt to revive an unconscious person after sending everyone else away, and advises to treat under the cover of a screen or inside a separate room.

Within a vaittiyacālai, the ācān enjoys considerable respect, accorded not only by patients, but first and foremost by students, who, as a prerequisite to receiving instruction, acknowledge their guru(s)’ authority and pay their reverence. Even experienced practitioners regard their devotion towards their own guru(s) as a vital part of their practices, and as important with regard to therapeutic efficacy. Many ācāns do not commence treating patients without contemplating on past preceptors. In most vaittiyacālais, therefore, the picture of a former guru is installed in a prominent place, often overseeing the physician. Such pictures are regularly adorned with flowers and receive the practitioner’s first attention alongside idols of gods in the morning, before turning to waiting patients. An ācān, it is held, should only act after contemplating on his or her teacher, in order to accord one’s respect and reverence. Likewise, students in vaittiyacālais start their day by venerating their present guru, often by bowing down to touch the ācān’s feet, thus showing their devotion towards him or her. The structure of the vaittiyacālai, as well as the behaviour of students and gurus, is mirrored in the kaḷari.

The kaḷari and the varma aṭi ācān

Varma aṭi translates as ‘striking the vital spots’ and focuses on varmam loci for defensive and offensive combat techniques. Often only those students who have received instruction in medical techniques for years receive instruction on how to attack varmam locations in an adversary and defend their own. This is primarily done using the hands and legs, but also with different instruments, part of a codified corpus of spots and from being put to equal usage by all ācāns. Varmam spots practice depends on individual practitioners’ erudition, lineage of learning and on local uses.

15 Varmakkaṇṇāṭi, verse 7.
such as the wooden long staff called *cilampam*, a prominent weapon among martial practitioners of Tamil Nadu,\textsuperscript{16} or the *kaṭṭaikkampu* short stick.

*Kalari*, the place where *varma aṭi* is trained, means ‘battlefield, training ground’. An ancient Dravidian term encountered in early Tamil *Caṅkam* poems dated to about the first century CE, *kalari* has, at various stages, described war battlefields or gymnasia for the training of soldiers.\textsuperscript{17} In Malayalam, the vernacular of Kerala, a neighbouring state to Tamil Nadu, *kalari* is closely connected with the popular martial art form *kalarippayāṭṭu*, literally meaning ‘practice-ground [*kalari*] exercise [*payāṭṭu*]’\textsuperscript{18}. In fact, many of the combat techniques and training methods of *kalarippayāṭṭu* closely resemble *varma aṭi*, with the exception of a greater emphasis on weapons training in *kalarippayāṭṭu* as opposed to bare-handed techniques as the most valued forms of training in *varma aṭi*. *Kalari* training grounds in Kerala are generally dug-out arenas (Malayalam *kulikkalari*), with the actual training floor situated about one metre beneath the ground level.\textsuperscript{19} *Varma aṭi kalari*s in Tamil Nadu, on the other hand, can be of various appearances, though normally this does not include dug-out pits. A *varma aṭi kalari* might be a thatched shed or an open space in the shade of coconut palms. Some *kalari*s are located on the rooftop of a house or in the premises of a temple. The training itself and the persons training together—the combination of master and students—seems to be of greater importance in this regard than the location.

A few requirements, though, should be met. Often the ground of a *kalari*, like that in *kalarippayāṭṭu*\textsuperscript{20} or the *ākbādā* of North Indian *pahalwān*i wrestling,\textsuperscript{21} is made up of special mixtures of soil or sand, to assure softness of the ground, reducing injuries from throws, jumps and falls. Further, though most *kalari*s are found outdoors, visibility or easy accessibility is not implied; the training areas are in fact most often screened from curious eyes by thick vegetation. The seclusive character of the *vaṭṭiyacālai*, to which many *kalari*s are attached, is thus preserved. The choice of timing for the exercises also helps in this regard; they only begin after the last patient has been treated in the *vaṭṭiyacālai*, which is rarely before 9 pm, by which time the *kalari* is enveloped in darkness.

\textsuperscript{16} Raj 1977.
\textsuperscript{17} Burrow and Emeneau 1984, p. 98; Zarrilli 1998, p. 25.
\textsuperscript{18} Zarrilli 1998.
\textsuperscript{20} Zarrilli 1998, p. 66.
\textsuperscript{21} Alter 1992a, p. 319.
Ritual inside the kalari

Concentrating on a kind of internal power or seeking an external force, which can be internalised for greater prowess, has been described as a universal aspect of martial practices around the world.²² Zarrilli emphasises this aspect of the ritual life of kalarippayattu, writing that ‘students must participate in the devotional life of the kalari from the point of ritual entry into the sacred space through the practice of personal devotion to the kalari deities and to the master’.²³ When entering the place of training, students begin their practice by honouring the deities installed inside the training area.²⁴ In front of these and in front of the teacher, students perform different movements from the martial repertoire to express their devotion. Ritual, thus, is a major factor in the process of students’ kalarippayattu instruction and practice, as it helps internalise exercises and devotion towards gods and preceptors.

A similar practice is found in varma aṭi training as well, though I rarely came across a kalari in which idols of deities were installed and worshipped before training. Students’ attention is rather focused on the ācān and on the ground itself; training routinely starts with greeting the gods in the form of the soil, and then one’s guru. This is called vanāṅkum murai, ‘greeting method’.²⁵ When entering the kalari, a student makes sure to place the right foot inside first. This mirrors the behaviour of Hindu devotees when entering a temple; the right side of the body is considered more pure and auspicious. Next, a student bows down, touching the ground with the right hand, then the forehead and throat or chest, thus revering the earth like one does with a deity. One ācān explained that, when entering a kalari, a practitioner asks Pūtēvi, the ‘earth goddess’, for permission to use the ground for exercises. When leaving the kalari after concluding training, the same action is repeated, this time to apologise for having used the ground. By revering the earth (manjav ati) thus, all its gods (teyvam) are said to be venerated as well, and their blessing is sought in this way.

Guru vanakkam, ‘greeting the guru’, is conducted next by students, who approach the ācān individually and bow down, sometimes kneeling or prostrating flat on the ground in front of their teacher. As core part of greeting the guru, students touch their guru’s feet, a meaningful performance in South Asia. This is called kāl tottu vanāṅku-tal, literally ‘to greet by touching [someone’s] feet’; an act which conveys the highest respect by the person greeting.

