

Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund Report

By Kamala Devam

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Project Summary:

A month-long residential course in the ancient South Indian martial art of [kalaripayattu](#)

06 June – 03 July, 2019

Training twice a day in group and private classes, 6 days/week for 4 weeks. Included daily yoga/meditation, Ayurvedic diet and philosophy/meditation classes.

Held at the [Kalari Gurukulam](#) Institute in Chikkagubbi, a village on the outskirts of Bangalore, Karnataka, South India.

Directed by Guru Ranjan Mullaratt and assistant teacher Shiny Mullaratt

How well the purpose of my project was achieved:

My purpose in engaging in this one-month-long immersive course in kalaripayattu martial arts (“kalari” for short) was to continue my study of the form I started six years ago with a former student of my recent teacher, Ranjan Mullaratt. In 2013, I learned the basics of this martial art from my Bangalore-native friend Veena Basavarajaiah in order to take over teaching some of her classes to the undergraduate dance degree students at the University of East London. After she left, I was offered a role as a Visiting Lecturer there myself, teaching my primary dance form Bharatanatyam alongside the basics of kalari. My knowledge of these basics has allowed me to teach not only at UEL, but in the U.S. when I return annually to visit my family, and as a guest teacher to different dance organisations and companies abroad. The form has also given me inspiration as a choreographer, and in 2016 I created a piece on an urban dance artist and UEL graduate Kamila Lewandowska called *Babushka vs. Renaissance Man*, working with the vocabularies of kalari and popping. This piece went on to tour the UK in my dance company, Kamala Devam Company’s, first tour last year, supported by Arts Council England.

Over the last few years, I felt the limitations of my knowledge base in kalaripayattu and knew that if I had repeat students, I wouldn’t be able to offer them much more than I myself knew. I also knew there was so much more kalari had to offer my choreographic curiosities as well, but I was limited in my knowledge of the more dance-like movements of its lexicon. Thus, I decided to embark on a month-long beginner’s course to not only brush up on the accuracy of the techniques I learned from Veena, but to expand my knowledge base to give me more to offer in my classes and more to work with in my own choreographic research.

The result of what I learned on the course was much more than just kalaripayattu technique; I was living the “kalari way of life”. (I’ll expand more on this later.) My training required me to start from the very beginning again, but this time there were many small (and large) differences in Veena and my teachers’ techniques. In speaking to Veena on my

days off from training, she told me that she herself had learned how I was being taught, but taught me variations on the original techniques to suit the context of being used and inhabited by the dancing body. This was confusing for me. On this course I was learning a traditional way of moving; re-learning what I knew before and yes, going on to learn new things... but how I'm going to present this knowledge to dance students, I have yet to figure out. I will need to decide if I adapt the traditional exercises like Veena did to fit the dancer's bodies and the needs of the course, or teach the exercises as they were taught to me traditionally, and give the students the power to be creative with them. Perhaps it will depend on the context and be different for different circumstances. More research and thought are required.

Choreographically, I felt I was just beginning to learn sequences and jumps at the end of the course which I could relate more to my creative interests and dance language development. However, my body was certainly ready to rest at the end of the month; I couldn't have continued so intensely for much longer as, despite constant massage and stretching, I was working with consistent right knee pain. Now I look forward to working creatively with what I've learned so far. That is, after much revision and practice!

Particular highlights in my travels:

Living in the country landscape outside Bangalore; being in a warm environment where my body felt easy to move; eating clean, flavourful, freshly-prepared food every day; not having to cook or clean dishes!; feeling emotionally grounded in the mornings by not drinking stimulants and doing yoga; the experience of training in the kalari (our training enclosure dug 4 feet down into the red earth) lit only by wick lamps during group class when there were power outages (the fire would cast animal-like shadows on the red walls and the only sounds would be that of our sweaty grunting); living amongst mango trees and eating juicy, sweet mangoes every day!; unexpectedly teaching my own dance company workshop to contemporary dancers in Bangalore the day I finished my training, before flying home; my teachers and the people I met during my training: kind, hard-working and easy to relate to despite our cultural disparities and expectations.

