

The Way the Water Runs

Interview with Vladimir Vasiliev

by Mark Hemels

[Meibukan Magazine no.3 - September 2004](#)

Vladimir Vasiliev is Director and Chief Instructor of the Toronto School of Russian Martial Art. Born in Russia (1958), Vladimir received intense training from the top Special Operations Units instructors. His work spans across 10 years of extensive military service with the Special Operations Unit of Spetsnaz, including regular high-risk covert assignments and missions. Vladimir also served as trainer for paratroopers, SWAT teams, and elite bodyguards. He moved to Canada, and in 1993 founded the first school of Russian Martial Art outside Russia.

Mr. Vasiliev, where did you learn the Russian Martial Art of Systema?

I learned a lot of it in the army, and I trained extensively with my main instructor Mikhail Ryabko, Colonel of the Special Operations Unit with the Russian Military. We worked as colleagues in the army some of the time and did a lot of training in the meantime. Before that time, I had experience in karate and boxing. In Russia there wasn't much distinction between different styles. It mainly involved using your legs and arms a lot [laughs]. I did participate in championships a lot and did very well.

Once I was in the army, I realised that as much as karate is effective in competition, for myself it wasn't so good in real combat. I found that the Russian System is a lot more effective in real confrontation. And that's why I started to study it intensively.

Why do you find the Russian System more effective than, for instance, karate in real combat practice?

The Russian System is more mobile. You can be ready instantly. There are no forms or patterns that you have to prepare yourself with. In the Russian System I learned how to move, and not so much the actual techniques. Techniques are learned step by step, by way of certain patterns, and then it becomes a style. The Russian System focuses more on how to move.

Isn't technique, and the repeated practice of technique, necessary to make fighting effective?

At a certain level you are right; it is good to practice some moves over and over again. But if you want to understand life deeper, it should be the way how to move that you practice, and not certain patterns. The techniques are an illusion in some way, because all the techniques are based on your body being healthy. For example, if you study grappling, you presume that both your arms are working well. But what if you have an injury, or what if one arm is wounded? Or what if even one finger is strained? Then you can't do it anymore. The techniques won't be all that effective.

If you learn how to move, it doesn't matter what part of the body is used. The movements rely more on the intuition, and not so much on what you have practiced and memorized.

How are intuition and natural movement developed in your training method?

Everybody is talented, and natural movement is just the shortest way to an effective result.

It's like the way the water runs. It always finds the right way. It may not be necessarily the shortest physically, but it's the right way. It flows around by way of the least resistance. It's the same with natural movement; it goes around to find the most effective pathway.

To any situation the reaction may be different. That's why it's useless – in a way – to memorize patterns, because the possibilities in life are endless, and you cannot be prepared for every single thing. Therefore it's better to be able to move in a natural way, and not even physically but intuitively.

How long did you serve in the army?

I had a total of two years in the army, which is standard for Russia. Then I started to specialize in this field. After the army I continued for another ten years, and that was with the Special Operations Unit.

Were you a teacher in these Special Operations Units for all these ten years?

I was trained to work with the S.O.U., and every once in a while there were groups I had to teach. It was all going on at the same time: I was trained myself, I did training of others, and I did the actual assignments.

Why did you leave the army?

When Perestroika happened in Russia in 1985, there were a lot of changes. Some groups in the army started to close, and there was a possibility to leave at that point. I wanted to go and leave Russia and travel for a while, which I did. I ended up in Canada and met my wife Valerie, who was already a Canadian citizen. When we got married I stayed in Canada, and now we've got three children.

In Canada I started a school; because that was the thing I knew how to do. And I needed a job to support the family. It started with a bit of training I did with a few guys at the gym. Then people saw what I could do and encouraged me to start up a school. It started with something small, and then it developed and grew, and now we just celebrated the tenth anniversary.

It puzzles me how the Russian Martial Art – with its focus on morality and the good in people – can go together with a military unit that is trained to kill. How can these two be combined?

There are different special units, and a big goal of any moral system is to defend your country. That's not a sin at all. They are warriors and have to protect their motherland. A very important principle in my unit was to deliver the least possible harm.

