

PHILLIP ZARRILLI'S SUMMER TRAINING 2011

Tray Wilson

Context

This first-person account explores the psychophysical training of Phillip Zarrilli during a week-long intensive training and teaching seminar held in August 2011. This training took place at Zarrilli's home and studio in Llanarth, Wales. Zarrilli's training incorporates *kalaripayattu*,¹ taiqiquan, and hatha yoga. Zarrilli has written extensively about these disciplines and their application for actor training (2009, 2002). My own experience of working with Zarrilli began in 1995 when I attended a ten-day intensive workshop at the University of Aberystwyth organised by the Centre for Performance Research. Since that initial workshop, I have attended a number of workshops in the UK and travelled to Madison, USA to carry out further practical and theoretical research into his practice. In 1997 I began teaching some of Zarrilli's training to undergraduate students and since then his practice has greatly informed my teaching practice as a University lecturer,² and my own training as a performer.

Each year (since 2001), Zarrilli has invited participants to attend his Summer School Intensives. The workshops start with a beginner's week, running through to more intensive training for more advanced students. In 2011, Zarrilli invited a small number of advanced students to attend a teaching seminar alongside the training in order to share knowledge and to discuss pedagogy. There were seven participants in total who had travelled from Spain,

¹ *Kalaripayattu* is an ancient Indian martial art originating from Kerala around the twelfth century A.D. This system of training contains elements of all-Indian sciences of War (Dhanur Veda) and medicine (Ayurveda). The form contains many elements such as physical training, complete fully-body massage, and weapons practice. The physical training incorporates body poses (defined by the use of animal names such as *the elephant, the horse, the cat*), leg exercises, steps and jumps. These are explored in combinations through the practice of sequences called *meipayatt* (individual body sequences). As the student progresses, they are introduced to a number of weapons beginning with the staff, then the short stick, *otta* (curved practice 'sword'), spear, sword and shield, spear versus sword and shield, *urumi* (flexible sword), and finally unarmed combat (Zarrilli 1979).

² For a further exploration into the teaching of *kalaripayattu* and other Asian forms of training in higher education, see the article by Jerri Daboo (Daboo 2009).

Austria, Korea, Mexico, Canada and the UK. All of the participants stayed on site in Zarrilli's home or nearby in a holiday chalet. The training and seminars took place between 9am and 6pm each day, Sunday through to Friday, with a half-day on Wednesday. The participants shared meal times together and helped out with the cooking and cleaning.

The training takes place in an out building which has been converted into a *kalari*³ with a pounded mud floor and bare stone walls. In each corner of the space hangs a brass oil lamp. In the top left hand corner stands another lamp and the *puttara*, a seven tiered platform built from the earth. When the training is about to begin a small wooden stool is placed next to the *puttara* representing Zarrilli's authority to teach *kalarippayattu*, and the lineage of teachers, passed down to him from his teacher Govindankutty Nayar. In the left hand wall is a small alcove inside which is placed another smaller lamp and various icons representative of a number of religions.

Although the *kalari* is by no means a 'neutral' space, Zarrilli does not encourage a specific spiritual 'reading' of the work (Zarrilli 2009:212). Instead he offers the possibility for the student to engage in extra-daily practices in a serious, focussed and disciplined way providing simple rituals which help to open up the possibility for a much deeper and more reflective relationship between the doer and the work. Zarrilli's practice creates the possibility for me to engage deeply with a process of cultivation - through a disciplining of my body and mind. I am encouraged to journey deeper into the practice through repetition which in turn enables me to discover more about myself. These discoveries include knowledge about my physical capabilities, and my current limitations, my level of focus and awareness, my internal awareness of energy, breath, and impulses, and my deepening relationship of the practice and its evolving effect on my being. This total engagement in a practice, through discipline and commitment, which encourages reflection and cultivation, is, to me, a spiritual process. It leads me to discover more than is normally available to me in my everyday existence.