Suggestions which could help future Awardees:

1. If you're engaging in a residential course, ask a lot of practical questions about the details of your course and daily routine, so you have a mental picture of what to expect before you embark. Knowing my teacher had a mosquito net over my bed before I got there meant I slept soundly at night, which I really needed for my training. But not knowing that I wasn't allowed coffee in my diet was really difficult at the beginning and I should've asked about the particulars of the diet I would be on.
2. Don't feel the pressure to post all the time about your project experience on social media. Take videos and photos when you remember to, but allow yourself to be present to every day while you're there. It's a precious experience, so be aware and

enjoy as much as you can of every moment, even when those moments are challenging.

Plans to share information about my project with others:

I've just sent out my latest seasonal Kamala Devam Company newsletter with news of this summer (2019), which included describing my experience studying kalaripayattu in India. I included links to Ranjan sir's school Kalari Gurukulam and photos I took during my training, as well as a link to follow my journey on my company Instagram page for more details and videos. I also included a post on my LUTSF award with a link to the LUTSF application webpage to spread the word about applying for the award to my company followers.

Here is a link to see that newsletter: <https://mailchi.mp/55f3148798e1/kdc-summer-news>

And of course, I'll be sharing the experience of my intensive study with anyone who I share my kalaripayattu knowledge with in the future: my dance degree students at the University of East London, the children and adults I teach annually in California through the *DanceVersity: World Dance for Youth* programme, my company dancers, young dancers I mentor, and through my teaching as a guest artist and speaker in the UK and abroad.

Description of my project; reflections on the impact of my journey on me both personally and professionally; outcomes, conclusions, recommendations:

As I mentioned in the project summary, martial arts training was only a part of what I experienced as a residential student on the course. My daily routine consisted of:

5:30am: Wake up!

6:00 – 7:00am: Yoga routine taught to me by Ranjan's wife and student Shiny Mullaratt based on the chakras. Involved holding positions for 60 secs each or doing 60 repetitions of specific movements.

7:00 – 8:00am: I did my own dance and yoga stretches and pressure-point releases (foam roller, tennis ball, etc)

8:00 – 8:20am: Eat a plate of fresh fruit

8:20 – 8:30am: Slather myself with Ayurvedic oil and dress for training

8:30 – 8:40am: Walk to the kalari (2 mins down the road from my guest house)

8:40 – 10:30am: Kalaripayattu training #1 with Shiny. (One-on-one Tues/Thurs/Fri/Sat and in a group ladies' class on Mon/Wed). I would unlock the kalari, ring the overhead bell, sweep the dirt floor, clean the shrine, light the lamp, pick and put flowers on the shrine and on really dusty days, scatter a bucket of water over the earth of the kalari for a cleaner practice. I considered this part of my warmup. Then I would warmup properly for another 15 mins. Shiny would start training by revising all I knew, then she would teach me a few more new exercises in each of the categories I was studying (i.e. kicks, jumps, animal movements, short stick, etc.) Meditation and stretching would be incorporated between some exercises. Ranjan sir, my main kalari guru, would come in for 15 mins or so of the

training and see what Shiny had taught me and adjust things or re-teach the steps to me in a different way. Sometimes he would teach us both something new.

10:30 – 10:45am: Stretching

10:45 – 11:00am: Lock up the kalari and go up to their house above to drink a fresh Ayurvedic juice. They made different ones every day - some based on gooseberries, some on coconut milk and sesame seeds. Delicious and very refreshing!

11:00am – 12:30pm: Wash the red mud off me and do chores (usually handwashing clothes for the next day) if I could stay awake. Often I would pass out from exhaustion.

12:30 – 13:00: Lunch! I would go back to my teachers' house above the kalari to eat all my meals. I was the only residential student for the majority of the month, so I always ate alone. I was on a strict Ayurvedic diet, which meant along with no coffee or tea, there was no dairy products, no spice, no water before, during or after meals, no refined sugar and no fried foods. Except for the restriction on coffee, this was basically my diet in London, so generally I loved the food prepared for me. As Ranjan and his family are from the south Indian state of Kerala (the state where kalaripayattu primarily originated) and Kerala is known for its coconut palms, most of the food was coconut-based which I loved!