---

²² Jones 2002, p. xii.
towards the person or deity being thus revered.  

The ācān responds by touching the student’s head, which is called talai toṭu-tal, ‘touching the head’, a gesture conveying acceptance and blessing. If the guru is absent, the most advanced student directs the training and may adopt the ācān’s position, towards whom guru vaṇakkam is then performed. Nevertheless, a kind of inner greeting of one’s actual master is still to be performed in the minds of students, regardless of the guru’s presence, and even fully-fledged practitioners honour their often long-deceased ācāns.

The devotional life of varmakkalai kalaris is centred on the person of the guru, paralleling the focal point of the vaittiyacālai. The close relation between both spheres, and between therapeutic and combat applications of vital spots, is even more apparent in the instruction of students, who have to progress gradually in different learning procedures that blur the delineations between medicine and martial arts.

Progression in the study of the vital spots

Students of varmakkalai are required to undergo a process of learning for which both physical and mental progression are central. Ācāns describe this as the development of utalcakti, ‘body power’, and manacakti, ‘mind power’. Stamina is needed for performing long, deep and strenuous massages and body manipulations in the vaittiyacālai and for kalari exercises. Physical endurance is also developed by both receiving and administering therapies on the one hand, and by gaining proficiency in martial practices on the other. Students are furthermore expected to exhibit determined will-power, self-confidence and restraint. This is thought to allow for the development of both flawless mastery of combat techniques, as well as therapeutic intuition for diagnosing diseases and treating patients.

Progressing physically in the study of the vital spots

Massage: taṭavumurai

Massage methods or taṭavumurai are not only an integral part of most varmam therapies, but are also important with regard to martial training. Students of varma ati may not receive regular massages before or after training, as is the case with kalarippayaṭṭu. Massage with medicated oils is, however, frequently

\[26\] Alex 2008, p. 537.

administered to students in order to address specific ailments. Such is administered in the *vaitiyacālai* if a practitioner feels that his or her body is tense, or that a particular body part aches, or in order to treat sprains, bruises or other injuries which frequently occur in the course of combat training. Medicated oils (*eṇny*) are deployed for this—the same oils which are utilised in the therapeutic practices of the dispensary to address *varmam* ailments. Such oils render the body supple, soft and flexible (*ilakum*), straightening the nerves (*narampu nērākum*) and activating the flow of *pirān* (Sanskrit *prāna*), a kind of life force central to therapies and martial techniques. *Pirān* is the vital substance of life, but is also a primary diagnostic instrument of vital spot treatments. This root of human existence circulates via a system of channels through the body, the *nāṭi* (Sanskrit *nāḍī*) channels. If unbalanced, practitioners of vital spot medicine attempt to equalise the flow of *pirān* by stimulating *varmam* loci, which lie on *nāṭi* channels and are therefore spots of concentrated *pirān* force. *Pirān* might thus be seen as a rough equivalent of *qi*, the vital substance of life in Chinese philosophy. Similar to *pirān*, *qi* circulates in channels (*mai*) throughout the body according to acupuncture and moxibustion theories, in which *qi* is also central to diagnostic and therapeutic techniques.28 Tuina massage and acupressure, for instance, also aim at equalising *qi* through stimulation.29

For *varmam* massage, unless there is an immediate problem such as a fracture in the area to be massaged, strong pressure is applied, utilising deep, intense strokes. Patients often groan under the immense force of strokes, which are delivered by various body parts of practitioners: from hands to feet or by (mostly wooden) instruments such as sticks and clubs, depending on the desired intensity or body part to be massaged. When experiencing this massage myself from the hands of Velayudhan ācān, I was struck by the force he used, under which I found it hard to relax my muscles. For the persons administering massage thus, this can be strenuous as well, and can itself cause strain and tightness, which a practitioner may deal with by in turn receiving massage.

After finishing massaging me, Velayudhan asked me to feel his hands. They seemed exceptionally rough. He explained: ‘An ācān’s hands must become rough and strong!’ Strong hands, he added, are necessary for strong massage strokes, but also come in handy when fighting. The practice of powerful blows, in turn, helps to intensify massage strokes.

To improve strength in their hands and fingers, many ācāṇs have their students hit plantain and bamboo stems. These are thought to be similar in structure to a human body, and students practise penetrating vital spots by hitting banana stems and also train their hands’ strength. This has to be done keeping the thrusting finger erect and firm, in order to prevent an injury. The practitioner Shanmugam recounts that his guru, while teaching varma ati, ordered him to perform numerous arduous exercises, the use of which he did not understand then. As a student, he had to collect the fruit of the neem tree (vēppappalam) and to press it between his fingers, squeezing out the interior kernel, which is easy. Then, his guru would ask him to try and squeeze the kernel as well, until it gave in and cracked open, which is very difficult. After having struggled to do so for some time, holding the kernel between his thumb and index finger, his guru had him try different finger combinations: pressing the kernel between thumb and middle finger, between thumb and ring finger and so on. This way, Shanmugam slowly built superior strength in his individual fingers.

The day after I had delivered my first massage under the auspices of Velayudhan ācān, from whom I had started to learn after an initial period of observation, the muscles of my arms felt sore. The ācān noticed this and said, ‘Your arms are hurting already? That’s good. Let’s see how fast you will be able to spin the cilampam [long staff] after some days!’ Indeed, sometimes I did not know whether the sore muscles in my body were caused by the massage in the vaittiyacālai or by kaḷari training, as both involved physically challenging activities.

**Learning to fight: muṟais, taṟippaṭam floor drawings, and cilampam staff form**

Martial training is physically arduous and may sometimes also require massages to overcome pain or injuries. However, I will highlight still more connecting points between healing and fighting in varmakkalai.

