

“What Can Aikidoka Learn from Systema..?”

More and more people in the aikido world are beginning to realize that even a short course in Systema will pay them great dividends in increased mental and physical freedom, leading to effortless movement. Famous names in aikido who have learned from Systema include: Hiroshi Ikeda (Aiki-kai 7th Dan) and Kevin Choate (6th Dan under Saotome Shihan), Matthew Hill (5th Dan Iwama) and the list is growing. The similarities with aikido are uncanny.

When I first saw Vladimir Vasiliev's Systema (S) on video 5 years ago, for instance, I thought someone had taken Japanese aikido, added a few punches to it, and given it a Russian name.. it was so close to what I knew.. It was as if some Japanese guy had somehow secretly emigrated to Russia long long ago, resulting in a very evolved version of aikido (A) that no one in Japan, and even the Western world, could have predicted or expected to see.. until now..

I attended Anthony Lucas's Systema class yesterday in Budapest and so thought I'd share with you some of what I learned and tie this in with a brief technical comparison between the two systems. As someone with 30-years-plus experience in aikido, whose made a conscious study of its major schools like the Aiki-kai, Yoshinkan, Tendo-kan, and Ki-no-Kenkyu-Kai (KKK), I think I can comment fairly on what is different and special about Systema that is missing in aikido training. I'd like to present three ideas from S that might help aikidoka realize, apart from the great overlap the two arts share, what is unique to S, so that you can learn to explore these in greater depth in any S seminar. Of course, Systema has many branches, just like in the aikido world, so we can only talk in general. But, I think we can always learn more about ourselves, and whatever branch of aikido you may happen to study, the following points, common to all branches of S, will inspire you:

Number 1: Breathing. The greatest thing about S is how they move from the inside - out. Of course, aikido too, in theory, is about *the spirit leading the body*, but for most people this theory is a little abstract and not as evident in practice. Don't get me wrong, there are many people in A who practice sincerely, with spiritual intent in the back of their minds. And, there are a few great teachers who actually teach the spiritual and energetic sides in detail, but the majority do not. The general pattern though is that we find ourselves moving without really knowing *how* or *why* we *have to* move in certain ways. Indeed, we have the names *kokyu-ho* and *kokyu-nage* ('breathing exercise' and 'breath technique'), for example, to enhance our

appreciation of the breath, and the *ki* exercises to help us realize the energetic mind, but few of us know the real reasons why these are so central to grasping aikido as a whole. In practice too, these movements are difficult to pull off..

Systema can come to the rescue here: a) because it has a solid foundation in breathing and b) because the physiological reasons it gives as to why *relaxation* is good for self-defense, and why this leads to smoother interactions in potential conflict situations, is ground-breaking *scientific* news..! It has to do with monitoring our breathing, so that no matter how fast or furiously our partner moves, it is possible for our *nervous system* to stay calm.. if we know ourselves and our body's limits.

Many advanced aikidoka also know this (especially in the KKK) and consciously try to work on keeping calm but what they may not know is how the limits of their own personal breathing patterns can upset their inner equilibrium. S deliberately explores the different aspect of the breath: the inhale, the exhale, and the holding of the breath after exhale, as well as after the inhale. These breathing patterns are explored in basic exercises, like the push-up, the squat and sit-up, to develop stamina in the lungs and nervous system, and are central to cultivating calm and safe movement. But, the whole idea is not to do *more* of these..

Quantity, or strength per se, is not the ultimate goal. It's the psychology behind such things as oxygen deprivation and the nervous system's reaction to panic that are the most valuable lessons here.

As we all know, scientists tell us that, in a threatening situation, many people hold their breath. In what is famously known as the *fight or flight response*, blood pressure, heart-rate, and muscular tension all rise, the pupils of the eyes dilate to try and take in more of what is going on, and, as your body instinctively goes into the stress mode, you feel the urge to fight, to run away or to freeze on the spot with fright.

