

## Healing Through Martial Arts: Reconstruction of Bodymind in Actor Training

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**Abstract:** The bodymind work is a vulnerable subject with relevance to actor training methodologies. Especially, if the body is perceived as an actor's main instrument, which is a common viewpoint in major actor training practices. Although the importance of a sound state of bodymind for acting is emphasized, studies of the bodymind treatment and recovery are rarely incorporated in actor training. This research attempts to find ways to preserve actors' physical and mental wellbeing in order to prevent collapses of their instrument – the body. Tadashi Suzuki and Phillip Zarrilli have extensively discussed the bodymind equilibrium by incorporating strong corporeal art practices into actor training. In pursuing their leads, the solution to the research problem might be found in Martial Arts practices. Sri Lankan Martial Art Angampora was examined as a potential source of development of bodymind awareness and recovery practices in actor training. The data collection was done through observation and interviewing Agam Maduwa group since they are trained in old traditions of Angampora whereby bodymind awareness elements are preserved. At the current stage of ongoing research, it has been proven that Angampora philosophy incorporates sustainable means of bodymind wellbeing and recovery practices. In addition, it was observed that practicing Angampora benefits mental and physical stability which results in decreasing the level of stress and depression. Therefore, Angampora is an exemplary Martial Art form that could serve as a role model for incorporation of wellbeing philosophy and recovery methods into actor training in order to prevent physical and mental injuries for actors.

**Key words:** acting training methodologies, martial arts, healing practices, Angampora, bodymind

### Introduction

Actor training methodologies aim to develop the actor's bodymind state. In other words, they prepare actor's instrument for performance. The term "body" as an actor's instrument is widely used in actor training practices since the body is considered the main mean of stage expression. "All performance work begins and ends in the body. When I talk of spirit or mind or feeling or psyche, I mean dimension of the body. The body is an organism of endless adaptability. A knee can think, a finger can laugh, a belly cry, a brain walk, a buttock listen" (Schechner cited in Zarrilli 2002: 14). Although the importance of a sound bodymind state for actors is evident, studies in treatment and recovery of bodymind are not broadly incorporated in actor training methodologies. Though most actor training methodologies target preparing the bodymind for the performance, post-performance bodymind rehabilitation is excluded in major actor training systems. This is the main cause of an actor's depression and professional procrastination. Acting could be physically and mentally harmful for actors. Neglecting bodymind healing and recovery aspects in actor training methodologies leads to destabilization of the actor's bodymind health which is not acceptable in professionalism in acting. "Performing has no relation to imitation, for the theatrical matter is the performer's struggle with his or her own physical and mental being" (Allain 1998: 79). To put in another way, if a violinist breaks his/her

instrument it could be substituted with another violin. On the contrary,

when an actor breaks his/her instrument the replacement is not feasible. The question of this research is how to preserve actors' physical and mental wellbeing in order to prevent their instruments' collapse. Surprisingly, an answer to this question might be found through exploration and incorporation of elements and philosophy of martial arts to actor training systems.

### **Methodology**

The research started with analysing literary texts, both in print media and on the internet, in order to understand the main principle in bodymind recovery practices and the need of its incorporation to actor training methodologies. After gathering data from literary texts, the research moved to the next phase of information collection which was directly linked to the Accelerating Higher Education Expansion and Development (AHEAD) project. Traditional martial arts training (Angampora) was examined as one of potential sources of development of bodymind awareness and recovery practices into actor training methodologies. Specially, the research investigated the practices of Angampora Traditional Sri Lanka Martial Art group led by Grand Guru Kakabushana G. Karunapala. The particular group was chosen for the research purposes as they are trained in old traditions of Angampora training which means that all bodymind awareness elements are preserved. Also, Guru Karunapala is considered as the only Angampora master in Sri Lanka whose Angampora style comes from the Alexander era. This phase of the research was carried out through practical training with an Angampora group by visiting their training session on a weekly basis. Thus, data were gathered through experiential practice, observations, semi-structured interviews and documentation of traditional Angampora martial arts training.