Velayudhan divides his martial training course into 18 steps or ‘methods’, muṟai, in all of which a practitioner has to excel before being considered a fully-fledged ācān. These include the cilampam ‘long staff’ used in individual training or sparring exercises; ciramam or ‘medium staff’, about one metre in length; and kaṭṭaiikkampu, a ‘short stick’, about the length of a hand. Further muṟais are ati tata, literally ‘hit and defend’, a bare-handed fighting method consisting of blocking, punches and kicks; piṭitterittal, ‘grappling’; puṭṭu,
Fig. 1. Manual stimulation of a vital spot
‘interlocking techniques’; and ṭukkiyerittal, ‘throws’. A couple of non-wooden weapons are also incorporated into the training regime: māṅkompu or māṭukompu, a weapon made of the ‘horns of a bull or a deer’; veṭṭukatti, ‘machete’; kōṭāri, ‘axe’; veṭṭuvāl, ‘short sword’; viccuvāl, ‘long sword’; vāl kēṭakam, ‘sword and shield’; and veḷkampu, ‘lance’, a staff with a sharp, metallic point at one end. The 18th method finally is varma atī, the direct attack upon and defence of vital spots. A student has to progress sequentially through these methods, being allowed to pass on to the next only after having successfully mastered all the previous ones. Learning how to utilise the vital spots in a combat situation or varma ati, is thus ideally only revealed to the most advanced among students at the final stage of their instruction.

Ācāns use taraippatam, literally ‘floor pictures’, drawn with white rice flour on the ground of the kaḷari, for instructing combat methods. Taraippatam pictures are similar in appearance to kōlams of South India or rangoli in North India, the ornamental drawings consisting of complex geometrical patterns.

---

33 Only 15 muraiks are listed here. Since the first three of these, cilampam, ciramam and kattaiikkampu, have to be individually trained as well as with a sparring partner, we arrive at a total of 18 muraiks.
drawn in front of the thresholds of houses to ward off evil spirits. Drawing *kōlam* is an almost meditational exercise, said to boost the concentration of the drawer. In *varmakkalai*, *taraippaṭam* are not complicated ornaments, but simple drawings consisting of only three to seven dots, spread over an area of about one and a half metres. These dots, often four in every corner of a square and one in the middle, are connected by lines going in zigzag or triangles. Standing on a *taraippaṭam*, as Zarrilli has noted, ‘the central spot is the one to and from which steps are made as the practitioner steps between and among these (. . .) steps, moving in triangle or zigzag patterns’. Using such patterns, students are taught every possible stance and movement by going through all dots on the floor. This is done by first concentrating on the ‘step-sequences’, *cuvatu*. Once understood and incorporated by the student, *cuvatu* steps can be applied in any combat sequence and in combinations with all methods; that is, irrespective if the practitioner uses a staff or fights bare-handed. For instance, a basic exercise practised within the *taraippaṭam* is *ottacuvatu*, ‘single (leg) steps’, in which one leg remains stationary, mostly on the central mark of the floor drawing, while the other leg rapidly moves from one spot to the next. Accompanying this, any set of attack or defence moves can be executed.

As Zarrilli states, the aim of using these floor pictures is to develop ‘the instinctive ability to step in any direction’. *Cuvatu* motion sequences have to be practised over and over again, until the movements become second nature and can be performed automatically. One obvious result of such training is that students learn to aimlessly execute hits or blows in every direction. *Taraippaṭam* drawings can therefore be seen as graphic tools assisting kinaesthetic learning, the purpose of which is to allow a student to eventually abandon and do without them. This is reminiscent of *daoyin* ‘therapeutic gymnastics’, and hereditary Chinese *qigong* practitioners, who instruct novices into their practices which incorporate martial and medical techniques through repetitious body movements. Elisabeth Hsu notes that such training was ‘directed at mindful being in the body’, which produces ‘sensations, feelings, emotions and visions’, important in the learning process of hereditary Chinese medical and martial practitioners and their students. Likewise, *varmakkalai* students learn to abandon the *taraippaṭam* after endless repetitions,

---

36 *Ibid*.
38 Hsu 1999, p. 49.
39 *Ibid*.
having not only deeply incorporated the patterns, but having also developed a
certain intuitive feeling for the movements and techniques.

Endless repetitions of body exercises help to foster a kind of outer control,
and observance of rules and rituals fosters an ‘inner connection to practice’, as
Zarrilli has remarked.40 This inner connection to practice is described as a state
of being ‘all eyes’, 41 a state which students may eventually attain through, but
which also positively influences their martial performances. Gurus of varmak-
kalai emphasise the meditative qualities of certain drills, especially those
deploying the cilampam long staff. Somewhat similar in appearance to English
quarterstaffs, cilampams are generally made of bamboo, and should be slightly
shorter than a practitioner’s height. They are used for fast twirling around a
practitioner’s perpendicular and horizontal axes for attack and defence, and
for controlled, direct offensive blows or defensive blocking moves. For twirl-
ing, a cilampam is normally held in one hand, while twirling the weapon
horizontally and vertically around one’s axes in various patterns. Skilled prac-
titioners spin two staves at a time, one in each hand, often achieving high
circulation speed. These techniques are popular in public shows as is the use
of fire-lit cilampams. However, staff twirling does not have merely aesthetic
value; it is held that, if twirled fast enough, even arrows and projectiles can be
fended off. Grasped with both hands, a staff can be used in direct combat as
well, and usually this is practised with a sparring partner, who delivers strikes
and blows that an opponent has to parry.

In the words of Palanisami ācān, once a certain degree of skill is achieved,
when exercising a certain movement or particular form, ‘the staff moves by
itself; you don’t have to think but [start to] meditate’. To achieve this, one has
to control knowledge and mind (arivum maṇamum), which is a crucial part of
the mental progression of students of varmakkalai.

Progressing mentally in the study of the vital spots

Yoga, breath control and meditation

Ācāns emphasise that, except for self-protection, the knowledge of the vital
spots ideally should not be put into practice. Practitioners and manuscripts
explain this as being due to the potentially lethal nature of some combat tech-
niques involving varmam loci. The manuscript Varmakkannāṭi cautions to
desist from fighting even under provocation, by advising: ‘On earth, whoever
may oppose you, be cool-headed and recede just like an honourable person

41 Zarrilli 1998.
[would]. Talk friendly with [the aggressor] and withdraw’. An opponent attacked at a varnam would ‘obey and perish’, a situation from which practitioners should refrain. Students are therefore told to practise self-control, otukkam. This, according to Velayudhan ācān, is of vital importance for the efficacy and success in both martial arts and medical therapies. If one had desires, one was prone to become a slave to these desires. Controlling one’s emotions not only prevents a practitioner from misusing the potentially deadly varma ati techniques, but also enhances therapeutic efficacy. To resist abusing varnam knowledge, however, requires ‘mind power’, maṇacakti. According to Velayudhan, this mind power is, moreover, not only crucial in ensuring success against an adversary, but helps one avoid conflicts as well as to effectively heal patients. To attain such strength of mind, some gurus advise their students to practise yogic exercises and meditation, or combinations of both, such as pirāṇayāmam, breath control.