S helps us get in touch with the workings of this response in ourselves in a safe environment, and through S's slow-motion practices, and relaxation exercises, to override this instinctive response to danger, so that we can defend ourselves *in the manner of our choosing*. This, alone, would be a great addition to anyone's aikido, but the greater benefit, I think, lies in knowing how to challenge our limits, and thereby enhance our everyday life. In S seminars, you will learn how to take the tension completely out of your body in every potentially stressful posture. This psychology of relaxation under stress is something that can serve you well for *a lifetime of reduced stress*... I got this from Anthony, and, I think, this is invaluable.

Number 2: Natural Movement. You may be sceptical, like I was, when any martial art claims to teach 'natural movements', because it seems clear that every culture has its own definition of *natural*. Just think of the difference between the minimalism of aikido movements compared to, let's say, the exuberant gymnastics of Brazilian Capoeira. Both martial. Both natural. Yet, they are on opposite ends of the spectrum of expressive human movement. But, if we say, 'natural' is '*whatever can help us survive an attack with ease*', then we have to think of the most likely attacks in a civilian context, and consider the question of how we will *personally* encounter them: psychologically and physically.

You can probably be 99.9% sure, for example, that you won't be attacked by a man flashing a Japanese sword on the street.. (So, what is the relevance of aikido sword-work..? That is another question..). And, it's also statistically improbable that you'll have to deal with cartwheel kicks from someone whose friend is playing the *berimbau* in the background...

By contrast, S focuses on how to deal with the most likely grabs, pushes, punches, kicks, knife attacks and group attacks.. but all within the simple context of moving with an awareness of your calm(ing) breath. Like in the best mastery-level aikido, you have to start with yourself, and realize there are no separate techniques. S is only about the freedom to move *yourself* freely.. in the *here and now*.. Kind of like the gentle art of aikido free-style, but with the stops removed.

S has found a way to teach this freedom to us *quickly*, through progressive drills and exercises. Through S, we can realize that it isn't the memorized martial techniques we know, even if learned over decades, that will get us out of trouble but our innate *freedom to move without fear*... Like the Zen master Takuan said, “..if our minds are caught in the thought of technique, then we won't have the freedom to respond creatively, spontaneously, appropriately. Our partner will spot our distracted mind, detecting a gap in our awareness.. we'll be unable to move, while our opponent will be able to exploit this moment to attack us...”

So, the way we express ourselves in self-defense MUST be *natural* in the psychological sense that it will always be personal, natural to you, and different to someone else's way, even if that person is your most favorite teacher of Budo. I like what an 8th Dan Kendo master once shared with me. He said: 'Most people think of the Way (or 'Do', as in 'Bu-do') as a road, or a road-map, already travelled by others. Its features and landmarks are well known. It's usually about a set of rules, teachers and formal

traditions.” “But, I don't think of it that way..” he said, “the True Way, I think, is really our own.. It's like the freedom we feel when walking on the beach, alone.. and, as you take in the beauty of the scenery, and look back, you see a series of footsteps going all the way back to the horizon.. When you take stock of your training record over the years, you realize, for the first time, where you've been. That is your individual path.. If you think of it this way, you can give yourself the courage to move forwards for the rest of the journey into the unknown.. What else is there..? If you follow someone else's way.. even Ueshiba's aikido.. it could still be taken away from you, if you relied on others to give it to you.. but *your way* is your *way*.. you will always have it, and it can't be taken away..’.

S is natural in that each person can discover their own insecurities and express their freedom to move past them, all within a safe place. S calls this *the work*.

Number 3: Strikes. In spite of Ueshiba saying, allegedly, that “aikido is 90% *atemi*” (or 'striking'), aikidoka are shy, in general, of following through with punches.

