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Gowtham P. S.

Embodied Martial and Medical Practices of South India

Abstract

In Tamil Nadu and Kerala, the martial arts practices appear under different names and emphasize different aspects according to geographical, political, and linguistic considerations. They find a place in contemporary society by addressing performative, fitness, and nationalistic and socio-political purposes. There are traditional medical systems, Siddha and Ayurveda, associated with these martial arts: many martial arts practitioners are medical practitioners as well. In my paper, I draw connections between the Siddha medical system and the above-mentioned martial systems.

The martial artist's internalized understanding of the body as malleable, able to conform to stylistic conventions, and able to navigate and exploit space to harm the opponent, I contend, must in some way affect his perspective when he takes on the role of Siddha practitioner. My paper will analyse the forms and movements as they relate to the medical systems, and the role they play in the practitioner's lived identity as well as in the collective regional identity. This paper explores the above-mentioned systems within the rationality of these systems of knowledge.

Keywords

Kalaripayat, Silambam, Varma Adi, Indian Martial Arts, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Siddha, Ayurveda

Contact

Gowtham, P. S.
Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Belgium
gp270@snu.edu.in

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1 Background

1.1 Historical Background

In the southernmost states of India, Tamil Nadu and Kerala, the martial arts practices appear under different names and emphasize different aspects according to geographical, political, and linguistic considerations. Though no longer used as combat training, they find a place in contemporary society by addressing performative, fitness, as well as nationalistic and socio-political purposes. At the same time, there are traditional medical systems, *Siddha* and *Ayurveda*, associated with these martial arts: many martial arts practitioners are medical practitioners as well. In my paper, I draw connections between the Siddha medical system and the above-mentioned martial systems.

Siddhars, the founders of Siddha medicine, are sages in Tamil tradition to whom many literary works in medicine and others art forms are attributed. The Siddhars' treatise of 96 philosophies on the working of the body (*Thonnutru-Aaru Udal Kooru Thatthuvangal*) lays the foundation for both the medical practice and *Dravidian* martial arts. The martial artist's internalized understanding of the body as malleable, able to conform to stylistic conventions, and able to navigate and exploit space to harm the opponent, I argue, must in some way affect his perspective when he takes on the role of Siddha practitioner. Therapeutic massage, for example, fulfils different purposes: to make the martial artist supple, and to stimulate the patient's vital points, or *varmam*, to facilitate healing.

On one hand this paper will analyse the forms and movements as they relate to the medical systems, and the role they play in the practitioner's lived identity as well as in the collective regional identity. On the other hand, it will explore the above mentioned systems within the rationality of these systems of knowledge.

1.2 Geographical Background

The Southern tip of India is a geographical region with diverse, sometimes competing, sometimes complementary, linguistic and cultural influences (Fig. 1). Malayalam and Tamil, the languages spoken in present-day Kerala and Tamil Nadu respectively, are linguistically related and both Malayalam and Tamil-speaking rulers reigned over the region at various times in its history. The division into two separate states in 1956 has not obliterated long-standing cultural links; rather, it has intensified areas of contestation that must be taken into consideration when discussing the martial arts.

Among practitioners in Tamil Nadu, where I did my research, there are problems of nomenclature, with no settled conventions as to what practices fall under what label. *Kalaripayat* is a twentieth century term for a distinct martial arts practice found in literature, movies and historical consciousness of Keralites (Zarrilli, 1998). *Silambam*, similarly associated in the popular imagination with Tamil Nadu, is sometimes spoken of as a separate martial technique with staffs, sometimes as part of Kalaripayat, which is distinguished from the Kerala form as Thekkan (southern) Kalaripayat, and sometimes as part of *Kuthuvarisai*, which is also sometimes referred to as *Varma Adi*, *Adi Murai*, *Varma Prayogam*, or *Varmakkalai*. Most teachers and practitioners believe that these forms are related and the myths and stories of their origin are shared. In order to avoid the complications of overlapping and confusing names, I refer to 'Dravidian martial systems' as the umbrella term, since the region is connected linguistically, speaking languages termed 'Dravidian'.