There are different special units; there are some that are really crazy and go overboard; the tough guys like it that way. But fortunately there are others who have different principles. The Special Forces guys aren't all vicious and out there to kill. One of Mikhail Ryabko's favourite sayings is: "There are no atheists in the trenches." In battle, you right away start to believe in God, no matter what you were before. That's why a lot of guys who participated in military action later on analyzed it – and if they do the right job in analyzing it, it brings them closer to God.

Besides, you cannot assume that all the Special Forces in Russia did the System. It's only a tiny minority that practiced the Russian System. Most other Spetsnaz [members of the Special Operations Unit] did kick boxing, karate, and sambo, the Russian wrestling style. Very few did the Russian System.

Could you tell us something about the role of the Russian Orthodox Church in Systema?

The foundation of the Russian System comes from orthodox Christianity. It's a style that comes from the monasteries in Russia. A whole culture was coming out of monasteries in the old days. A settlement would be built on the banks of a river or a lake, and there was a fort, and the main structure in that settlement would always be a church. The people that defended that fort were monks, religious people, and that's why the foundation of this warrior spirit is really Christianity.

The warriors that participated in battle were actively defending their country. Once they would become older, they would go and live in the monastery, and they would be the ones teaching the younger generation. And that's why it's all faith based. Warriors would want to go to the monasteries to repent for the sins that they have committed and to continue fighting evil on a spiritual level when they get older, through prayer and a righteous life.

The key quality that anyone has to develop – a regular person as well as a warrior – is humility. Otherwise our land would be gone. If you don't try to develop humility, what you end up developing is pride, and that's destructive; it destroys yourself and it destroys the world around you.

Could you please explain what makes Systema a fighting art in stead of a fighting system?

It's not even an art; it's more a system. That's why it's called a system. It's common to call it a martial 'art' in terminology, but it's more than that. It combines all levels of human ability and develops all our physiological systems. It develops the breathing system, the circulation, muscular, skeletal, digestive systems. All the bodily systems are developed in a natural way, and then it goes on and develops your psychological state and your psyche. And then, on the next level, it brings you closer to God, it develops your spirit. It gives you strength and a sense of truth. And that's why it's not even an art; it's a whole system. It's like life.

What do you consider to be your responsibility as a teacher of the System?

It's really a big responsibility, because people do come to you with their questions. They come because they look for something, and not just for a self-defence skill. The main responsibility is to be a good person yourself; to be humble, not proud, and not try to impress anyone... just try to improve yourself; that's the most you can do for people. As soon as you do the right thing for yourself, then you achieve real truth and you can pass it on to others.

In your seminars you also give exercises that involve attacking with a knife. Why are these lethal techniques taught to civilians whom you've never met before?

I don't think I teach anything aggressive. All the techniques are just work. I show them how to use the knife, and there is nothing vicious about that. I don't make animalistic stances or vicious faces, and there is no aggression in this. The main thing that could be harmful is if people are stimulated to be aggressive, nervous and uptight; then they can do damage. But if people are just taught how to work properly in a calm setting, then that won't be dangerous.

So that also includes working with knives?

Yes, the knife is just a tool for self-defence. Nobody is presumed to go around and start cutting up people. It's just a way of self-defence. What I do is relax them, because a lot of people get nervous about weapons. So it's just a way to relax them and make them feel comfortable with a knife.

In your Russian System Guidebook you say being serious in life and in training is not helpful – in the contrary – when real fighting action is needed. Could you explain this?

Being serious means to be responsible; taking full responsibility for your actions, and not being emotional. Because often our emotions cover up the real truth, and then we don't see the responsibilities we have. It just cautions against being overly emotional.

In karate training a serious attitude while practicing also means a strong focus and concentration on what you are doing...

What happens a lot of times in karate is that people are really tense. It may be focus but they are tense, and that's destructive. It destroys your psyche as well as your physical body. A lot of strikes rebound back into your body and destroy you. A lot of karate fighters have damaged joints, torn ligaments, strained shoulders, knees and hips. In the Russian System there's a big emphasis on not to hurt your body; to improve the conditions of your joints, tendons and all that, and all the strikes and moves are designed to do that.

How is the sixth sense trained, and why is it important in Systema?