In addition, Angampora training sessions were documented through visual means, which were selected and analyzed in order to project Angampora recovery and bodymind wellbeing means to actor training methodologies.

### **Background and Literature Review**

In the foregoing, it was argued that existing actor training systems have not adequately addressed the bodymind healing practices. Nevertheless, the presence of some therapeutic practices can already be observed in actor training methodologies. For example, the basic body scan exercise, which is the same exercise that is common in psychotherapy sessions, is widely used during actor trainings. Such an exercise has a beneficial effect on the mental and physical state of the actor. In psychotherapy the benefits of the exercise are described as "by scanning through the whole body, the client becomes aware of the areas that experience pain or discomfort - usually parts where energy blockage or constriction occurs. Clients are also asked to attend to areas of comfort and wellness for a while in order to gain access to the innate energy of self healing" (Leung, Chan, Lee 2009: 4). The same can be said about the breathing techniques and breath meditation which are present in both acting and psychotherapy practices. However, the problem in actor training is that such therapeutic and healing methods are usually introduced as techniques, and not as a part of acting philosophy. These exercises do not aim consciously to focus on wellbeing, and as a result there is no intentionality. "Broadly defined, intentionality involves the projection of awareness, with purpose and efficacy" (Schiltz 1995: 120). As a result, these therapeutic and healing practices in actor training methodologies are not conscious ones and do not provide a proper effect, and they also neglect their major beneficial outcome. The elements of healing implementations are perceived by actors as technical exercises and the healing aspect of such practices is blurred.

That is to say, that a conscious and intentional approach to such exercises could elevate bodymind wellbeing and the recovery awareness in acting practices.

If we look at Asian actor training practices, bodymind awareness is stronger in these than in Western practices. Furthermore, Philipp Zarilli's statement shows us that bodymind treatment and its proper evaluation and understanding are presented in Asian actor training methodologies.

"To understand acting in India, one would need to understand vibratory theories of sound which provide insight into the psychophysical aspects of voicing and its metaphysical implication; yoga physiology/philosophy which provide a detailed understanding of what happens to both physical and "subtle" bodies when practicing exercise; and Ayurveda (literally, the "science of life"), the indigenous system of medicine which provides a humoral understanding of the body, physiology, and health." (Zarilli 2002: 85)

This shows us that Asian theatre and other corporeal art practices could serve as potential source of uplifting bodymind awareness in actor training methodologies. Bodymind consciousness is present in Asian arts philosophies, which is crucial for the valuation, appreciation and treatment of the body. Japanese theatre director Tadashi Suzuki uses physically challenging exercises and martial art elements within his acting system in order to promote the importance of body wellbeing. This can be seen in the example of one of his training exercises which is called lifting the heavy ladder. "Lifting the ladder teaches mental concentration. And the actors know it is dangerous and that they must prepare themselves to it. It teaches them value and protect their bodies" (Brandon 1978:40). Extreme physical exercises help to stress on the vitality of bodymind wellbeing. Therefore, martial arts could be presented as the source that introduces elements of bodymind awareness to actor training methodology.

