



A Question of Faith by Martin Wheeler

A common question is: do you have to be Orthodox Christian or even religious in order to be good at Systema? The answer is no. But the concept of faith and religious philosophy in Systema is an intriguing one.

What is the purpose of faith in Systema other than the well known health and well-being benefits? I think there are many, and they are certainly worth exploring, as the heart of the art is more than certainly rooted in religious philosophy.

To me it seems likely that the concept of Systema has been around for a very long time, a lot longer than the name Systema itself. The art we are learning today is simply too vast to have evolved from an amalgamation of ideas that have only existed since the Cold War.

Historically, it is believed that centuries ago when the ancient warriors left the Russian battlefields, some entered the churches and monasteries to atone for their battlefield experiences. Out of this mix of warrior arts and Christian philosophy, the art that is handed down to us from Mikhail Ryabko was likely born.

When I first discovered Systema, I was immediately struck by its relaxed approach to combat. The other thing that was mostly lacking in the fighting arts that I had studied, was its deep philosophy. A philosophy that not only guides your actions, but more importantly, can guide your entire life.

Despite the amount of movement explored in Systema training (which is far more than in any art I can think of) movement is only one percent of Systema training. The majority of Systema is philosophy. The way you think and feel reflects directly in how you move and interact with others.

Fear of death is the fear that rules all our fears, and studying Systema is a pathway to exploring those fears and overcoming them. In doing so, removing any doubts and obstacles as to how and when you act and react and more importantly what you feel. If you can remove the fear of death, it changes your

perspective on the world.

On a professional level to see the world differently from others is a definite advantage. As a non-professional, it is no less important to remove fear, especially the ultimate fear. The fear of death. Nothing does that more effectively than religious training and the strengthening of your belief.

Watching Vladimir's or Mikhail's relaxed effective work, it is easy to see the benefits of their devotion. But when I think one of the biggest lessons I had in recent years about the nature of relaxation and how an untrained psyche reacts, was passed to me by Father Vladimir, the head of the Orthodox Church in Toronto.

He is casually impressive, very friendly, affable and most human of men. I always come away with deep insights into life after any conversation with him that effect me to this day. But on one occasion it was his actions that spoke volumes, more than his words.

We had just come from a beautiful service he had presided over and were having lunch with the Vasilievs family on a hot muggy summer Toronto afternoon outside of a patio restaurant. Father Vladimir was sitting opposite, sweating uncomfortably in the heat and chatting animatedly.

... A fly landed on his forehead. Walked around to his eye brow and after a while, flew away.

I was fixated by it. I know I would have reacted, flinched, brushed it away if it had landed on me. Something. But he just carried on chatting like nothing had happened. I know he knew the fly was there, I found myself wanting to reach across and brush it away. But Father Vladimir was unfazed, relaxed, and comfortable enough with his own psyche not to react to the annoying intrusion. That was very good Systema.

There is of course so much more to accepting God's love than this, I present this is as just one very limited view point. But if considering Christian philosophy helps to interpret Systema, then maybe it will help to decipher the meaning behind Master Mikhail Ryabko's words in this recent interview:

Question: Is Systema more defense or offensive?

MIKHAIL: If we are talking about real situations, any martial art more is defensive because first you need to survive and then attack.

Q: What is the most important quality in training and fighting?

MIKHAIL:

“As in life in general, the main attribute should be doing everything to glorify God.

Note how in the Scriptures, our Lord calls Himself the Son of Man. Do you know why that is?

This is to emphasize that all the miracles He created were for other people, none were created for Himself.

In one episode the Pharisees and the crowd tried to seize Him, but it was not time for His sacrifice yet. So, what He did was He walked right through the crowd and no one could lay their hands on Him.

How did He do that if we know that He did not perform any miracles for Himself...?

His movements were so correct and pure that no miracle was needed. He just escaped.

This is an example to us of how we should work and act and fight.”

“Blessed are the pure in heart...” Systema allows us to attain this.

“Also, it is important to differentiate the purpose of our training – either sport or defending your country.

Sport generally breeds pride, whereas defending your loved ones, one is ready to sacrifice his life.

“Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.”

If one is ready to fight for his loved ones, he is only afraid of God and no one else and nothing else. Such a warrior becomes undefeatable.

In our training, it is therefore very important to overcome the unwanted fear and emotions. To keep up the fear of God and cleanse our heart from the needless fear, anger, pride and other feelings. We do it through breath work, strengthening/endurance exercises, natural movements and understanding ourselves.”