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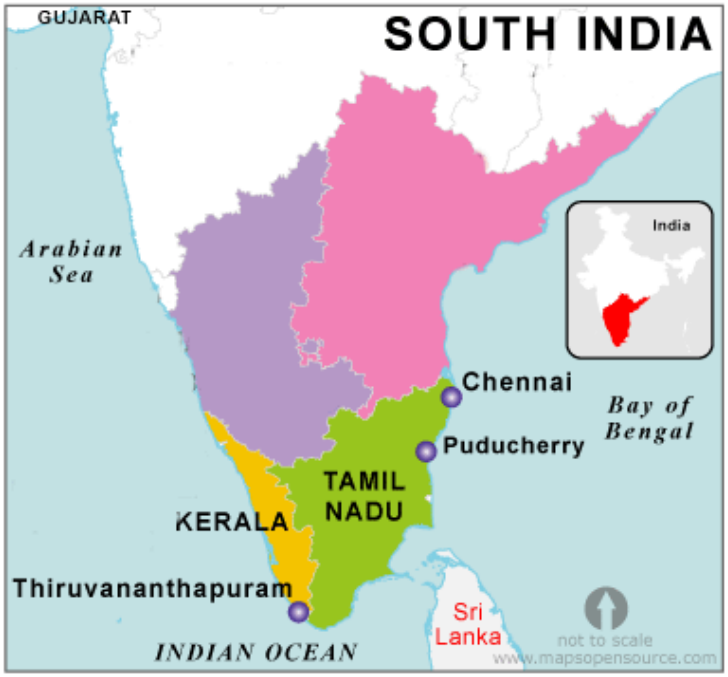

Fig. 1. Map of South India (Source: mapsopensource.com)

I am using the term Siddha doctor to refer to the medical practitioners who have obtained a degree through formal training, whereas Siddha practitioner refers to the ones who have followed the traditional way of learning under an *Asan*[1], who could even be their family member.

1.3 Background on Siddha

Siddhars form the bridge between Dravidian martial arts and medicine. Siddha is a school of philosophy prominent in Tamil Nadu, founded by religious figures that primarily worship the God Shiva. The prayers to Tamil martial arts — Silambam, Kuthu Varisai, and Southern form of Kalaripayat — begin with a salutation to the teachers, with Siddhars as the first teachers. As a native speaker of Tamil, I experienced how Siddhars are embedded in the day-to-day life of Tamils, shaping regional identity. Some people believe that they have lifetimes of more than two thousand years and that they have lived since the beginning of Tamil culture. The treatise defining Tamil grammar, *Tolkappiyam*, is attributed to a Siddhar named Tholkappiyar. Siddhars are linked more to Tamil identity than to Hinduism, which opens a window for practitioners from any religion to learn and practice Siddha medicine. My Asans continuously mention that the martial arts and the knowledge of the Siddhars is common to everyone, irrespective of their race, ethnicity, or language. In fact, some of the Asans have Christian names.

The Siddha belief is that there is a Nature that governs everything in the universe, and this nature is within the body and outside as well (*andathil ullathu pindathil, pindathil ullathu andathil, andamum pindamum ondrey*).[2]

[1] Tamil term for a teacher knowing martial arts, medicine, and spirituality, including astrology.

[2] This statement has been repeatedly published in every book on the 96 principles that I have encountered. Veeramani Asan and Kittu Asan have often repeated this statement during our discourses.

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2 Theory and Methodology

From July 2017 to August 2018, I lived in Madathukulam, a small town on the foothills of Western Ghats in Tamil Nadu. During this period, I learnt martial arts, meditation techniques, and the basics of Siddha medical practices and theory under Veeramani Asan and Krishnasamy (Kittu) Asan. I had met them through Logesh Master, who is my *senpai*.[3] I had met him during my fieldwork in the summer of 2015, and since then he has been guiding and mentoring me in martial arts and its spiritual aspects. Through the above mentioned practitioners, I visited and interacted with other Asans at their discretion. I also got some information from Vikas *Gurukkal*[4], my Kalaripayat teacher in Calicut, Kerala.

This paper is an outcome of my lived experiences as a martial arts student and trainer, and a martial massage assistant to Veeramani Asan. I used my body as a repository for storing field experiences, which I reflected and wrote down later in my room, a frequent approach in the performing arts research (Cox, 2011). I depended on "the body that writes as well as the body that performs" (ibid., p. 74). Just as my martial arts training influences my way of viewing the body, my reflections as a researcher impacts my understanding of the dynamics of the martial arts in a larger social setting, so that "each time I write and reflect, I view myself as an object while simultaneously being an active subject" (Ronai, 1995, p. 399). This approach was essential, given that the connection I am trying to make, between the massage techniques and the martial art techniques, is one that is not completely articulated, and is not available for observation.