Velayudhan ācān advises his students to exercise sets of yōkācanam (Skt.: yogāśana), yogic body postures. These include patmācanam, ‘lotus pose’, sitting in a cross-legged position on the ground; pujaṅkācanam, ‘cobra pose’, stemming the upper body off the ground while lying flat on the stomach; cakrācanam, ‘wheel pose’, backbend in a standing position; pātacakrācanam, ‘semicircle pose’, lifting one leg in a straight line while in a backbend; paccimācanam, sitting position with both legs being stretched out on the floor while simultaneously bending forth one’s upper torso to grab one’s soles with the hands; virācanam, ‘hero pose’, position of squatting on one’s knees; carvānacānām, ‘whole body pose’ shoulder stand; and cavācanam, ‘corpse pose’, lying calmly on the back. Some such exercises are meditational or recreational, others are physically very challenging and many include both these aspects at the same time. According to Mircea Eliade, the purpose of Yoga poses is the realisation of ‘a certain neutrality of the senses [when] consciousness is no longer troubled by the presence of the body’. Practitioners attempt to achieve such a state in which bodily and mental desires are shut down, while sense perceptions are focused.

Yoga is therefore equally stressed for its value in training the senses and one’s perception, in making the body fit and flexible, and for its meditative aspect. However, a kind of protective function is ascribed to different Yoga poses as well. According to one informant, all vital spots can be ‘locked’ by assuming the ‘pose of the wild boar’, varakācanam. Assuming this deep

---

42 Varmakkaṇṇāti, verse 4.  
43 Varmakkaṇṇāti, verse 5.  
45 Eliade 1970, p. 54.
squatting position, the lowermost psycho-physical centre, the *mulātāram* of the coccyx region, well known in yogic theory as (Sanskrit *mulādhāra*) *cakra*, is said to be protected, which in turn is believed to protect all other *varmam* loci in the body.⁴⁶ Velayudhan ācān stated that yogic practices conveyed the ability to protect vital spots from attacks, and related this to the circulation of *pirān*am ‘life force’. *Varmam* loci are vulnerable precisely due to their housing of *pirān*am, the live-giving, transphysical energy that flows through the body, and Yoga stimulates this life force and its circulation.

This is not only achieved by particular body stances but even more so by breathing exercises. Dharmalingam notes that ‘a person “holding” the breath does not get affected by any force applied on the varma[m] points [which] get “bound” when we hold the breath. This (…) paralyses the points’.⁴⁷ Controlling *pirān*am and concentrating it in particular places and thus ‘locking up’ vital spots is indeed the objective of *pirānāyāmam*, as exercised by *varmam* practitioners. Velayudhan attached much importance to this ‘control of *pirān*am’. *Pirānāyāmam*, which by definition is supposed to control the flow of *pirān*am through the body, is thus not only a tool for meditative purposes, calming the mind and cleansing the transphysical body (the functioning generally emphasised in literature on Yoga),⁴⁸ but can also be deployed to ‘control the circulation of *pirān*am and “lock” the *varmam*’,⁴⁹ and hence to directly influence one’s own vital spots. This is crucial for both martial and therapeutic applications in *varmakkalai*.

The main reason for the finiteness of life, some Siddha manuscripts note, is that exhalation normally involves a larger quantity of breath (eight *āṅkulam* or fingerbreadths) than inhalation (four *āṅkulam*).⁵⁰ Every life is characterised by a stipulated amount of breathing cycles, after which life expires. Therefore, with every respiration sequence, vital breath is lost and a person approaches expiration of life. The aim of *pirānāyāmam* is to counter this loss of breath by synchronising inhalation and exhalation, and by slowing down respiration cycles. Ideally, the continual practice of breath control enables a prolongation of life or even immortality, the ultimate goal of the ancient Siddhars, the semimythical founding figures of Siddha medicine.⁵¹ This method is pursued by ācāns, albeit not necessarily with the intention of attaining immortality. As Velayudhan elucidated, forging the respiration in the way described, *pirān*am

---

⁴⁸ Eliade 1970, p. 56.
⁵⁰ Natarajan 1991, p. 89.
⁵¹ Weiss 2009.
becomes ‘locked’ inside varmam spots during retention of breath. Varmam loci can be guarded from attacks and disease by consciously controlling one’s respiration, since pirāṇam is forcefully retained within the vital spots, not allowing any impact to extract or disturb it.

Pirāṇāyānam attains particular importance for the martial art practitioner, since skilled breath control facilitates the protection of one’s vital spots, among other things. Moreover, pirāṇam and its regulation is an effective tool for an outstanding combat performance. If pirāṇam is controlled, this becomes manifest in martial exercises. Blows delivered can be observed or felt as particularly heavy and of a deadly power.\(^{52}\)

Moreover, pirāṇam control has therapeutic value. Not only can pirāṇam energy be utilised for fighting purposes, ‘[a] master’s hands, feet, forearms, and elbows control [pirāṇam] vital energy also to heal’.\(^{53}\) Pirāṇam is directed through the limbs of a practitioner while administering manual therapies such as massages, in which it is carefully administered through each massage stroke, conveying strong but steady force. Breath control, Velayudhan ācān elucidated, is a way of training the student to direct pirāṇam through one’s own body, and how to utilise this in martial and medical applications. Administration of massages and the manual stimulations of loci in particular require ācāns to be experienced in controlling and directing pirāṇam. Since vital spots are the places where pirāṇam exists in a condensed form, practitioners who have become sensible to this vital force, to their own and to pirāṇam in patients’ bodies, unerringly detect a varmam location by sensing the pirāṇam on its inside.\(^{54}\)

One practitioner described varmakkalai as a ‘way of meditation’, tiyāṇamārkkam, noting that unless meditation was practised daily, one would not attain proficiency in varmakkalai. As thus, meditative aspects are at the same time a prerequisite and inherent characteristic of varmakkalai. Only through austere practice of Yoga and pirāṇāyānam, it was often explained to me, was it possible to fully learn and to successfully practise martial and therapeutic aspects of varmam. If correctly incorporated into one’s regimen, Rājēntiran maintains, the combination of meditation and physical training

---

\(^{52}\) Zarrilli 1989, p. 1302.

\(^{53}\) Ibid.

