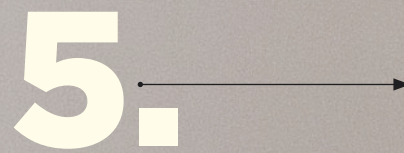


Systema

THE RUSSIAN MARTIAL ART IS REGARDED AS ONE OF THE MOST EFFECTIVE FIGHTING SYSTEMS ON THE PLANET, AND ITS POPULARITY IS LARGELY DUE TO THE EFFORTS OF VLADIMIR VASILIEV!

BY ROBERT W. YOUNG • PHOTOS BY ROBERT REIFF





TAKE OUT THE LEG: Vladimir Vasiliev (right) remains in a natural, nonthreatening stance when confronted by an attacker (1). As soon as the man starts to close the gap, Vasiliev drives a front kick into his quadriceps—not to damage muscle tissue but to temporarily ruin the leg’s ability to support him (2-3). Because he’s not out to hit with maximum power, it’s easier for the systema expert to execute the technique without being noticed by the assailant (4). As a follow-up, Vasiliev can deliver a light strike to the back of the head or neck to disorient the man (5-7). From that position, it’s relatively easy to control him.

Spend 20 years in a field you’re passionate about—when this issue of *Black Belt* hits the newsstand, I’ll have edited articles for two decades—and it’s easy to conclude you’ve seen and heard it all. It’s a fair assumption, but it’s a dead giveaway that the person doing the assuming has never been face to face with Vladimir Vasiliev.

The day of the photo shoot that yielded the images you see here will go down in my mental history, for it marked the first time I ever had an exchange like this:

Me: “Could you show us the first *systema* defense you want to demonstrate? That was perfect! Can you do it again for the camera?”

Vasiliev: “No.”

Me (my eyes bugged out and my jaw no doubt hanging slack): “You can’t?”

He shook his head, then explained that in *systema*, everything a practitioner does is predicated on the actions and position of the opponent. If said opponent feeds the *systema* stylist a slightly different attack or even the same attack from a different angle, the response will be different—sometimes radically.

The Russian summed up his position in perfect-though-accented English: “I can’t promise to do it again exactly the same way.”

At first, I thought it might be a touch of subconscious posturing, the kind you occasionally get from men at the top of their food chain—which is where Vasiliev has been since 1993, the year he set up shop in Toronto and founded the first *systema* facility outside Russia. But then, as the day wore on, the pieces fell into place. I saw plenty of evidence that what Vasiliev had explained was an essential component of his fighting philosophy. Before the session ended, I was a believer. The way the Russian and one of his instructors, Los Angeles-based British expat Martin Wheeler, who three days earlier headlined a *systema* ground-fighting photo shoot, had responded to every attack they faced was completely dependent on the nuances of the attacks.

That’s not to say *systema* asks students to memorize thousands of moves for every conceivable situation, thus leaving them vulnerable to the much-talked-about mental logjam. No, Vasiliev and Wheeler seemed to respond with attacks and defenses that *fit*

the situation—there’s no other way to describe it. Nothing fancy, just the perfect choice for a given moment. When you think about it, that’s the best any of us can expect from ourselves in a fight.

Mystery Demystified

Training to facilitate the optimal response to an attack makes total sense, especially when you consider the environment in which *systema* was fine-tuned to function. Its primary practitioners in modern times—spies, undercover operatives, high-level military personnel and the like—couldn’t adopt an obvious stance before or during an attack, and they couldn’t blast out a *kiai* in combat. Either could alert an enemy as to what was coming, and either could send a message that makes onlookers think, “Hey, that man’s a trained killer, even with his bare hands. Let’s get him!”

All that isn’t to say *systema* owes its existence solely to Soviet science of the Cold War era. The moves that make it up are believed to date back more than a millennium. “Russian warriors acquired a style that combined strong spirit with extremely innovative and versatile tactics that were practical, deadly and effective against any type of enemy under any circumstances,” Vasiliev writes on his website. “The style was natural and free while having no strict rules, rigid structure or limitations (except for moral ones). All tactics were based on instinctive reactions, individual strengths and characteristics, specifically designed for fast learning.”

Systema is big on deleting tension from the self-defense equation. “You should use your movements to remove excess tension,” Vasiliev said. “This way, you are always ready and free for your next action.”

Versatile, natural, no strict rules, instinctive reaction, no tension—after the photo shoot, I’d agree with all those descriptors. Apparently, *Black Belt* contributing editor Floyd Burk is way ahead of me on this one: Two years ago when we asked some of the movers and shakers of the industry to list their top 10 arts for self-defense, Burk replied with this: “Most people who observe this Russian fighting style will appreciate the spontaneity with which practitioners can fend off armed and unarmed attacks. It’s practical and effective without the nonessentials.”

That’s what I was going to say.

Looks Should Be Deceiving

Systema places great importance on your starting stance in a self-defense situation. "It has to be a natural and straight body position," Vasiliev said. "As simple as it seems, it is essential [to pose] no threat to the opponent. Your actions will be unexpected, inconspicuous and a lot more effective."

"There are times when deliberately unusual and less-natural body positions are needed in confrontations, but these would be assumed for tactical and strategic reasons to manipulate your opponent into the behavior you need."

How are you supposed to know which position is best for a given adversary and assume it in time? The oft-repeated attribute known as situational awareness, Vasiliev said. "In systema, we have many exercises to specifically develop awareness of your opponent and your distance from him. You should feel comfortable to act, and there should be no excessive tension."