(It should be said, though, that Ueshiba's statement here is apocryphal, and is still controversial, and, therefore, shouldn't be taken literally as gospel. At the very least, if Ueshiba did say this, we have to reconcile it with his other statements like the fact that aikido has something to do with the *infinite spirit of the universe*. It would be logical to ask, then: 'how it is possible to have 90% of infinity..?' But, the absurdity this leads us into is a debate that will have to be covered in a separate article)

The Yoshinkan and Iwama dojos are about the only ones that use strikes extensively to get their techniques to work. Without strikes to initiate their moves, their hard versions of aikido don't make much sense. The Aiki-kai and KKK tend to limit striking in their curricula; even eschewing defences against kicks, on the grounds that they don't want to encourage violent minds. OK, I understand the sentiment.

Most aikidoka, I think it's fair to say, don't like the image, the feelings or conduct, and seeming lack of control that appears to be associated with punching and kicking. Indeed, in the minds of non-violent people, punching is already a kind of violence, and, because of their violent image in films, the martial arts are also, unfortunately, often enough equated with thuggery. In the eyes of many aikidoka, then, the martial arts (Bu-jitsu), as opposed to Budo, are No-Go Zones.

Indeed, I think it's true that *non-violence* is what attracts people to come to aikido in the first place. After all, if you wanted something more aggressive, there's no limit to the range of choices available.. From MMA to Krav Marga, Brazilian Jujitsu to Thai

Kick-boxing, you can take your pick.. Aikido is supposedly uniquely different from this smorgasbord of consumer choices, because it takes its firm footing on the basis of its non-violent spiritual stance.

So, the question to S people from A people would then have to be something like: 'Can punching ever be spiritual..?' And, the short answer is 'yes'. But, the second part of the answer is: "it depends on you..and your intent.." "If you punch with love.." Anthony said.. which, by the way, made my head spin, in the beginning..

But, then when you actually try it, it ain't so bad..

In fact, the punching in S is nothing like in boxing, where we tense our arms and go against our partner to try to knock him out. The punches in S are done exactly like the idea of *ki* extension. You just extend your arm with a relaxed fist to break down your partner's balance. Or, you make him react to your hand that's in the way of his movement. People who are off-balance in the turn, as you move away, are vulnerable.. At the same time, if you had to KO someone, there is no reason why you can't do that in self-defense using S, just like you can do that with Shiho-nage or Irimi-nage in A. Then again, Ueshiba did say " Aikido is loving attack and peaceful reconciliation".. Too many of us think that this reference to 'loving attack' is only about *uke's* role, but there is no reason why *tori* can't also be loving in defending themselves with punches.. If so, S can show us how..

The kicking too is done more like Ikkyo with the legs. The idea is to lead the attacker's leg a little, touching his shin with your foot to make him pause (*omote*, or 'entering', if you will), or, by stretching his heel out a little with your foot, making him lose his balance (a sort of *ura*). Again, there is much more to using the legs than the punishing Thai-Kick Boxing routines..

Finally, just a few words on the Systema Instructor Anthony Lucas. I have found him to be a generous person, with a compassionate heart, always ready to encourage his students with positive feedback. As an experienced teacher of Ninjutsu, it is clear he is also keenly aware of the differences between *kata* (or form) training and the relaxed freedom of movement which Systema provides the student of traditional Budo. He has trained with some of the biggest names in Systema, like Vladimir Vasiliev, Mikhail Ryabko, Martin Wheeler, and others. As a fellow researcher along the martial road of self-study, I salute him. and recommend him highly to all Budoka, but aikidoka in particular who have so much to gain. Europe is lucky to have him.

Anthony, together with two Hungarian aikido instructors, will be offering the **Aikido Meets Systema Friendship Seminar** on the 27th of September. Be sure to mark your calendar for this unique and historic event.

Writer: Keni Lynch is the son of aikido pioneers in New Zealand and currently teaches aikido in Budapest, Hungary. He is an award-winning philosopher and has a masters degree in International Relations from Victoria University in Wellington. He is also the author of the upcoming book 'Aikido Body' (2014), in which he shares some of the principles behind effortless aikido mastery, based on his 34 years of experience in the art.