In 1999, my spiritual explorations took a more specific path when I became a Christian. As I have progressed further with this work alongside this specific spiritual path, I have found the possibility to encounter not only myself more deeply but also to search for a stronger encounter with God. As a Christian, I believe that through the Holy Spirit we have the

³ A *kalari* is the traditional space specifically designed and designated for the practice of *kalarippayattu* and its related practices. For more information about the specific dimensions and purpose of the space see Zarrilli 2000

potential to be in constant communion with God. I carry out the same practice and rituals, with this sense of connectedness, but the structures of this highly disciplined and cultivating practice enhance my somatic awareness, thereby increasing the extent of my awareness and the possibility for more intimacy with God.

For the purpose of this account, I will explore my experience of working within a specific *kalaripayattu* exercise sequence called the *varnakum*. This is a form of salutation involving a specific use of the bodymind. In Zarrilli's teaching of this form to western students, there are a number of tasks which are being explored simultaneously; specific use of the body, specific use of the breath in coordination with movement, specific points of external focus, and a directed awareness of internal processes such as breath, energy, and impulses⁴.

First Person Account

Just by entering into the space, memories are triggered by the smell of the earth floor, the incense, the lamps; it is as if the here and now reconnects with my experiences of this space and this work in the past. The space between now and my present state, and that of this past experience, thins and I can easily transpose between these two states. I feel the rough texture of the natural stone walls and remember the times when through tiredness and lack of balance I have reached out to steady myself. I feel the smoothness of the mud floor beneath my bare feet and cringe as I am reminded of the times when I have dug my big toe into the soil whilst trying too hard to execute a kick. These memories are physical reactions which reverberate within my body: I can still feel the impact of the floor through my toe and its effect on the rest of my body and my balance, the smarting feeling that quickly follows and stays for a while. I recall the intensity of the training, the sweat rising from drenched tee shirts creating a mist above the head of each participant. Even in my clean dry training clothes, having just arrived in the space, I can sense the clear journey ahead that will lead me back to that intensity, energy and sweat. In amongst these memories and sensations which flood my being I also sense the silence and calm that is evoked through my associations of this space and the work. A peace that comes from entering into a relationship with the work, and being able to leave everything else outside of the space; in here there is a specific way of being, a specific way of using my body, a specific way of disciplining my mind. Through this

⁴ For a more external perspective of Zarrilli's practice with students, see Edwin Creely's ethno-phenomenological approach (Creely 2010)

specificity I am freed from all other distractions and concerns as my tasks are clear and precise.

Having completed the yoga exercises and some of the initial *kalarippayattu* animal poses, it is time to begin the first salutation exercise. Standing amongst others in the space, all facing towards the top end of the *kalari*, I wait for the first verbal instruction from Phillip to begin the *varnakum*. I am already reminding myself through a silent mantra to open my awareness out into the space, to the others, to my feet, to my breath... I sense the floor through the soles of my feet and through the use of my imagination I feel the sensation of water rushing up from the earth through my feet and throughout my body, coming out through the top of my head, through my arms and out through my fingers. This is not just an image which I construct in my mind, this is a visceral sensation of liquid surging through my body. I experience it as a palpable force which I can either block or release depending on the positioning of my body. Since the optimum state here is for release through specific parts of the body, I make small adjustments to enable the correct alignments which will allow the water to flow freely.

As Phillip's instruction comes, I execute the first move, a movement initiated from my centre where the impulse began. The impulse is like a spark which originates in my stomach a few centimetres below my tummy button. It is the trigger which begins the movement and results in my stepping forward with my left foot into a position called the horse. This is the start of a series of movements initiated by impulses which begin to ignite an energy and intensity which originates at my centre but travels up through my body and is directed out into the space. This energy I experience as a kind of heat and breath, not the breath of the lungs but something essential which surges through the whole body bringing life and vigour. It surges through the spaces in my body that I have already accessed through my imagining of the free flowing water; as the exercise continues the intensity of this surging increases.