Further, it has been proven that actor training methodology neglects the cool down part of the training which is an essential element for maintaining actors' physical and mental wellbeing. Mark Seton presented a research based on Australian Actor's Wellbeing Survey which shows the following. "Actors approach warming up with rigour and focus, carefully managing the movement into role, preparing their bodies and voices, and taking time to focus their energies, either to relax or to raise their levels of activation. In contrast, the process of moving out of performance is characterized by a diversity of predominantly informal processes, in which the transition is rarely dealt with as a book-ending cool-down counterpoint to warming-up but more frequently as an extended process of winding down"(Seton 2019:15). It might be said that such pattern of actor behavior can be observed globally and causes harm for actor's sound state. Another aspect that Seton's research brought up is that actors prefer to use alcohol drinking as the way of transition from performance to ordinary life routine. His research it showed that 52% of Australian actors would use such method to cool-down (Seton 2019: 10). "Our data suggests that one such strategy is to have a drink, as innocuous, as that formulation sounds, however, our overall findings confirm that this comes at a significant cost to an actor's overall wellbeing" (Seton 2019:16). With this in mind, the cause of actors using alcoholic drinks as a transition cure is the absence of cool down session in actor training. Dr Seton has called on actor training institutions to impose changes to actor training regarding actor's wellbeing since consequences of such mis-care could be drastic in the future. "Work practices of warming up exist, but training institutions and theatres must do more to support actors to cool-down to help them reground into everyday life and relationships". As can be seen, the problem of actor's wellbeing and neglection of cool-down has been raised in the performance field, though practical solutions have not been introduced as yet.

One of the reasons, of such dilemma is that most of the actor training institutions use actor training methodologies developed at the end of 20<sup>th</sup> century and beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> which were tailored to the needs of actors living in that period. Indeed, a rhythm and style of modern actor has changed compared to the past. A modern actor copes with more stress in relation to professional and personal life and as the result the actor training methodologies should consider such factors and tailor actor training accordingly. Prof Maxwell says that actors are highly skilled, low paid workers, who experience anxiety, stress, and, most seriously, depression at high levels. Also, research shows that actors are more vulnerable and exposed to depression. "Researchers from the University of Sydney surveyed 782 working actors and found they had significantly higher levels of depression, anxiety and stress than the general population, coupled with dangerous level of substance use". Indeed, pressure and stress levels that a modern actor faces directly affect their mental and physical wellbeing which results in weak professional skills and performance. As a result, there is an urgent need to introduce new elements to actor training which will cover actor's mental and physical wellbeing aspects. Sri Lankan traditional martial art Angampora in particular is investigated as one of such potential models. The direct translation of Angampora means "fighting with the body". Thus, knowledge of the body, its functions and its recovery are the core of this martial art. Another vital element that can be borrowed from Angampora is its healing practices which are based on the ancient medical science Ayurveda. For this reason, Angampora could be a possible source of bodymind awareness and recovery development in actor training methodologies

### **Angampora and Bodymind Wellbeing**

To demonstrate the relevance and potential use of Angampora practice in actor training methodology regarding wellbeing and recovery

aspects, it is essential to be familiar with main principles and philosophy of this martial art. Angampora is an independent and strong martial art form which alongside carries the knowledge of bodymind wellbeing and its treatment through ancient practices and spiritual connections. When describing Angampora, its practitioners usually refer to it as a game. Grand Guru Kakabushana G. Karunapala describe this sport as not a playful game or a game for pity. Angampora originates in Sri Lanka which is a Buddhist country. For this reason, as described by one of the Guru's student "*Angampora is meant ideally for the Sinhala Buddhist person to protect and preserve the temples, the dagabas, the buried, hidden treasures of this country. It is to protect country, the religion and the nationality. However now it is reducing. Now lots of people are coming in search of truth.*" As can be seen this combative art form is strongly attached to the Buddhist religion and its philosophy. It is important to remember that the main thing in Buddhist culture is to learn to meditate. Angampora promotes a sense of patience as a key element in achieving strong and sound mental and physical wellbeing. Guru says that "*the main thing is the patience for the person. Remember well, the one who has patience can take onto their body a strength they didn't have earlier. I say that. You need to have a right amount of patience. Through patience you will automatically feel like maybe you should eat this, or that, and you get that, you will be able to learn more*". Clearly, meditation practice is a part of Angampora and is present as a basis of its philosophy and training. The reason for practicing meditation is to bring the mind into one place which leads to peace of mind and increases a level of concentration. Guru Karunapala explains meditation as following "*the main thing in meditation is bringing your mind to one place. That is the main thing. If your mind is everywhere, you cannot learn anything, nor can you do anything. When we say meditation, we sit on the ground, and meditate for at least 8-10 minutes. We think, may I remember the things that I learnt here, may I*