The foundation of it is in just relaxing your body. When the muscles are tight, they prevent the passing of information, and you are no longer aware. Once you relax, then

you can absorb the information intuitively. It's like you catch the right wavelength if you relax. If you're tense, you're shutting that information off. So that is the foundation; to just be relaxed. It doesn't mean being limp. It means that everything is calm and you are really aware.

And then, once you've got that, prayer is the next stage. When you pray, you feel humble and connected to God. And all the things that are down to earth are cut off from you; you've just got a higher connection. And then a lot of information opens up to you, the kind of information that is not based on vanity or how to be funny or successful. It's the real information.

So, the sixth sense is developed by both relaxation and prayer?

Yes, absolutely. And prayer is not just the repetition of certain words, because then it becomes almost like meditation. Prayer is really if the rest of your life goes along with the bible. It's trying to do all the right things throughout your life. Then the prayer is really powerful. The key prayer is 'Lord have mercy', so it is in sensing how you are without God, that you are nothing, and that only with God you can be everything. This makes you humble and tolerant towards other people. But prayer isn't taught in training. It's up to the individual, and in fact you don't have to be a Christian to practice this.

In Systema you are taught not to look the opponent in the eye but above his head, whereas in most other martial arts you look the opponent in the eye. Why is that?

A lot of times when people look each other in the eye, it's a challenge. So in karate and in many other martial arts you challenge your opponent. In the Russian System the main goal is to calm your opponent down. And the only time when you would look him in the eye is when you know you can calm him down with your eyes, when you can control him and relax him with your eyes. So that's why we often look above the opponent's eyelevel. And if you have multiple opponents coming at you, then obviously you can't look into their eyes. Then it's more effective to look above because your peripheral vision helps you better.

It is often thought that by looking in the eyes you can read your opponent's mind and anticipate his intentions. Isn't this quality lost?

There is much more to a person than just the eye. Looking in the eye and looking at the body is more a sports technique. For me and my teacher, we sense the person as a whole; we don't need to look him in the eye. We just sense the whole thing right away without the actual analysis of visual information. Besides, looking in the eye is more a competition aspect: who's going to hit quicker, that kind of thing.

Is there a special reason why beginners and advanced students all train together in Systema?

Indeed, there are no belt levels or grades. The psyche is primary, it's more important than your physical skills. Often times, when a person reaches a certain level – a black belt for

example – he has this prestige that he has to keep up. He has proven himself in some ways and is afraid to lose face. And if a new person comes off the street and all of a sudden chokes him, he doesn't know that this person has such a level of black belt. When I first opened the school, I tried to teach close to what I was doing in the army, and people were just afraid. A lot of them didn't stay. At one point from the 20 people that started only 2 kept going on. Of course for people who don't have to go to war, that was a bit too much. Now, the principles are more adapted to ordinary life.

How important are breathing and breathing techniques in Systema?

Breathing is life. It is the basis of everything. Literally, it is life. So you have to utilize this resource to the most that you can. That's why there's a lot of breathing practices that are done every class. Systema is the only system that has all the aspects of breathing covered.

The people are taught how to maintain the breathing cycle no matter what, that's one big goal. The other is to make sure the breathing is full, that it goes through the whole body, not just down to the bottom of the lungs but through the whole body. There are so many things you can do with breathing. One of Mikhail Ryabko's colleagues in Moscow, by way of breathing he heals people even from cancer at the last stages; people who have gone through radiation therapy and nothing helped. These terminal people have been helped by breathing, and cancer just went into remission, to the amazement of the doctors.

Is there anything you would like to add to the interview?

One way to understand the System is to see that there are three levels of human ability. The first level is the physical. Imagine two guys sparring: the one who is healthier and stronger is the one who is going to win – purely on a physical level. The next level is skill; the one who has more techniques and knows more about the ways to move is the one who is going to win. The level beyond that is the spiritual level, the understanding level; the one who can see more is the one who will really win. That comes with experience and awareness of life. That usually happens from the age of forty or fifty and up. The physical part may not be as overwhelming at that point, but if an old person has the right understanding and spirit, then a very skilled and strong young person can not defeat him. *

For more information on Vladimir Vasiliev and Systema, visit www.russianmartialart.com.

Mark Hemels is editor of Meibukan Magazine. He interviewed Vladimir Vasiliev on 23 May 2004 with the kind help of interpreter Valerie Vasiliev.

Steamers:

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