\(^{54}\) For an account of breathing exercises for the flow of qi as found in Chinese manuscripts and as part of many self-oriented practices, see Lo 2001, p. 21. Breath exercise or ‘breath-cultivation’ is an important part of Chinese medicine and internal martial arts. Hsu 1999, p. 22, has observed how qigong meditative exercises are shared by Chinese martial and healing practitioners alike. Like pirāṇāyānam, controlling of one’s qi energy within the body is said to confer abilities with regard to both therapeutic and combative effects.
would convey ‘superhuman powers’.\textsuperscript{55} \textit{Nōkkuvarmam} is a case in point. This esoteric practice is often described as only understood as an ultimate stage of \textit{varmakkalai}, achieved through the most austere meditation, Yoga and breath control. \textit{Nōkkuvarmam} means ‘gazing spot’ and is understood as the ability to affect vital spots by the power of sight alone, without any physical contact. Interestingly, this technique also incorporates a double character, since it can be used to attack opponents as well as to treat patients.

To achieve such skills and dexterity, a special, combined body-mind state has to be fostered. Modalities to achieve this include Yoga, meditative exercises and \textit{pirānāyāmam}, which merge physical and mental training in order to produce such a desired body-mind. Students strive to attain a physical and mental balance and simultaneous development of ‘physical strength’, \textit{utalcakti}, and ‘mental strength’, \textit{manacakti}. When fostered in parallel through the practice of martial exercises, therapeutic manipulations and yogic techniques, this triggers an effective intuition, called \textit{mana utti}. This term is composed of \textit{manam}, ‘mind’, and \textit{utti}, which is defined as ‘intuitive perception (…) tact’, by the \textit{Madras Tamil Lexicon}.

\textsuperscript{56} This kind of intuition, which \textit{varmakkalai} practitioners ideally develop, is deeply connected to the efficacy of all practices of both \textit{kalari} and \textit{vaittiyacālai}.

\textbf{Medicine and martial arts intertwined}

I was sitting together with Velayudhan in the backyard of his house one afternoon, enjoying a short break from the rush of patients. The \textit{ācān} picked up two \textit{cilampam} staves which had been leaning against a coconut tree, and after throwing one over to me, started to playfully exchange a few strikes and blocks, a common pastime during such short breaks or in the evening hours. In between delivering blows or parrying mine, he explained that by handling a \textit{cilampam}, one became more aware of the \textit{varmam} locations, but a knowledge of the \textit{varmam} should also be considered a prerequisite for such martial training. Injury to prominent places was a common occurrence when staff-fighting and \textit{ācāns} therefore had to be prepared to deal with any related traumata. \textit{Cilampam} training could result in severe injury, and this was also true of other weapons and bare-handed fighting forms. He said: ‘A practitioner of \textit{varma ati} must be skilled in \textit{vaittiyam} [medicine] as well; otherwise injuries happen that might cause chronic ailments or even death’. This, according to most

\textsuperscript{55} Amānuśya \textit{āṛyalaka}, Rājēntiran 2008, p. 40.

\textsuperscript{56} See also Sujātha \textit{et al.} 1991, p. 74.
practitioners, is the reason why varma /cgi martial exercises and varma marut-
tuvam medical treatments are practised in combination.57 Every martial applica-
tion of a varmam must be completed by therapeutic techniques, and every
possible effect to a varmam must be treatable by corresponding measures.
Also, numerous shared concepts characterise both combat applications and
therapies of vulnerable loci; these include stimulation/penetration techniques
as well as underlying concepts of timing, force and effects.

The vital spots in therapy and martial training

While exchanging staff hits and parries with Velayudhan, the ācān would
deliver sudden and speeding blows in the direction of specific parts of my
body, but stop short of actually touching the particular point with the tip of
his staff at the last moment. It was obvious that such were significant loca-
tions, and in the case of a real fight, each blow would have had serious effects.
For instance, two particularly vulnerable spots are situated on both sides of the
ribs. These loci, known as atappakkālam, are considered as ‘lethal spots’,
patuvvarmam, since they quickly cause unconsciousness and, in serious cases,
death. As soon as the ācān had delivered a mock strike in the direction of this
spot, he listed the symptoms of an affected atappakkālam: ‘If atappam is hit,
blood oozes from mouth and nose; [the patient] will not be able to breathe,
unconsciousness will set in and he will faint’. Velayudhan pointed out a differ-
ent spot, kūmpuvarmam, as a therapeutic spot of utmost importance if
atappakkālam was affected and how to stimulate it, thus countering its ill-
effects. In this manner, no attacking blow to a vital spot is instructed without
mentioning symptoms for diagnosis and countermeasures required to coun-
teract the effects of a varmam affliction for saving a victim/opponent from an
impact. Therapeutic and combative stimulations of varmam loci are always
intimately combined.

Ways of stimulating or penetrating spots also combine both medicine and
fighting. In varmakkalai, a rough approximate to a weapon called ọtta kol, a
curved, wooden, dagger-like instrument,58 is called katṭaikkampu, ‘short stick’,
which can be used to penetrate vital spots. These wooden sticks are not nor-
mally finished in an artful, dagger-like style like ọtta of kaḷarippayāṭṭu; most
katṭaikkampu have a plain, cylindrical shape. Usually about one cm in diam-
eter and corresponding more or less to the width of a hand in length, a
katṭaikkampu can be easily concealed in its bearer’s closed fist, and, therefore,
makes for a weapon which should not be underestimated. However, the kaṭṭaikkampu is not merely a weapon. The same device is not only utilised in kalāris and in martial practice, but also in vaittiyacālais for therapeutic stimulations of vital spots. A kaṭṭaikkampu is often used to penetrate spots which are difficult to reach with the bare hand, or which require greater amounts of pressure.

Despite the occasional use of instruments to address varmam spots, the tool perceived as best suited to achieve this are the hands of an ācāṅ. In contrast to kalarippayaṭṭu and many other martial arts, ācāṅs do not consider bare-hand combat a rudimentary form of practice. At its core, varma ati is about penetrating the vital spots, a task best accomplished by the practitioner’s hands. The manual techniques to achieve this highlight the double characteristics of healing and harming.