*not forget, I think of all my teachers when I meditate. When we do this, we receive a protection, and also, we very rarely forget what we learn when we meditate. I think most of these students here have very good memory, they forget very little of what we learnt and students here I do not think that students here have any memory loss.”* Indeed, meditation puts mind in a stronger place and makes it more resilient. Also, it is believed that people who practice Angampora tend to be calmer and are able to cope with their anger and negative emotions better. The main reason for this lies in its philosophical aspects and beliefs and the way the training sessions are conducted. According to Guru *“Some people get very angry. People who do this sport/exercise do not get much angry. The nerves at the soles of the feet are massaged by the stones on the ground, and it eases the mind. With this, the anger of the individual stops completely. That is the first thing. And the body, when it functions and is bruised, it starts functioning, and that person will never get angry.”* Thus, Angampora has ability to control anger in its practices. Lisa Firestone refers to Sigmund Freud and his explanation of depression as an anger turned inwards. With this in mind, an ability to control anger might prevent or decrease a level of depression which can serve as a solution for actor’s tendency to depression.

Another key point about Angampora philosophy basis is a connectivity between human being and the Universe. People who practice such form of combative art believe that a human being has a connection to the Universe. Guru says that *“Someone who learns this sport they is able to develop strange feelings for the animals, trees, and the ground they have a connection with the environment. These feelings emerge automatically from engaging in this sport. It is from that the mind of that person gets the strength to draw the minds of other people as well. One more thing, we call it the “sestare” we do this with no footwear, and make a connection to the ground, the connectivity, earth mother. Overall, it’s a connection with the Earth and the space, and the foot connectivity,*

*the universal power. From this, we develop a connection with everything. We learn about animal posture. We learn about medicinal purposes, Ayurveda medicine, pressure points, a pressure point treatment.”* It can be said that Angampora is based on holistic approach and linkage to the environment. At the same time, it has elements of performance as they act as other means of nature which comes naturally through its practice. Also, connection with the space is vital in Angampora practices. In fact, these aspects closely resonate with main actor training principles.

It must be remembered that treatment and curing is a crucial part of Angampora training. The knowledge of traditional ancient medical treatment is passed from master to his students. If any injury occurs Angampora fighters do not require to go to a doctor since all injuries and diseases can be cured in their training base. The methods that are usually used in such treatments originate from Helavedakama which is Sri Lankan indigenous medicine. Following Guru provided examples in which scenarios curing methods are used. *“Depending on the nature of the accident, the treatment differs. Let us say someone received an electric shock. We have to lay the person on their back, there are some nerves that we have to massage, and then when we do that and raise the person up, they recover consciousness. Say someone is poisoned, we have medicines where we can make to the person vomit or make the poison ineffective. For example, if your hand is damaged there are different types of oils that can be used. And there are many people who have been cured through these medicines. We do advise them, and guru advises them on things that they should protect themselves from, types of foods to avoid, and how to protect oneself from further injury. We have medicine for everything. And also, there have been no bad incidents here up to this day. Also, when you enter the Angam Maduwa, your chance of getting injured is also low. There is a spiritual power here.”* In addition, the strong connection to the space and belief in its sacred meaning

helps to omit any injuries during the training session.