Following the rhythm that Phillip has set, I execute each movement in coordination with each inhalation and exhalation. I use the regular rhythmic pattern of my breath to guide the speed at which I execute each movement, trying to complete each movement in the exact time that it takes to complete the full inhalation or exhalation of breath. This directed use of my breath, steady and consistent, somehow helps me to control and regulate the flow of the energy. My highly developed awareness of the breath and its journey inside my body, through my nose

and down into my lungs, and then back out of my nose and into the spaces outside my physical body, has helped to map out a territory which transcends a sense of the internal and the external as separate or somehow divided. It is through this new territory that I direct my energy so that from my centre it can travel through and out of my body in any direction that I choose. For this slow and controlled version of the *varnakum*, the energy is directed in highly precise ways through specific parts of the body, the hands, the feet, the elbows, the top of the head. The energy becomes palpable and at times appears almost visible to the eye. It is not a question of what it is, as I experience it completely; it is a question of how best to direct and release it. As the energy penetrates through my body into the space there is an opening up of my awareness to the whole space and the space beyond the walls of the *kalari*.

This continual opening up of my awareness includes an awareness of the group, the others in the space. As I execute the *varnakum*, guided by Phillip's verbal commands, and an awareness of my own breath, I am also informed by the rhythm of the group. Working in close proximity, it is often possible to see, and to hear the breath of, those closest to you, which might help to enhance our synchrony, but this is not the purpose of our work. It is more important that we are guided by a more energetic experience of doing the exercise rather than adhering to a specific shared rhythm. This is reflected in the engaged calling through the forms which must take account of what is happening in the moment rather than the idea of a caller as conductor keeping a specific rhythm, regardless.

Once I have begun to fully engage with the exercises, there is a sense of knowing that seems to flow through my body as it begins to recognise the patterns and forms. This feels like an internal journey of fluidity and recognisable sensations within which it is easy to get immersed. I work against the pull to stay simply immersed in this internalised experience and simultaneously reengage with those tasks which help to keep my attention and focus also on that which is external. Opening my awareness up to the space, to the others, to the specifics of the form creates the possibility for further development and progression; it ties me back into the moment, into the precision of what I am doing.

As I work with more and more precision, searching for a mastery of the form and all that it entails, I find myself engaging or connecting with a stronger source of energy or drive. It is as if through the repetition of the form I find the possibility to unlock the resistances within my bodymind, and with this comes a churning of the energy as it is further released, creating more potential in the directed use of that energy. I have experienced this release in a number

of ways: through unexplained tears, an unfounded sense of anger, hysterical laughter to mention a few. But beyond these initial reactions comes a sense of going deeper into the forms, and of locating a more intense surge of energy and power through the movements. During these moments, the level of intensity is such that I cannot easily explain how this much energy can be generated and sustained without causing fatigue, but it carries me as I ride the waves.

From this place of heightened and multiple awarenesses, and the simultaneous engagement in a number of tasks, I bring into the fore my connection with God. I actively draw closer, seeking an intimacy that I might find through deep prayer or meditation. This is an embodied experience of love, warmth and acceptance and it is accompanied by a further opening up (or releasing from) my limited awareness, one which seems to transcend horizontally. I experience a part of myself moving up and out of my physical body into the space. This is not an out-of-body experience but a simultaneous experience of being fully in my body and yet able to open my awareness to a position beyond the physical. From this new position I can somehow achieve a more objective perspective of my experience and execution of the form. From this position I notice that the self-critical voices that I had not really been aware of, and that were telling me that I was 'trying too hard', or 'not working hard enough', quieten, and in this place of newfound silence I experience a deeper level of peace. This peace is like a release from egotistical fears or doubts. It feels like I have been decentred from my experience in the midst of things and I am now able to get a clearer view of my own experience from a different perspective. This is a fairly new experience for me, so I am still trying to navigate my way around what this new perspective offers, but I am excited by the possibilities.

Conclusion

As I reengage with this work in this specific location, far away from my usual patterns of life dictated by family and work, I am surprised by how much it feels like “coming home.” This has been a place where I have had important revelatory experiences – often about myself, although not exclusively. The intensity of the work that I have engaged with here through countless repetitions has created the possibility to dig so deeply into the forms and myself that I have uncovered truths that have been so valuable that they have changed not only myself in the training, or myself as a performer, but myself as a human. For me this work has always been about engaging fully through practice in order to know more about ourselves and

each other; to me this was spiritual, long before I became a Christian and my spiritual explorations took a more directed path.

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