---

The healing and the harming touch: varma mudrā

Mudrās, translated by the Monier-Williams’ Sanskrit-English Dictionary as ‘particular positions or intertwinings of the fingers (…) commonly practised in religious worship, and supposed to possess an occult meaning and magical efficacy’, are found in many forms in South Asia. Such hand gestures are, for instance, utilised in day-to-day practices, as forms of greeting (Sanskrit namaskāra), and also enjoy a special meaning in worship in Hindu temples or in theatrical performances, such as Bhāratanātyam dance. Ācāṇs draw on a distinctive set of mudrās, for both combat and healing needs.

Penetration of a varmam, no matter which of the two purposes of healing or fighting is intended, has to be done in a very particular way—by literally ‘opening’ (tira-ittal) a specific spot. The form of the varmam manipulation employed, whether a rotary movement, a quick jerk, a twisting or a plucking movement, is determined by the type of spot that needs to be stimulated. Only if the right technique is deployed will a particular varmam open, which otherwise will remain closed, inactivated. Every spot is thus associated with a specific technique, and it is the varma mudrās, which facilitate such an opening. Ācāṇs frequently refer to mudrās as keys, cāvi, used to unlock or open a vital spot if applied correctly. Only the right key will open a varmam.

Most vital spots are opened by the means of an ācān’s hands. However, the heels, soles, instep, toes and balls of a practitioner’s feet can all be utilised to stimulate spots and count as mudrās. Though there is considerable variation in the usage, forms and names, some common mudrās include: ‘elephant-face mudrā’ (yānaimukamuttirai), ‘horse-face mudrā’ (kutiraimukamuttirai), ‘power mudrā’ (caktimuttirai), ‘wheel mudrā’ (cakkaramuttirai), ‘conch mudrā’ (cāikumuttirai), ‘heel or instep mudrā’ (puraṅkālmuttirai), ‘[god] Viṣṇu mudrā’ (viṣṇumuttirai), ‘Vēl, or god Murukan’s spear, mudrā’ (vēlmuttirai), ‘[god] Śiva’s spear mudrā’ (tiricūlamuttirai), ‘snake [face] mudrā’ (carppa(muka muttirai)), and the ‘five (finger) mudrā’ (pañcamuttirai).60 Some of these gesture-like intertwinings of fingers can be found in artistic expressions, such as in dance, while others are distinct.

Practitioners are required to perform these hand positions quickly, and in the correct form. Students practise making one gesture after another in rapid succession, so as to embody this kind of knowledge. Mudrās may be trained on surfaces that closely resemble the structure of a human body or to different body parts and limbs. This includes banana stems, being somewhat similar to

60 This list has been taken from Velayudhan ācāṇ’s repertoire. Other practitioners may utilise different mudrās or terms.
a body’s trunk; pumpkins, resembling a head in shape and stability; or gourd varieties, which correspond to the limbs. Hitting such objects is believed to strengthen one’s blows, and to help become accustomed to a particular hand gesture.

Every mudrā can be assigned to one or more varmam spots, the opening of which is affected through it. Tilartakkālam, for example, situated on the forehead, in between and slightly above the eyebrows, must be penetrated utilising the ‘power mudrā’.61 It is indispensable to intimately know which finger positions to deploy for stimulating a particular varmam; this applies equally to the opening of vital spots in combat techniques and in therapeutic methods.

Closely related to mudrā and to the knowledge about penetrability of, and effect on, vital spots is the concept of māttirai, which incorporates taxonomies of force and timing.

**Force and timing: māttirai**

Māttirai, according to the Madras Tamil Lexicon, means, among other things, ‘moment, measure of time (…) of winking one’s eyes or of snapping one’s fingers; (…) limit, as of time’. The implications of varma māttirai go beyond these meanings, denoting the measure of time and the measure of impact or force of a vital spot penetration, thus relating both to combat applications and to therapeutic techniques.

One informant, Samuel ācān, who practises about 20 km southwest of Takkalai in Kanyakumari district, explained to me while simultaneously stimulating vital spots on a young patient:

If I stimulate this spot using half māttirai [arai māttirai], the disease will be cured. Māttirai can mean different things. It is the pressure which is applied for treating; the indentation of massage [tatava patippu]. In case of an injury, or attack, māttirai describes the degree of the trauma and the severity of an ailment. Even the time of day [camayam] including how and when an injury happened is a part of māttirai.

Māttirai thus describes the time, timing and force of injury or attack, all of which together determine the extent of impact and the virulence of a resulting disease. It further is a measure for describing force and timing used in treatment measures, laying down the pressure of stimulation of a vital spot by the practitioner. Diagnosis of an ailment and correct treatment are thus intimately connected to and determined by māttirai.

---

Generally, as a force of striking or therapeutic indentation, māttirai is described as less than one quarter (kāl māttirai kil), one quarter (kāl māttirai), one half (arai māttirai), three quarters (mukkāl māttirai), one (oru māttirai) or as more than one māttirai (māttiraikku miru). There are several notions regarding how to assess such degrees, a knack which can only be learned through experience. Hence, exactly how much force individual degrees of māttirai involve is difficult to specify. It has been noted that one full māttirai is the force needed to penetrate the stem of a banana tree, perceived as similar to the structure of a human torso, up to the first metacarpal of the index finger.\(^{62}\) One ācāṅ described māttirai as the power required to lift a weight of 100 kg above one’s head. Similarly, Rājēntiran notes that lifting weights of 75, 50 and 25 kg equalled the energy required to produce three quarter, one half, and one quarter of māttirai respectively.\(^{63}\)

Māttirai cannot be reduced to either combat or therapeutic relevance alone. Natcattirakkālam, ‘star vital spot’, located one fingerbreadth from the exterior corner of both eyes, was demonstrated to me as best attacked using the ‘snake mudrā’. However, only one fourth of māttirai pressure should ever be applied to this varmam as both the forces which accord to half and full māttirai might lead to immediate death due to this spot’s extreme sensitivity. If the ‘star vital spot’ is affected, the victim starts sweating profusely, the eyes turn yellow and the ability to see and hear diminishes. If these signs are noticed, treatment has to be given quickly, otherwise death is certain. To counter these ill-effects, a practitioner has to press on the sides of the patient’s forehead by using exactly the same pressure of a quarter māttirai.\(^{64}\) The above-mentioned atappakkālam, located on both sides of the rib-cage, can be penetrated by way of an offensive method, which utilises either the foot or ‘snake mudrā’. If attacked with half māttirai, an opponent is said to fall unconscious. Full māttirai is understood to kill, and hence has to be avoided at all costs. For treatment, as above, kūmpuvarmam on the patient’s breast can be stimulated with a thumb indentation using a half-māttirai pressure. After stimulating manipantavarmam on the wrist of the hand and massaging the patient’s back with the feet (purāṅkālmuttirai), the patient regains consciousness.\(^{65}\)

Both combat and treatment of a varmam are thus characterised by the interrelations and influences of varma māttirai (force/timing) and mudrā.

