Feeling is Believing

In many demonstrations of Systema principles, the work seems ‘too easy’ to be effective. Outsiders looking in can have an instinctive reaction of skepticism when observing said demonstrations, especially when viewing them on video. An accomplished practitioner of Systema appears to be calm, relaxed, and relatively unaffected by the chaos and ferocity of attacks going on all around.

When the outsider transposes themself into the same situation, a powerful internal, mental struggle ensues. The eyes are seeing X, Y and Z but a vast series of established reference points (movies, previous demonstrations, personal experience or background) are almost immediately cancelling out any sense of validity to the expression.

Their orientation to the event is off on another quadrant that prevents them from indeed “seeing” what actually goes on. The inner man is loudly proclaiming this cannot be possible because, nobody can function in this manner given this type of stimulus… nobody.

My military background is rooted in Naval Special Warfare. From an early age, I was interested in what works, not what the title was. Over time, my interest has generally gravitated toward those individuals and teams that operate on a professional basis. This is work that goes beyond self-defense or so-called street fighting. These are people who have faced, and will continue to face life-threatening situations on regular basis in wide variety of circumstances and environments. They work in teams, carry weapons and have a legitimate interest in ferreting out the real from the non-sense as the use of deadly force is always just around the corner.

On the surface, it would seem that the individuals who comprise these groups would not be easily swayed by big names, labels, over-the-top marketing and should easily be able to distinguish effective from non-effective approaches. That being said, it has been my experience that this is simply not the case. Being part of an elite Special Forces or SWAT Team does not automatically erase the powerful filters accumulated over time that any human being normally channels information through. These people are human in every sense of the word, and subject to the same pitfalls of understanding all of us face.

I would like to dedicate a bit of space exploring these drivers and why someone who sees Systema on the surface might initially have some doubts about the methodology.

New Doctrine and Ideas are always challenged and sometimes ridiculed

Although the principles of Systema have been around for quite some time and they have been refined to a high level, the entire construct is “new” to many here in the United States. We are used to seeing high-tension, high-voltage expression of martial arts from a variety of sources and those serve as the guidepost for validation or rejection of anything different. We come to believe that only blow for blow, power met with more power, aggression met with ever increasing aggression is the only viable way to solve problems in this realm of activity. In reality, this is simply not the case. In fact, it can easily be shown that “two bulls meeting in the ring, smashing horns to determine the victor”, “taking it up the middle” is counter-productive on so many levels.

As new member of any given group, you are almost automatically driven to ‘go with the program’. As a ‘new guy’, the last thing anybody wants to hear is anything coming from your brain-housing group and in many cases for good reasons. You don’t have the experience or knowledge to guide core doctrine. The danger here is that your genuine and legitimate concerns never rise to new action within the group. Things tend to remain at stasis and left alone. It takes work to unseat established patterns. If you do elect to push the matter, it can incite, emotionally driven, fever pitched arguments that rival the most heated debates. On the more diabolical side, political and financial factors often drive programs into or out of existence. Somebody’s pet perspective and selfish motivations never allow for the evaluation of any other syllabus.

When I first was exposed to Systema and started advocating it as a valid approach, I was immediately the subject of ridicule on numerous Internet martial arts forums. Without going into great detail, the core of my responses centered around the idea of stop talking about what you think you saw. Book a trip to Toronto, bring your “A” game, and bring a friend to videotape the results. To a person, these Internet warriors would not pick up the gauntlet.

“It's new, I don't' understand it, it does not jive with my pre-conceived notions and assumptions; therefore, it can’t be valid. There must be another explanation. Yes, this approach is a sham propagated by charlatans and embraced by the weak-minded. Whew, I feel better about myself!”
Unfamiliarity generates mistrusts

It is interesting to note that individuals that have been unknowingly exposed to the core concepts of Systema in an environment they are familiar with, readily accept them. When not focused on origin or pedigree or any other agenda, they easily embrace the strategies, principles and techniques simply because they make perfect logical sense and they work under resistive conditions. Oftentimes, they are surprised to find out exactly where this stuff came from!

It is interesting to note that many US Military personnel will readily accept Asian-based martial traditions although we dropped nuclear bombs on Japan, yet there is a powerful undercurrent of mistrust with our WWII ally, Russia as a result of the cold war. This uneasiness is still there and I believe it plays a factor in the cultural acceptance of Systema.

People are funny. There is a popular outdoor seafood restaurant here in the San Diego area. It’s right on the wharf overlooking the San Diego Channel with its fishing vessel, sailboats and passersby’s. It personifies the San Diego area and lifestyle. One of their most popular offerings is their Calamari sandwich. I cannot tell you how many people told me that they absolutely hate squid when I suggested it to them. Got it… I won’t order that for you but you will love the “white fish” sandwich I just ordered for you. They grind away at the sandwich, grinning from ear-to-ear at the fantastic taste. Their only regret is that I did not order them two more! When they are done licking their fingers and cleaning their face, I tell them they just had the Calamari.

