

## Systema and Tai Chi?

### Cirencester Systema Workshop Review

Jan 30th 2005

Here's a report on a Systema seminar I attended at the weekend. Systema UK's Chief Instructor Robert Poynton had been invited to teach this seminar by a Wu style Tai Chi class in my area. For most of the participants, like myself, this was going to be their first experience of Systema. The similarities between Tai Chi and Systema have long been noted, and as a (Yang) Tai Chi practitioner I'd been quite curious about it for a while, so here was a chance for me to really explore this in an ideal setting.

The class contained so many different drills and exercises that it's hard to remember all of them, but they all worked around the same basic principles - such as spontaneous natural movement, breathing and generating a wave-like motion in the body. Each exercise we did followed the same theme - it started at a very basic level, then added extra elements, or extra training partners, until it had evolved into something much more demanding.

The class started and ended with some breathing exercises, which I understood as being designed to teach the body to automatically relax on an exhale. After this fairly sedate exercise performed while lying on the floor we moved on to squats, push-ups and sit-ups all done with different breathing patterns. One thing I found particularly interesting was when we had to perform the exercises without breathing at all. As Rob explained our two basic fears are of falling and not being able to breath. Testing your limits with repetitions of exercises while not breathing is a great tool, and serves of a great way of warming up and dealing with the panic that sets in once you think you've about to asphyxiate!

A lot of the partner exercise we worked on were based on the idea of receiving an attacking force, evading it and striking back. We worked on regaining our balance after being pushed, struck, or targeted by somebody walking at you. It was here that we first explored one of the fundamental differences between Tai Chi and Systema - the 'floating root'. Rather than having a solid base to work on the Systema exponent pivots around the solar plexus. Depending upon the type of attack they are responding to this sometimes results in the feet wobbling about all

over the place and the body rising up, both things that should be an anathema to Tai Chi practitioners. These are things we train not to do, so it was unfamiliar territory for me. You'd think (from a Tai Chi perspective) that having no firm base like this would make your strikes loose power, or you'd have to rely on local arm strength for them, but I was impressed by the way Rob could make use of this floating root to avoid an attack and still generate plenty of body power in a wave like motion as a return strike. The wave is generated by the initial evasive move and the whole evade and counter technique becomes one fluid movement with no breaks in it. Indeed once we moved on to looking at how to generate power from this wave-like motion it was aptly demonstrated that losing your root doesn't mean losing power, due to the unique way Systema people strike. The whole body is involved in this motion, starting from the foot and going through the body, adding the rotation power of each joint into the strike.

This all lead onto another important principle of Systema - getting out of the way. The first thing you do in Systema is simply get out of the way of the danger, whether it's a knife, a fist, a kick or somebody lunging at you. All the techniques flow from this simple idea, and once you set this in your mind as your very first action you can get the idea of how it works quite easily.

It was now time to start on another of Systema's trademarks - absorbing blows. The art has built up quite a reputation of absorbing blows to the body, so I was eager to see how it was done. Again, the principle is the same - absorb the blow with whichever part of the body is struck and let it start off a wave-like motion. We split into groups for this and were encouraged only to hit our partner with whatever force they were comfortable with. Rob used one of his more experienced Systema partners for a demonstration and hit him hard enough to make everybody in the room wince.

Other partner training exercises we worked on included defending punches with just your shoulders and elbows and trying to evade four people all trying to attack you at once, and the first half of the session ended with what Rob called a 'Systema tradition', which is basically a big scrap with everybody in the room moshing about together - I didn't quite get the point of this, but it at least served as a bit of light relief!

After lunch the afternoon session started off with more breathing exercises, then we moved on to looking at knife defence. As Rob pointed out, when facing a determined attacker with a knife you're going to get cut at least once, so everything we did was simply a case of damage limitation. This was actually the part of the seminar I enjoyed the most. After seeing clips of Systema on the Net I was very sceptical of the knife work but it seemed to bring together everything we'd done in the morning and the Systema solutions to knife attack are very ingenious. By now I was seeing how everything in Systema, even the warm-up exercises, some of which were used to defend a knife to the throat, fitted into one big whole.

The afternoon session also included some groundwork, with Rob introducing the Systema ways of rolling, falling and moving about on the ground. Every action is performed with as much lightness and efficiency as possible, so that you don't get tired out. Again it occurred to me that this was another of the principles we'd been working with all day - trying to find the most efficient movement possible in every situation.

We finished the day off with a look at getting out of locks and holds (Rob demonstrated how to easily get out of one particular lock that I've always struggled with, which was something I'll definitely be filing for later use) then we all sat in a circle for another Systema tradition, which is to share our experiences of the day and give feedback to the instructor.

### **Well, what did I think?**

Because of the way Systema is trained (everyone helps each other) you get a very positive feeling from it. The training was fun and informal, but with enough direction and management from Rob to keep things focussed and on track. You feel that you and your training partners are all working towards something together, and that feels good. One thing I do wonder about is if they ever engage in less friendly uncooperative sparring at the more advanced levels (I suspect they do though). In the seminar everyone was encouraged to play nice and be helpful, which made the techniques easy to do, but I've personally found a shot of reality from an uncooperative sparring partner has been one of the best learning

tools I've ever experienced. Obviously, a taster seminar like this can't give you a complete overview of the art.

Rather than being 'martial arts' orientated Systema is very 'self-defence' orientated. Rather than teaching you how to win a fight in a competition it's designed to get you out of a sticky situation fast and with the minimum fuss. I should also take a moment to thank Rob for the seminar. He is a very good, patient and professional teacher - explaining and demonstrating the System in a very down to earth and accessible way. Most importantly, he could actually do the things he was talking about with ease. His use of relaxation and breathing during the really slow press-ups we did was exemplary. He was also very open and willing to answer any questions we had by showing how things work in a hands-on way.

As one of the seminar participants put it at the end, it's amazing how similar Systema is to Tai Chi, but at the same time how completely different it is. The main problem for Tai Chi people is the difference in the way they body is rooted, so you can't really just bolt Systema onto what you already know as a Tai Chi practitioner. It will be interesting to see if I can incorporate Systema ideas into my next Tai Chi sparring session, or whether the two arts really are incompatible when taken beyond a surface level.

Some people may look at clips of Systema on the Internet and think it's just another bunch of techniques you have to memorise, but what I've learned from the seminar is that it's a few simple principles, which can be expanded into a thousand different techniques. I came away from the Seminar feeling like I had a good, positive taste of the system from a very competent instructor and would recommend it to anyone interested in learning to defend themselves in a practical way.

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