---

62 Dharmalingam 1991, p. 32.
63 Rājēntiran 2008, p. 36.
Time limits: nālikai

If a varmam is impacted, the injury must be addressed by therapeutic countermeasures within a stipulated period of time. Each vital spot, if afflicted, has a particular time limit, within which treatment is still feasible. Exceeding this period, the symptoms cannot be reversed and in many cases incurability of an ailment, sometimes even death of the patient, is certain. To ensure survival, treatment has to be administered within a stipulated period of time, as described by manuscripts. This time frame is defined by the force of impact or māttirai. The more forceful the impact, the less time available for treatment. The duration during which treatment is possible is measured by manuscripts in nālikai, a time category which roughly corresponds to 24 minutes; one hour therefore consists of two and a half nālikai. For every varmam, the period from an impact to the onset of certain symptoms and to the manifestation of incurable situations differs. If the stipulated time is exceeded, complete cure cannot be guaranteed. Rather, the manuscripts caution that an ailment is likely to have turned ‘incurable’ (acāttiyam) by that time. For instance, if tilarttakkālam, in between the eyebrows, is affected, treatment must be administered within one and a half hours (three and three-quarters nālikai) to ensure recovery of a patient.66

There is an interconnection between māttirai and nālikai; the severity of impact, time and harm. Velayudhan explained this, deploying the metaphor of archery:

If you shoot an arrow [ampu] using a bow [vil], you need to know exactly how to aim for your target. Carefully holding the bow’s string you must decide how to release the arrow and how much speed is needed. This is māttirai. Depending on how much speed [vēkam] and power [vellam] you apply, the arrow will reach the aim more or less quickly; penetrating more or less deeply. As in the case of the arrow, an effect [pinpōkku] on the body is seen after a varmam is struck. Some spots are affected fast, within one or two nālikai, others take longer. If you strike a varmam very powerfully, then nālikai is reduced, like the powerful arrow, which reaches its target very fast.

Thus māttirai and nālikai are closely interrelated. As in archery, the distance from which a shot is being delivered determines the force of impact, as does the speed of an arrow. Released from a short distance and at high acceleration, the impact is more powerful and deep. The time limit given for treating a varmam affliction invariably depends on the force of impact. In many cases, an impact of one full māttirai forecloses any therapy, because such a powerful

66 Varmakkaṇṇati, verse 231.
injury causes an incurable trauma or considerably minimises the time frame for treatment.

All concepts described here not only define varmakkalai and determine varma ācān’s practices. Nālikai, māttirai, mudrā, etc., all share a dual importance and epitomise the close interrelation of therapy and combat; the intertwining of healing art and martial art.

Conclusion

Varmakkalai is a system of physical and mental self-cultivation, intended and utilised for medical, martial and spiritual goals. In this regard, among others, it appears as strikingly similar to Chinese martial arts and self-cultivation practices in particular, and to the incorporation and dual use of vital loci—varmam, in one context, and acupuncture, acupressure, or moxibustion points in the other. It may be tempting to ask whether or not there have been historical connections between the Indian and the Chinese martial arts and healing systems, and in particular whether the Chinese concept of acupuncture points has influenced the Indian concept of vital spots (marman in Sanskrit, varmam in Tamil), or vice versa, and whether the Chinese concept of the qi has influenced the Indian concept of the vital force (prāṇa in Sanskrit, pirāṇam in Tamil) or vice versa. While the apparent similarities between this South Indian practice with Chinese concepts of qi energy, mai channels, and physical loci may be taken as an invitation to comparatively analyse South Asian and Chinese medical traditions and practices in particular, I suggest that there is more to be learned from this. Joseph Alter cautions in the introduction to his edited volume Asian Medicine and Globalization that the term ‘medicine’ itself might be not only misleading but also a distorting analytical concept in the case of therapeutic concepts in Asia. Indeed, the vital spots, and

---

67 The history of close commercial ties of the region under review here—Tamil Nadu in South India—with China’s south-eastern provinces needs to be acknowledged in this regard. See Sen 2003, pp. 227–31. Guy 2001 provides an account of a constant flow of merchants and goods—precious stones, spices and other luxuries—from the early centuries CE, especially between Tamil Nadu and south-eastern port cities in China such as Quanzhou, where Tamil merchants even established Hindu temples.

68 I do not intend to make the argument that acupuncture and varmam/marman point-systems accord with one another or even that they are necessarily related. In fact, comparing charts of marman and acupuncture points in particular is likely to show many differences with regard to locations. Other Chinese traditions of bodily spots, like that of martial traditions as given in a thirteenth-century work on forensics appear as more suited for comparison with Indian vital spots, given both traditions’ preoccupation with attacking such loci. See Lu and Needham 2002, pp. 307–13; T’u 1981. I am grateful to Vivienne Lo for pointing this out to me.
their diverse theories, which incorporate not only aspects of healing, but of apparently non-therapeutic facets, such as Yoga and martial practices, underscore this challenge. In any case, we should refrain from interpreting healing practices in too narrow a definition, and to avoid problematic, western dichotomies, such as ‘science’ vs. ‘arts’, or even ‘healing’ vs. ‘fighting’, both in South Asia and in Asia in general.

I have intended to show that it is the very combination of fighting and healing which is the basis of varmakkalai, and through which ācāns understand their practice. However, most publications, though being few and mostly in Tamil, stress either medical or martial aspects of vital spot practices, or hold that one aspect has developed first and has facilitated the evolution of the other. On the other hand, most ācāns are outspoken about the inseparability of varma maruttuvam and varma ati; that is, of treatment and martial techniques. Velayudhan, for instance, related the origin of varmakkalai as follows:

Varmakkalai means protection [kāpāttu]: this includes protection [kāppu] and self-protection [tarkāppu, ‘self-defence’]. One alone will not suffice; both have to be combined [inaicirakkunum]. (...) If one knows only one part, lives may perish. Varmakkalai is a method for taking life, but it is a method of conferring life as well [uyirai parikkak kūtiya oru murai, uyirai etukkak kūtiya oru murai].