This research is carried out within the framework of collaborative ethnography, where the relationship between the researcher and the 'informants' blurs the boundaries between the author and the 'research subject'. In negotiating these boundaries, I endeavoured to open avenues for the coproduction of knowledge, allowing it to '(move) in from the margins' through a more fluid interaction with practitioners (Denshire, 2014, p. 844). Rather than situating myself in the infamous colonial attitude of the informed, 'civilized', curious, and benevolent researcher going to a place to investigate an exotic group of people, I here serve as a collective, reflective voice for all my teachers and the members of the martial arts community, where I am 'not writing about them, but rather writing with them'. As a result of my interactions with the members of the martial arts collective body, and because I am a native, I consider myself as one of the constituents in this network of relationships, much like what Tamara Kohn calls the 'aikido body' (Kohn, 2003).

3 Findings

3.1 The 96 Principles

There are said to be 96 principles in the Siddha system of knowledge, which form the basis for medical, martial, and spiritual techniques of Tamil Nadu, and hence to understand their connections one needs to know these basics (Rajaram, 2018). Although they are termed as 'principles', they appear more religious than scientific, in the sense that the principles cannot be changed/challenged per se, however, their interpretations can be and often are contested.

[3] There is no equivalent word in English and 'senior' wouldn't capture the depth of the relationship.
[4] Synonymous to *Asan* in the Kalaripayat system of Kerala.

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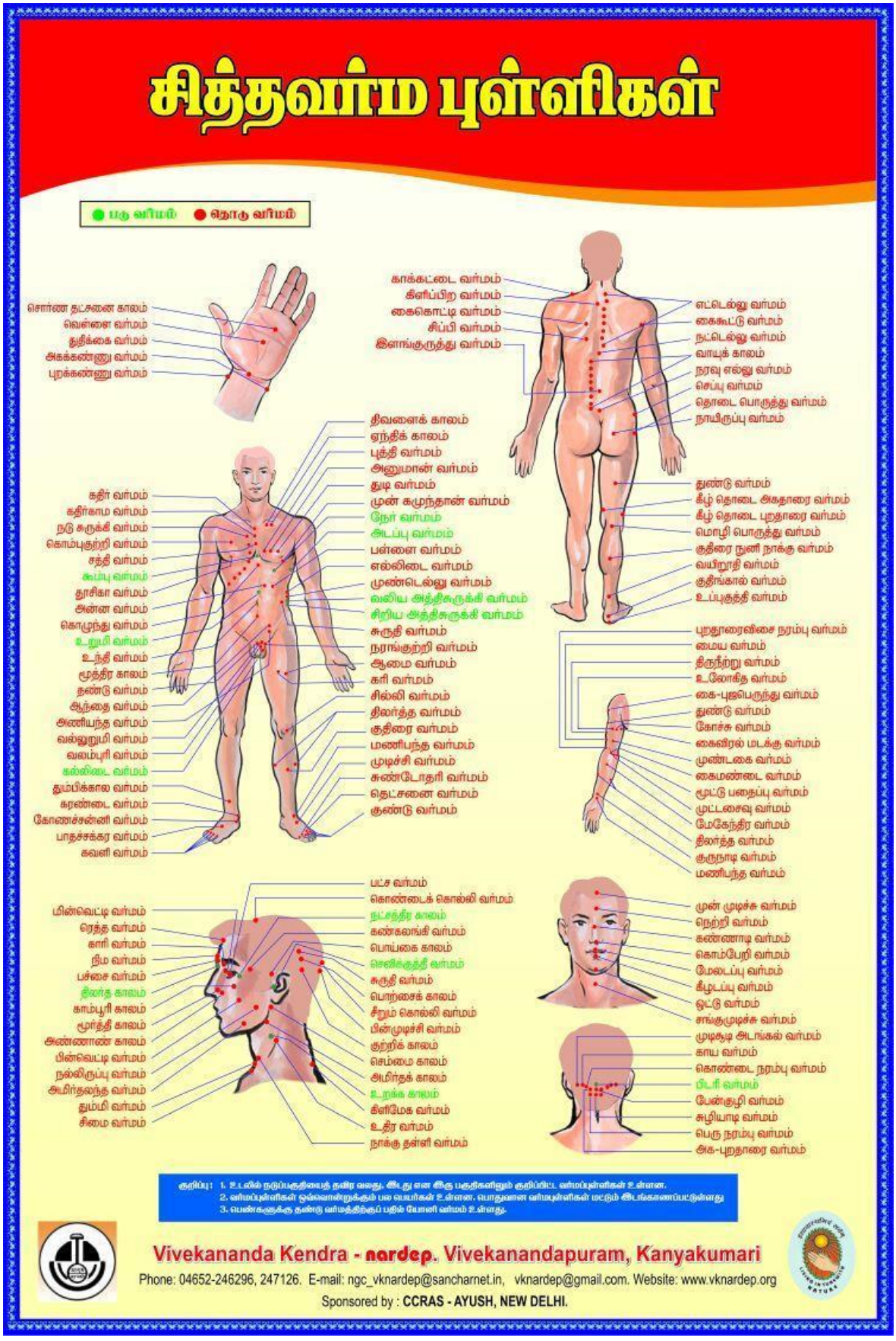