“No-Pain, No Gain”

The idea that real function can be achieved by relaxing the mind and body as opposed to constantly bombarding it with more muscle tensioning exercises and inculcating animalistic aggression is foreign to many of us. Again we learn from pictures, movies, and advertising that the mind and the body must function and appear certain ways in order to be ready for combat.

Don’t get me wrong, it can be quite painful to address the tensions, fears, and injuries that reside and accumulate in our bodies, but this lack of function is not dealt with in Systema by pumping more iron, blasting mindlessly forward, grimacing more in training, or otherwise beating the mind/body into subjection as traditionally advocated by many.

Systema training treats and recognizes the mind/body/sprit connections as a cohesive and integrated unit. At the end of day, you should be a better person on multiple levels, less likely to snap at the slightest provocation. Many exercises as looked at from the outside in, are simply not understood by someone failing to investigate beyond the surface of things and therefore rejected as being valid.

“It cannot be that Easy”

Yes and No. I maintain that a professional should be constantly looking for combat efficiency and that is a never-ending journey. Professionals in any activity do, in fact, make it look “easy”. But that ease came as the result of serious dedication and an unrelenting pursuit of excellence. There will never be a substitute for constant training, discipline, dedication, searching, replacing, and refining when full function at ease is required. The true study of combatives is not something that can be achieved in a short period of time regardless of what anybody says.

But there is a harsh reality. Institutions and small units are always under the pressure of time and resource constraints, so they are easily swayed by claims of expediency. We live in an instant gratification world. Individuals within any given unit might need to know another language, drive specialized vehicles, handle certain materials, become proficient with weaponry etc. Combatives is one of many skills on the required capabilities list. So simple ABC approaches that ‘guarantee’ success are attractive and unfortunately there are those that are looking to check the box as opposed to obtaining true mastery. It becomes grab, smash, kick the groin…I understand…Let’s do it…Done.

The inner man, the driving philosophy and psychology of what you are trying to achieve is never really addressed in many of these approaches, so there is no across the board continuity or real benefits when engaging in activities not specifically related to grabbing, smashing and kicking. On the other hand, Systema is specifically designed to reach way beyond the A,B, C’s of primitive technique and becomes deeply instilled within the person. It is not easily unseated and therefore useful under a variety of stressful situations faced.
“The Real Cage”

Large numbers of groups have gotten into outwardly attractive sport-based approaches that can be demonstrated to be highly effective in relative comfort of the “Cage”. Yes, I said it, the comfort of the cage. Cage fighting is not professional work as it relates to armed teams in hostile environments and should not be confused with actual combat. There are small benefits, but the negative effects of single purpose, sport combat, outweigh those that do exist.

Some Questions:

How do you get beyond the outward easily seen and drill inward where the real function resides?
What can one gain in terms of useable, real-world function in a relatively short period of time when training time is a limiting factor?
What can be presented that will stay with the individual long after the initial training?

I wish I had the all the answers, but quite simply I don’t. It’s been a fantastic challenge to try and address these questions and more in conjunction with each group’s requirements. I do believe the time we do spend with them must be highly mission focused and honed to address a specific sub-set of the whole while simultaneously remaining true to fundamental principles of Systema. It can be done.

We have seen dramatic, positive results in Police Officers and Military Personnel who have been in life and death encounters. Their feedback is the strongest validation possible in my opinion.

What I have found is that in order to educate and share the true capabilities of Systema to these groups, you must find the key individuals who can make a difference within that group. Sometimes you find them; sometimes they find you. Listen to them. Hear and perceive what they need. Endeavour to serve them. If you cannot help them directly, point them to someone who can.

Recently, we had a group of folks schedule an appointment at our school to “test under resistive conditions”. They told me, they were not looking for trouble, but wanted to know one way or another if Systema had valid solutions to their problems faced in Iraq and Afghanistan. Fair enough, come on by. Each had several tours of real-world combat, physically fit by military standards, and mentally ready to go. They also represented the core teaching staff of this group and have been investigating quite a few martial approaches from a variety of sources. They had done their homework.

They were primarily interested in weapons retention, close quarter knife defense (as several of their teammates had been stabbed through the side of their body armor), takedowns and control of unarmed individuals. After 90 minutes of practical, “what-if-ing”, specific scenarios and demonstrations they were genuinely pleased. It was also really gratifying to see Jeff Sodeman who started the study group at the school, who has no military background per se as well as other members of our school jump in an answer questions and demonstrate the principles for these guys and really hit the mark. I asked if they had any other questions or concerns. One guy stated he wanted to raise the flag on the Striking he saw on YouTube.

So…Seeing is not believing…Understood.

One strike…that was it. After witnessing the results, nobody else wanted to feel it. They were laughing that they wanted to “see” it again, but nobody wanted to “feel” it for themselves. The flag was officially lowered for the day. It brought me back to the first time I was hit by Vladimir Vasiliev. At the time, I could not tell you the how’s or the why’s, but my body was communicating to me loud and clear! In other words, I did not understand what was going on intellectually, but that was not highly relevant at the time. I didn’t need to “see” too much more. That was the proverbial fork in the road. Was going left, now going right. Check!

So I guess I could have saved everybody time and simply written: It’s not seeing Systema, it’s feeling Systema.