13:00 – 16:00 (or 18:00): My free time. Usually a nap after lunch to avoid the hottest part of the day. Then grant writing, other company administrative work or more hand-washing my clothes (which was a workout in itself).

16:00 – 16:30 (or 18:00-18:30): Pre-training stretching and oil application. Dress for training. (Mon/Wed/Fri/Sat) 16:30 – 18:30: Kalaripayattu training #2. Training one-on-one again. I would start on my own practicing what I learned that morning and Shiny would join me later. Ranjan would often join towards the end of the training for 15 mins and depart, leaving Shiny and I to stretch together.

OR

(Tues/Thurs) 18:30 – 20:30: I would join the school's adult group class. Ranjan sir would train us all in kicks together at the beginning, squeezing up to 20 people in 1-2 lines kicking across the narrow kalari. Then for the next hour and half, we would train in our individual exercises until weapon training came in. Then we would pair up to practice the various hand-to-hand combat, short stick, long stick or metal weapon sequences. Class would always end with personal stretching and meditation and each person would depart on their own time, after the ritual touching of Ranjan's sir feet.

18:30 – 19:30 (or 20:30 – 21:00): Wash red mud off me again, hang filthy clothes to dry

19:30 – 20:00 (21:00 – 21:30): Dinner at my teachers' house

22:00: Crash into bed... and prepare to do it all again the next day!

The personal impact of my training with Ranjan sir and Shiny was profound. Ranjan was continually telling me my body was too rigid and tense, reminding me to relax in my practice. He said that according to Ayurvedic philosophy, I had too much *pitta* or fire in my system. I consider my virtues as a human and artist to be my strength, confidence and clarity in my expression, sometimes at the cost of how I actually feel. His teaching exposed my insecurities and gave me permission to be vulnerable and unknowing, particularly in his lessons on moving from the heart chakra (I often felt on the verge of tears). This theme was expanded on in our philosophy and meditation classes when he talked about being generous in life and giving what you had without thought of reward. Both Ranjan and Shiny's teaching styles were gentle, but Ranjan could be terrifying when he wanted to make an impact on a student, so I approached him with humility and took his instruction and

feedback seriously. There was no fooling Ranjan sir; he knew you better than you knew yourself.

Impacting me both personally and professionally, Ranjan showed me the value of moving in different states of being as well as knowing where my movement was coming from, i.e. the chakra source and intention of my energy. Taken down to its very essence, my kalari practice taught me how to focus and not be distracted by pain, tediousness or mental gibberish. I often felt guilty that I wasn't enjoying the training more at times. I attributed this to suffering with a knee injury through most of the month, but I realised looking back that it's often my connection to music that gives me a sense of joy and positivity amidst difficult physical training. This was a relieving and important realisation for me to have: that first and foremost, I still identify myself as a dancer, and music is integral to my practice.

Professionally, my study gave me another way of approaching my teaching of kalari: with an emphasis on the movers' intention instead of how accurately one can execute the movements. It also gave me ideas for how I want to approach creative tasks for a new company piece I'm researching this summer on the concept of Centricity: starting research with meditations that bring energy back to the chakras (energy centres) and looking at how movement intention originates from them.

The experience of studying kalaripayattu with Ranjan and Shiny at Kalari Gurukulam has been life-changing for me. I struggle now to incorporate daily habits I had there into my random, freelance-artist-lifestyle here in London. However, I really look forward to seeing how my learnings will translate and express themselves in the studio in the months to come, through my body and the bodies and minds of others. Kalaripayattu is a life-long study. In this context I don't propose to know anything, even after my studies this summer, but I think it's important to share what I've learned with my greater community because the physical, emotional and spiritual benefits of even the fundamentals of the form are so profound. If I can offer even a glimpse into "the kalari way of life" to the people around me, then that expands their knowledge and hopefully inspires them in the way it's inspired me: to be a more centred and generous human being.