Fig. 2. Human Varma Anatomy Chart (Source: Vivekananda Kendra, Kanyakumari)

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According to these principles, the world is made up of five elements of nature, viz. liquid, earth, fire, air, space, which are also responsible for the working of the body in the forms of three humours (*dosha*). The three humours must be balanced to have a healthy body, and an imbalance between them causes disorder. This disorder could be caused by diseases, accidents, or bad diet.

Diet plays an important role in Tamil culture. There is a popular saying in Tamil: "*Unavey marunthu*", which means "Food is medicine." Kittu Asan often mentions that the medicines he gives are made of food ingredients that were once a part of the traditional diet of Tamils, but are now forgotten or being incorrectly combined. Even the word for cooking in Tamil, which is *samayal*, meaning balancing the three elements of nature in the body. An expert medical practitioner should know the basics of cooking, and a traditional cook will know how to treat at least some basic illnesses. The grammar of cooking is mentioned in a treatise attributed to Siddhars called "*Pataaptha Guna Sinthaamani*" (A gem of 10 characteristics [of food]).

The 96 philosophies are used in Varmam, "a medically [and martially] relevant anatomical concept" (Sieler, 2015, p. 21), with manipulation used both for harming and healing. "These are literally 'lethal spots' or 'mortal points,' since the Sanskrit root of marman is mṛ, 'to die; causing to die'" (Sieler, 2015, p. 27). The vital energy circulates through the energy channels of the body, stopping and passing through these vital points, depending on the lunar cycle, planetary motions, and the time of the day. This circulating energy is called *saram*. As the saram circulates, during particular times certain vital points become vulnerable. This knowledge helps a martial artist as much as it helps a medical practitioner, for he could use it to attack the opponent at this vulnerable point and win the fight without much effort.

The time period, during which the vital energy is at locations in the body, where it has a beneficial effect, is known as being auspicious. I have seen my masters turning away students and patients because it was an inauspicious day. In some cases when the patients arrive later than the prescribed time, they would be turned down, with the argument that it wouldn't be possible to identify the saram in order to diagnose the patient.[5]

There are nine planetary Gods in every Shiva temple in South India. Going back to the Siddha philosophy, that the macrocosm is in the microcosm, these Gods are attributed to certain parts of the body. According to Kittu Asan, when a certain body part is not functioning properly, it would be visible in the astrological chart as a *dhosha* or malefic function in that particular planet. There are certain foods, temples, and rituals linked to each planet, and in turn to each body part. Hence by offering penance, by taking in those foods, visiting those temples, or practising the rituals, the patients would be able to 'correct' their *dhosha* and thereby heal their disease.

Here is one example of how religion, medicine, and ritual practice intersect. Lord Perumal, or Vishnu, an important god in the Hindu religion, is often depicted as sleeping on a bed of a coiled snake, above a sea with his two wives (Fig. 3). The book of poems called *Sidhambara Ragasiyam Aimbathi Ondru* (The Fifty-one Secrets of Sidhambaram), attributed to the Siddhars, explains that the image is an analogy: the sea being the urinary bladder, the snake being the intestine, the wives being the two endocrine glands, and Perumal being the liver.

[5] I have witnessed Veeramani Asan and Kittu Asan preparing medicines only during certain times on particular days considered conducive to that preparation.