Furthermore, Angampora martial art form has a very close connection to the human body. The attention is brought to every part of a human body and teaches about its weak and strong points. In Angampora, the attacks can be deadly as the result they paralyze or kill opponent. Guru Karunapala says that *“an Angampora artist is able to dislocate our joints. This is what we have learnt through experience. For example, master is able to break a bone into three. He can break a foot into 3. If he hits a certain point, it will explode. We say that the knee has 4 eyes, 4 nerves.”* The literal translation of the word “Angampora” is “fighting with the body” hence anatomy and body structure knowledge is vital. *“Also, there is a good understanding of your bone structure and joints in the body for the student who is learning Angampora. How to identify weak points, how to treat them if anything bad happens to them, is taught in Angampora. This martial arts form provides exercises and food habits that make joints stronger. And there are certain therapeutic massages and beating techniques that help build a body. Also, there are massaging techniques for nerves. Say for example you are seated in a chair and you get a stomachache and even a stomach pain could go by touching knee or the points in a knee.”* To summarize, wellbeing of mental and physical health lies in the philosophy of Angampora and is crucial in its practice. Such form of martial art helps to develop strong and sound bodymind system as well as to prosper a connection with the environment. Also, it provides means of treatment and recovery methods which assist to maintain physical and mental health.

### **Angampora and Actor Training**

As has been said earlier, the actor’s body serves as a main instrument of stage expressiveness. With this in mind, it is important to realize that human body is a complex structure which is vulnerable and resilient at the same time. As a result, the knowledge of its functions is crucial.

However, when it comes to actor training methodologies, a knowledge of body and its function are barely introduced to its practices. On the other hand, when looking at Angampora martial art a knowledge of a body and human wellbeing is strongly present in its philosophy. Although, the Angampora is a dangerous and risky game it is shown that the tendency to injuries or self-harm is low. It is to say that even when accidents occur practitioners of such combative art form possess knowledge of self-treatment. They are trained to maintain physical and mental wellbeing in order to prevent traumas. As was explained by Guru Karunapala, everything can be cured and healed through Angampora treatment methods. In general, people who practice Angampora say that this martial art helps to support their mental and physical health. Also, it increases their level of self-confidence and positively affects their daily and professional lives. Giving these points, knowledge of self-treatment and understanding of a body is crucial to acting profession as it provides an opportunity to eliminate physical and mental disorders that actors are facing during their acting careers. Like Angampora students, actor students should obtain solid and precise knowledge of body structure. They should study to identify weak body points and methods of its treatment in order to be able to run their instruments smoothly. Apart from that they should be further introduced to exercises, therapeutic messages and food habits which benefit in building strong body. As was mentioned earlier patience is a key element in the Angampora training and such skills benefits to learning and working outcomes. Patience is developed through meditation, physical activities and connectivity to the environment, especially through connection with a ground. Thus, Angampora can serve as a guide of incorporation of physical and mental recovery and treatment elements to actor training.

With attention to the post performance phase, it should be said that cool down element is absent in majority of actor training systems. As

was discussed earlier it results in massive mental and physical issues in actor's sound. On the contrast, cool down is a natural process in Angampora training. Although, there is no separate set of exercises for cool down, practice of cooling down is essential and has solid connection with a training space in Angampora sessions. Guru explains cool down process as following *"we do the exercises, we do not stay even two minutes in one place, we have a little bit of water. We just walk around the Angam Maduwa space and automatically the body cools down. It happens through bring your mind to one place. You do not let your mind run here and there and forget the things you just learnt. But there are also massage techniques. For example, after the exercises you go through the particular massaging techniques and you are at ease afterwards"*. Thus, through Angampora training you receive an ability to calm down your mind and to cool down your body with minimum expenditure of energy. In addition, particular massaging techniques help to renew body and eradicate tension. A fusion of such Angampora principles and methods of cool down practice into actor training will provide actors with ability to bring their mind and body to one place and smoothly transit to their daily life routines with minimum stress and tension. The understanding and practice of cooling down session might prevent stressful transition between off and on stage. At the same time, it prevents body and mind from injuries. Mark Seton pointed out that in sports cool-down plays an essential part of a training and its beneficial outcomes have been vivid. "It is worth remarking that professional sports have a long embraced systematic, and frequently lengthy cooling-down processes, as a core practice, often focused on reducing levels of physiological and psychological activation" (Seton 2019: 15). Therefore, the attitude to cooling down in actor training methodologies should be as comprehensive as it is in sport practices.

