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# LAMP IN A WINDLESS PLACE

Developing an Actor Training Methodology  
through Sri Lankan Combative Art Angampora

Issue Editors: Saumya Liyanage,  
Lyudmyla Honcharova, Marlon Ariyasinghe

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*Lamp in a Windless Place*

Developing an Actor Training Methodology through Sri Lankan Combative Art Angampora

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The illustration on the cover pages is inspired by angampora wood carving piece at the *Embekka Devalaya* and designed by Nuwan Chamika.

## A Conversation with my Body

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### 1. Preamble

I started my artistic journey learning Sri Lankan traditional dance styles when I was 10 years old. Later, I continued my education and practice as a performing arts student at the University of Colombo (undergraduate studies) and at the prestigious Chitrasena Dance Academy. The Academy's intense physical and theoretical training helped me to become a professional Kandyan dancer. While at the Academy in 2017, I had the opportunity to join a choreography camp held by the Goethe Institute in Sri Lanka. This was a turning point in my professional life as I stepped into the world of Butoh and contemporary dance for the first time. This experience was transformative as it helped me to change my understanding of the concept of dance and my body.

### 2. Codified body

When I was at choreography camp, I started questioning the norms and rigidity of my traditional dance training. The rules and routines were restrictive, and I wanted to break free to truly push the limits of my physical self and creative mind. It was about freedom. Freedom as a creator of movement and the power to shape the ineffable. I struggled as my body resisted to unshackle itself from over a decade of the rigorous conformity and cultural uniformity of Sri Lankan traditional dance. As I pushed myself to break away from this reality, something unique started to

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happen. I was listening to my body. I was talking to it. I was having a conversation with my body. It was beautiful. The space I was in did not matter – whether it was big or small – I could move in it like a bird released from a cage. It was a rebirth. I felt light as a feather.

As a traditional dancer, I wanted to look beautiful and have perfect technique. I wanted to entertain. But I was not seeing my body from within. I wasn't one with my body. I was going through the motions taught by someone else. I was a puppet. I found this lack of self-discovery in traditional dance troubling, and the choreography camp ignited a spark that propelled me on the path to enlightenment as a contemporary dancer. For the first time in my life, I asked, 'Who am I?'. I was also beginning to explore the relationship between body and space. Improvisation was meditative, and this newfound freedom as a performer fueled my creative self in delightful ways.



Figure 1: Kanchana Malshani, performing a piece titled 'See you don't see me and its double' in an empty apartment in Colombo, Sri Lanka.

Photo: Harry A. Haller, 26th August 2021.

For 17 years, my body and I have been held prisoner by the many years old cultural bulwark known as Sri Lankan traditional dance. Kandyan dance tradition is one of the most important dance traditions in Sri Lanka. Proper posture and its technique are the hallmarks of that dance tradition. I have always maintained the inherent form in Kandyan dance tradition, and my body has been trained in that form since I was a child. In traditional dance, my body has always represented the tradition of dance. My soul was confined to traditional dance

and overwhelmed my soul. As I began my journey as a contemporary dancer, I spoke to my soul. My body no longer became the agent of traditional dance but the agent of my self-expression. That is, I no longer had to dance for tradition but for myself and freedom. It is not the freedom of metaphysical existence; it is about the freedom of my life. I no longer wanted to think about how my body would represent the audience and the correct posture technique. I carried my body all over the space through my life experiences, joys, and pains. I don't want to represent dance. I want to represent what I understand as Dance. Contemporary dance and its inherent improvisational aspects set me free.

### 3. Angampora and my body

Studying the ancient Sri Lankan martial art form known as angampora reminded me of my previous life as a Kandyan dancer. Having been trained in Kandyan dance for a long time, I realized that angampora movements which were familiar to my body, embraced my body very lovingly. Every time I practiced angampora forms, my body was able to repeat the shapes and techniques without any strangeness. Some of the formal, linear, straight movements of the feet in angampora forms, like in Kandyan dance, were very close to the body. The basic foot movement in angampora is called *Adiya*, which is used to move in the space. Maintaining the straightness and linearity of the foot movements is one of the hallmarks of angampora, similar to Kandyan dance. All the hand movements in angampora are also based on the foot movement called *adiya*. Some of the linear features of angampora's hand movements were also no stranger to my body. In angampora training, I realized that the Kandyan dancer who lived in my body in the past is still alive, even though she is not involved in traditional dance today.

There are many similarities between the two forms of physical movement. Angampora was developed by men to be used in combat and as a form of exercise and general physical wellbeing. But primarily, angampora was for self-defense. Its focus is on the complete and total physical submission of an opponent. But as in Kandyan dance, the science and movement encompassed in angampora are graceful and purposeful.