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Fig. 3. The image of Perumal on the snake (Source: http://ganapati.free.fr)

There is a common practice in Tamil Hindus to not eat meat in the month of Purattaasi, which is around September/ October. It is considered to be a holy month, devoted to Lord Perumal. Kittu Asan said that during those times there would be a spike in the number of germs due to rain. Liver has to take care of defending the body, and if it is constantly engaged in digesting meat, it would not be able to contribute to the immune system. Moreover, the germs commonly spread through meat. So, to avoid weakening the immune system and to strengthen the liver, worshippers are asked to visit Perumal temples early in the morning, with an empty stomach. At the temple, they are given a solution of raw camphor, tulasi, and clover in copper vessel full of coconut water, which many medical practitioners agree is good for health. Kittu Asan believes that many religious practices such as the above example have solid medical benefits, but people follow the rituals blindly without properly understanding the underlying effect.

3.2 Martial Artists as Medical Practitioners

My masters relate to this story as an important element in the evolution of Dravidian martial and medical practices: as people started fighting amongst each other, they developed fighting techniques which they passed on to the next generation. However, while undergoing training and also in battles, one is bound to get injured. Therefore, the student, in order to become a teacher, had to learn medicine to heal his students. However, once the student acquires vast medical and martial knowledge, he may become arrogant, which would eventually lead to his downfall. The teacher therefore teaches meditation techniques, which are related to the Siddha life philosophy of surrendering to Nature or Supreme Logos, or to his teacher, who is a manifestation of all the past teachers and the Supreme itself.[6]

Both Veeramani Asan and Kittu Asan do not advertise themselves as medical practitioners.[7] In discussion with Vikas Gurukkal, he said that he was not allowed to advertise himself as a

[6] Personal communication between myself and my masters.

[7] Video showing the layout of Bhagat Singh Martial Arts Association's kalari (practice ground): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xm7QfyoVoyU. Veeramani Asan teaches the students, looks at his patients in his clinic adjacent to the kalari, and then returns to correct the students.

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medical practitioner because he lacks proper institutionalized training and the necessary diploma, and to do so would be a crime in Kerala. On paper, he is hired as a consultant by Sahana, his wife, who is an Ayurveda doctor (who studied in an institution). However, people would come only to consult him. Though Vikas Gurukkal can treat his students, he believes that by tradition he is not allowed to treat others. But it could have been different in the past, when "several mutually interacting layers of medical knowledge and practice" were allowed to co-exist, the Asans would have treated patients other than their students (Sieler, 2015, p. 56).

The integration of the martial, medical, and spiritual is not unique to Indian martial art systems, being a feature of Chinese, Japanese, and other Southeast Asian martial art systems as well. It is interesting to note that even in Western medicine, many important and widely used techniques were developed in battlefields (Chatfield-Ball et al., 2015).

My masters insist everybody should learn Kalaripayat before learning the Kalari massage. However, Veeramani Asan has conducted Kalari massage workshops where he taught people who had no prior training in Kalaripayat. He said that he had to do it since many people did not have the time nor patience to learn both the martial art and the massage. He stressed, however, that nobody can fully comprehend the massage without the knowledge of Kalaripayat. This only made sense to me when I started assisting my master in his massage treatments. Each movement that we did was related to the martial movements that we practiced earlier. The embodied knowledge of Kalaripayat helped me move more efficiently. The massage strengthens the fingers and forearms to a great extent, which again adds to combat skills. Sometimes in my practice sessions, I would accidentally hit my partner's varma point while the master wouldn't have revealed that knowledge to me. Only later my teachers explained to me that it was the result of the kinaesthetic knowledge of vital points in the massage being transferred to combat training.

4 Conclusion

While the masters insist that every serious martial arts student must know the basics of treating simple injuries that can happen during practice, it doesn't mean that the teacher teaches the medical and spiritual aspects to every martial arts student. Depending on the age and the teacher-student relationship each teacher selects what the student is taught. There is no fixed curriculum after a certain stage, and the student might even have a say in what he wants to learn. Some students learn martial and medical techniques, some learn spiritual techniques, while few learn the basics of all.

In this paper I have tried to broaden the perspective on Dravidian martial arts, and to situate it in the imagined cosmologies of South India. As standalone practices, the martial, medical, and spiritual techniques appeal to many. But, according to my masters, it is becoming increasingly rare to find disciples that are able to dedicate their time to learning all these three aspects. However, as my own experience has shown, learning them as one integrated system has the potential to deepen our overall understanding of the body.

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