Reconstruction of actor training approach is urgently required in order to maintain mental and physical wellbeing of modern actor. At the

present time actor training methodologies have not reached a level of covering all the essential aspects for actor's wellbeing and professional growth since acting philosophy and methods are comparatively young, and as a result require further refinement. As a matter of fact, an opportunity for rebuilding structure and philosophy of actor training might be achieved through incorporation of Angampora martial art form that has remained unchanged for over centuries due to its strong philosophy and well developed structure. It is believed that Angampora has been created with things in the past and with things in the future. Angampora cannot be changed and probably it should not be as it seems a perfect form of martial art that consists of vital knowledge and skills. The refinement of actor training methodologies through Angampora could cover deficits in actor training and establish new actor training philosophy which promotes mental and physical wellbeing of actor's health.

### **Discussion**

The study demonstrates a correlation between Sri Lankan Martial Art Angampora and actor training regarding philosophy of wellbeing and healing practices. In fact, actors have serious issues with mental and physical health, which is caused by disregard of recovery methods, body knowledge and cool down in actor training methodologies. It is correct to say that actor training evolved once Asian somatic and corporeal practices were introduced to it system. As a result, to enhance actor training systems as well as refer to the needs and struggles of modern actors, additional sources of Asian corporeal practices should be applied. For this reason, Sri Lankan Martial Art Angampora was chosen as one of the potential sources of actor training development. The aim of the research was to identify whether Angampora has substantial healing methods that could serve as a guide in order to maintain actor's Psychophysical system. It has been shown that Angampora philosophy and practice promotes physical and psychological stability as well as offers methods of bodymind

recovery. Precise body knowledge, meditation, healing methods, massaging techniques, connection to the environment and space promote healthy bodymind system as well as make the body resistant to stress. These aspects and practices are intentional and consciously done in Angampora training and as a result they provide beneficial outcomes which cannot be said for acting training. Ultimately, practicing Angampora tend to decrease level of anger and make people calmer which results in reduction of chances to get depression and being physically inactive. Indeed, it shows that well-structured training with emphasis on bodymind wellbeing positively affects on bodymind health and assists with efficient use of body resources. Notably, these elements and training philosophy are what actor training methodologies require in order to maintain the actor's instrument i.e. the body. Therefore, incorporation of Angampora philosophy to actor training could provide methods which will cover bodymind wellbeing aspects and will assist with healthy on and off stage transitions. Moreover, Angampora practice elements have a potential to make actor's psychophysical system stable to stress and injuries since through Angampora actors will obtain knowledge of bodymind recovery and its maintenance.

## Conclusion

The subject of mental and physical health has been playing a significant role in society over the past couple of years. However, a trend of conscious bodymind wellbeing has not influenced modern actor training methodologies yet. Every day, actors use their bodies as a professional tool which causes massive harm to the actor's emotional and physical wellbeing. The actor's body can be compared with a process of pottering or sculpting, since an actor works with a body in the same way as sculptor or potter works with clay. Body and clay are very fragile substances

which could be easily destroyed and the process of reconstruction of broken material should be meticulous and time lasting. For this reason, the subject and practices of mental and physical wellbeing and recovery should be presented at a new level in actor training methodologies. Indeed, the bodymind health awareness shift in actor training could be made through incorporation of martial arts practices and its healing philosophy. In contrast to actor training, Sri Lankan martial art form Angampora has a strong presence of bodymind recovery and injury prevention elements. Examination of Angampora showed that its training methodology has potentially beneficial sources that could be transferred and incorporated into actor training. Consequently, a next stage of the research will intend to find the way of practical use of Angampora elements in actor training in order to raise the state of bodymind awareness and prevent actor's physical and mental destruction.

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