



the healing art of kalari

the grace of oil massage on straw mats awakens the circulation of prana

story by dearbhla kelly photos by amir magal

NEARLY NAKED, SITTING A STRAW MAT in a sparsely furnished room in Kannur, Kerala, simultaneously vulnerable, curious and expectant, I waited for my first treatment session to begin.

I had traveled half-way around the world to Kerala to receive Kalari treatment, the initial entrée for many into *Kalarippayattu*, an ancient martial art developed in Kerala guided by Ayurvedic principles. Treatment is administered by the Gurukkal (the senior-most teacher and overseer of the Kalari school) and advanced practitioners, who are highly skilled martial artists and masterful massage therapists, physiotherapists and neurologists with a deep understanding of anatomy and the subtle body. They are adept at controlling the flow of *prana* (vital life-force) in their bodies and able to channel this energy through the hands while giving massage.

The flow of *prana* through this treatment is done by direct manipulation of the body via oil massage and application of hot medicinal oils (*kili*). Understanding the energetic body and its system of nadis, the energy channels through which *prana* flows is fundamental to creating balance. Most important here is the *prana* of *vyana vayu*, which governs the circulation of the entire body and manages the functioning of the nervous system.

The marma points are found at points of intersection of the *nadis* and the skin itself is a vast *marma* zone, thus Kalari therapy, which includes *marma* therapy, treats dis-ease and ailments by stimulating the flow of *vyana vayu* through touch, the skin naturally being the place of contact. When the flow of *vyana vayu* is disturbed *vata* (the air humour) is aggravated. Whenever there is a *marma* injury, *vata* is disturbed. Wherever there is pain, *vata* is disturbed. This disturbance can cause anxiety, insomnia, agitation, irritation, hypersensitivity, ex-

cessive dryness and other related problems. Disturbance or provocation of *vata* can be the result of injury, trauma (including emotional trauma), weakness or debilitation in the tissues, exhaustion, overwork or stress or restrictions in movement and the free flow of energy in the body. The imbalance can sit beneath the surface, not revealing its nature for years or even decades. For example, someone sustaining a head injury may develop asthma or bronchitis after thirty years.

Every function of the body is dependent on the condition of *vata* and in Ayurveda, *vata* must first be brought under control. The massage in Kalari treatments unblock restricted channels allowing *vata* to course freely through the *nadis*.

My doorway to receiving Kalari treatment was an act of grace. Several years ago I was lucky enough to attend a Kalari workshop with Gerhard Schmid, a senior Kalari student from Hamburg, Germany. He noticed and asked me about the misalignment of my skeleton. After hearing that I'd sustained multiple fractures in a severe car accident when I was nineteen, sixteen years previously, he suggested that Kalari could help and advised me to spend a month with his teacher, Sherifka. He also said that it would help pacify my (often-aggravated) *vata*. I was intrigued and encouraged. Gerhard was the first to suggest that my post-accident lopsidedness could be reversed; over the years it seemed to become progressively worse. To put things in perspective: the aforementioned car accident left me with a fractured skull, five broken ribs, a punctured lung, smashed elbow, broken humerus and clavicle (all on the left side) along with multiple cuts, severe bruising and swelling. Although I healed successfully and underwent physical therapy, my left shoulder sloped and drooped forward and over the years I developed a slight scolio-