Like in Kandyan dance, angampora has physical beauty, and considering angampora is a martial art, a sense of lethal beauty. angampora is not always modelled on the body of the fighter but on the location of the main organs of the opponent's body. In combat with the opponent,

the body should always be kept active, and the body should be open in all directions. During attacks and counterattacks, several simultaneous movements are released from the body in different directions and have to move not only into the fighter's space but also into the opponent's space. Opening the body to cover not only in one direction but in all directions, very fast foot and hand movements are energetically released from the fighter's body into space, and the movement patterns of those hand and foot movements travel across space and create various patterns throughout the body. Often no definite clarity can be seen in these movements, and the same ambiguity reveals the deadly and mysterious nature of angampora. Especially when engaging in martial arts, one should pay full attention to one's body, space, and all movements, and all the actions that take place there affect one's life. The combat martial art form angampora is not for entertainment but for protecting one's life from the opponent. The energy released through angampora takes on a very lethal nature as well as it provides a different definition of beauty in a way that is a sense of lethal beauty.

Like Kandyan dance, angampora has a structural basis and a rhythm. Because angampora is a form of lethal combat, it is essential for the practitioner to have a wide degree of freedom of movement and the skill to improvise, which is not possible in Kandyan dance. In combat, your opponent and his strategy will be unpredictable, and your survival depends on your skills, or more specifically, on your skills to break away from the framework of the foundational movements and improvise. For an angampora fighter to be successful, they need to harness the energy within themselves and release it outwards in one powerful and graceful motion. But traditional dancers are trained to gather the energy outside of one's physical self and channel it inside their bodies. Angampora trains the practitioner to be aware of his surroundings while intensely focusing on the situation at hand and productively harnessing the energy within to overcome a potentially deadly situation.

#### **4. Body and metaphysics**

I constantly study the relationship between mind and space. The body is a sensory object. It is the receptacle of life. I have now learned to see the outside world through this amazing organ called my body. So far, as a contemporary dancer, I have learnt to pay attention to the many millions of neurological impulses inside me and, through this process, better understand the

potential of my physical being. Humans also exist metaphysically as a collection of experiences and memories absorbed through the physical body.

When I perform improvisation or performance, I travel within myself to connect with an external reality. Here, I separate my metaphysical existence from my body. I force my mind to have no control over the movements of my limbs and the body, thereby extinguishing a formidable barrier between mind and space. I cease to exist as a human being, and I am one with the natural world. A metamorphosis from existence to nothingness.

In angampora, the metamorphosis is reversed. The martial art instils in the practitioner a heightened sense of alertness. It makes you intensely aware of a raging energy within, and you will have the power to exercise precise mental control over how that energy is channelled outside through your limbs to deadly effect. In angampora, the mind is your master, and mindfulness or living in the moment is key.

Now, the gestures and motions of angampora have become a part of my collective metaphysical existence. I feel that sometimes, angampora movements emerge from my subconscious when I am performing improvisational dance movements. The movements of angampora are a new addition to my vocabulary of motion.

## **5. Dance and Actors Lab**

I joined the AHEAD Actors Lab as a dancer. My solo performances and creations are based on varied forms of movement. There were many other dancers and actors in the Actors Lab. They were of varying skill levels, and there were very distinctive styles and qualities of movement between career dancers and actors.

But whatever their skill level and ability, the challenge in angampora is to match the energy of the opponent and eventually overcome him. This meant that every participant inside the angampora ring had to release considerable energy during sessions. I absorbed that energy through my sensory self and used that force of nature to float as light as a piece of cotton wool amongst my fellow angampora students. I was feeding off the life force released by the others in the ring with me and translating that energy to a positive mind-altering experience that gave me freedom.

The workshops provided me with an opportunity to closely study the pressure points on the body – an integral part of angampora – and their relation vis-à-vis the senses and one's physical existence. I understood that the martial art of angampora is all about using disciplined movement to destructive effect with a single-minded purpose. And for me, this aspect is the key takeaway from the Actors Lab angampora sessions. That irrespective of your training – be it as an actor or contemporary performer – understanding the ability to harness the energy within and without is essential. All of these movements simultaneously target the structure of the opponent's physical body. There is a lethal potential in angampora movements to cause harm, injury, or even death.

As a contemporary dancer, I was always interested in intensely connecting with my body. For me, angampora is not only martial arts based on the physical body but also has a deep connection with the mind. Mental concentration is an integral part of all angampora movements, and the study of angampora has great potential to deepen our understanding of the internal connection between mind and body. In angampora training, I was constantly immersed in the deep dialogue between embodying the energy of the mind and releasing that energy into the metaphysical world. That training awakened the interior of my body even more, and I observed that, as a martial art, angampora allows one to connect, and it has a great potential to feel the whole energy in the space around us at one moment around your body. It is a meditation. It is a profound dialogue between mind and body. It is an extraordinary creation of a wonderful object called the body and the power of nature.

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