I have shown that varmakkalai consists of massages, breathing and meditation techniques, therapeutic treatments and combat techniques—all of which address varmam loci. To use the words of Velayudhan cited above, it is indeed a method for protecting life and for taking life. Varmakkalai, comprising varma ati, or ‘hitting the vital spots’, and varma maruttuvam, ‘vital spot medicine’, highlights how closely aspects of martial art and therapeutic treatment can be interrelated. They are not opposed, but mutually supportive. Combat training in kalaris is complemented by manual therapies in vaittiyacālais, often administered to practitioners to ensure flexibility and softness of muscles and tendons, strained by exercises. Varma ati ācāns are often accomplished medical practitioners offering their services to patients. Analysing the process of learning varmakkalai, the intersection of medicine and martial art becomes apparent as, while students learn about broken bones, strains, etc. during

---

69 It may be interesting to note that, in the Indian context, the double character of harming and healing or, in other words, of destroying and (re-)creating, is reminiscent of the god Śiva, who is generally perceived as incorporating both devastating character traits and the power to create anew. According to Doniger 1973, it is precisely the joining and mastering of such apparent opposites—of creating and destroying, ascetism and eroticism—from which Śiva derives his ultimate power.

martial training, the same skills are required when dealing with patients and vice versa. Experiential learning about the body and the anatomical concepts of varmaṅkalai takes place both in a medical setting and in physical combat training. Encounters in the vaṭṭīyacakalai dispensary convey a highly developed sense of the body, which is also used for combat training. As Velayudhan put it, ‘you learn which bones break if you apply a certain amount of force and which fractures really hurt a lot’. This is crucial knowledge for any fight; and for any treatment for that matter.

However, when one takes a closer look at attempts to institutionalise, promote and spread varmaṅ series in contemporary Tamil Nadu, one finds that the amalgamation of martial and medical practices is a problematic issue and not easily transferred. Institutions of comparatively recent origin, like Siddha medical colleges, tend to fragment this combined practice. For instance, in colleges, where the education is dictated by textbooks and the medical curriculum, the martial arts components of varmaṅkalai are being omitted. It might be speculated that within academic frameworks, martial arts, Yoga, astrology and so on, suffer from their alleged ‘unscientificness’, which inhibits them from being paired with therapeutic practices. Whereas the kalari and the vaṭṭīyacakalai are closely interrelated institutions, which require each other’s existence in the practices of hereditary acāṅs, they pertain to clearly demarcated concepts in modern educational imaginings, which draw a definite boundary between science and arts. This is a demarcation of practices and objects, which has affected the framework of modern education institutions as well, classifying some of its objects as science and others as arts, but never as coinciding or as applying to both.71

I would like to suggest that an academic dichotomy between (healing) science and (martial) arts, together with its corresponding taxonomies, have ensured distortions in the study of medical and martial arts in South Asia. Often, both in martial arts literature and in public discourse, it is alleged that India has been the cradle of martial arts that diffused to other parts of the world, to China and Japan in particular.72 However, contemporary India is not as closely associated with combat sports as are East and South East Asia. With the exception of kalarippayattu, martial arts and India are not intimately

---

72 Payne 1981, p. 5; Varghese 2003. Both regional traditions in China and in India as well as scholarly literature hold that Bodhidharma or Ta-Mo (Phu-Thi-Ta-Mo), the semi-legendary monk and patriarch of ch’an meditation (Japanese zen, Sanskrit dhyāna), who was, according to some accounts, a south Indian prince or Buddhist monk, divulged his expertise of martial (and medical?) skills upon travelling to China, where he is believed to have taught monks at the Shaolin Ssu monastery. See Lu and Needham 2002, p. 305; Faure 1986.
connected in the popular mind. Of course, this does not mean that there is not a rich and varied tradition of martial practices in South Asia. Different regions display varying martial practices and have been the subject of scholarly research.\(^{73}\) However, Zarrilli is right in noting that Indian martial arts are ‘founded on a set of fundamental cultural assumptions about the body-mind relationship and health and well-being that are similar to the assumptions underlying yoga and Ayurveda’, therefore calling kalarippayattu a ‘martial/medical/meditation discipline’.\(^{74}\) It might be argued that in South Asia, martial practices have seldom been practised as martial arts alone. However, on those rare occasions when they have been addressed by the scholarly literature, this has been done by considering their combative, performative or ritualistic aspects,\(^{75}\) but not their therapeutic dimension, for instance. This might well be a reason why the idea of martial arts in general imagination is not connected to India.

In the same way, the analysis of healing, which has hitherto tended to overlook performative aspects and physical exercises, such as those described in this paper, is equally distorted, possibly because these correspond to ‘arts’, as defined by modern taxonomies and curricula and, therefore, do not square easily with healing ‘sciences’. Nevertheless, the striking involvement of many manual medical practitioners, such as ‘bonesetters’, with martial traditions in India,\(^{76}\) and the apparently close connection of ayurvedic practice with dance and theatre performances in Kerala, for instance,\(^{77}\) should sound a note of caution in regard to a temptation to apply rigid dichotomies to Indian traditions. I would argue that distinctions between arts and science in South Asian culture have only a recent footing. This is highlighted by varmakkalai, which is as much an art as it is a science: A healing art/science and a fighting art/science.

References


\(^{73}\) Dutta 2006; Alter 1992a; 1992b. See also Staal 1993.

\(^{74}\) Zarrilli 2005, p. 20.

\(^{75}\) Jones 2002, p. xiii.

\(^{76}\) Lambert 1995.

\(^{77}\) P. S. Varier, founder of the Kottakal Arya Vaidyasala, started a dance and theatre group, run by employees of his enterprise at the beginning of the twentieth century, which still functions today. See Varier 2002. With this, Varier seems to have continued a long tradition of medicine and performing arts.
Irājēntiran, T. 2006, Varmanum tatāvumururai ariviyalum ['varmam and massage science'], Mūlaccal: Teñral Patippakkam.
——. 2000, Varmayuttam ['vital spot combat'], Chennai: Kumaraṇ patippakkam.


Varmakkalai not dated, in Mariyajōcap, A. Varmak kāṇṇāti—500: miḻamum uraiyum [‘500 verses of the mirror of vital spots: source text and commentary’], Maṇḍilakkarai: Muttu miḻakam.