I asked Vasiliev to demonstrate how that natural stance works. He stood there, seemingly unprepared for what was about to come his way. The opponent closed the gap and initiated his attack. Vasiliev's response entailed kicking him in the thigh—which dropped him like a sack of potatoes—and landing a punch to the back of the neck on the way down.

"You kick his quadriceps not to damage the leg but to debilitate the muscle so it can no longer hold up the person," Vasiliev said. "The kick is not hard, but it's precise so that even in light shoes or bare feet, it will be effective."

"As with all systema strikes, you must hit unexpectedly so the attacker is shocked but not in pain or anger. Pain and anger can cause him to strike and punch needlessly. If you hit properly, he will be off-balance and will fall onto you. This is very convenient for your further control. You now have a choice of finishing moves—again, not to injure him but to disorient him."

Another way systema exploits the power of deception was revealed in a self-defense sequence in which Vasiliev dispatched a man who was about to uncork a haymaker. "The opponent prepares for the strike—there is no need for you to change your position yet," he said. "While he approaches, take a small step to the right; this should be done exactly with his movement so he will not see it. Raise your right arm—be sure to choose a trajectory he won't see

from his viewpoint. Keep your shoulders down so he won't be able to tell what your intentions are and adjust his strike accordingly."

Backup Plan

That ability to move in a way the opponent doesn't detect enables systema practitioners to intercept attacks before they reach maximum power, and that's one of the smartest ways to fight. Reviewing a sequence of photos after the shoot, Vasiliev elaborated:

"As the opponent prepares to kick here, you make a small step to the side during his movement. Do not wait for his full kick; as soon as his knee is up, he has collected himself and is concentrating on the forming kick. He is vulnerable; it is a good moment to hit."

"Hit the muscles not to destroy them but to debilitate them and switch them off temporarily. This way, the leg is no longer functioning to support the body. An accurate hit causes the leg to give. He will no longer be able to kick or strike with his hand."

The goal, Vasiliev teaches, is to gain control of the assailant using economy of motion and unpredictable techniques. If that fails, however, you'll likely need to be able to take a punch before you can implement a backup plan—which is precisely why systema training devotes so much time to staying functional while you're taking enemy fire.

"No matter how good you are, you will get hit," Vasiliev said. "Maybe it's because you didn't see the strike. Maybe it's because you moved into its path. Maybe it's because it was more powerful than you anticipated."

In a previous interview published in *Black Belt*, he explained his rationale using an incident he's seen replayed ad infinitum in his schools: "A new student joins in. We begin a mass-attack drill, where everyone comes to the center of the gym and is hitting in all directions. Right away, the new guy gets punched on the head, turns to see who did it and gets ready to hit him back. At that moment, he receives a punch from the other side, and, with anger building, he turns to that side, his fist ready to fly in that direction. And then he is hit again from the opposite side. Finally, he realizes that 'punch for punch' doesn't work in a mass attack, so he exhales and starts punching those who are close by and not those who hit him."

"Unfortunately, most of us have an



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NEUTRALIZE THE PUNCH: In a natural stance, Vladimir Vasiliev (left) faces the opponent (1). The man prepares to strike, but Vasiliev doesn't move (2). It's only when the man approaches that Vasiliev steps slightly to his right—while the opponent is moving, which reduces the chance that he'll notice (3). Next, the systema master raises his right arm and uncorks a punch that has the first follow a path of minimal detection (4). Vasiliev then redirects the arm downward (5). He uses his left hand to control the man's back and to prevent him from retreating while he uses his right thumb to hit him in the throat (6-7). His balance disrupted, the opponent falls, and Vasiliev moves his left hand to the back of the man's head to maintain the pressure of thumb to throat and to "lead" him down to the ground in the event he grabs Vasiliev (8). He then can follow up or flee as the situation demands.



INTERCEPT THE KICK: The assailant (right) rushes forward and attempts to kick Vladimir Vasiliev (1). From his natural stance, Vasiliev uses his left foot to hit the side of the man's knee and begin rotating his body (2). Using his right hand, the systema instructor puts pressure on the opponent's left arm to further disrupt his balance and to give himself the option of delivering an unobstructed blow to the face (3). As the opponent falls, Vasiliev controls him with his right leg (4). He can use the leg to cushion his fall, thus making sure the man doesn't hurt himself when he hits the ground (5-7), or he can continue the counterattack by placing his knee under the falling foe's head (not shown). Systema philosophy encourages practitioners to use minimal force in self-defense situations.

almost automatic response: When a strike touches us, we immediately go to retaliate. This is caused by pride. Systema training for taking punches deals directly with this pride."

The only way to minimize the effect, whether immediate or long term, incurred from a blow is through another unexpected facet of systema, he said. "With proper breathing, it's difficult to sustain an injury. And if trauma does happen, the damage is a lot less severe than it would have been otherwise."

The reason stems from the nature of a strike, which he described as a sudden force or impact that increases inner pressure in the recipient. "It's a quick transfer of tension from person to person," he said. "The tension comes not only from

the physical impact but also from your perception of threat and pain."

Let's say you're moments from getting gut-punched. The fear you feel as you see the incoming fist causes tension, and that tension creates more fear. The resulting fear manufactures even more tension and so on. Breathing, Vasiliev said, is the way to stop that from escalating.

Breathe right and the impact will be dissipated, the tension won't build and there will be minimal bruising, he tells his students. "Even a powerful punch will bring no damage physically or psychologically. Breathing helps eliminate the tension and thus removes the pain and negative feelings."

How it works: "Keep your mouth lightly closed so air can move freely in

through the nose and out through the mouth," Vasiliev said. At the moment of impact, allow the air to exit your mouth. Tensing up and holding your breath when you're about to be hit is the worst thing you can do, he said, because the pressure that comes with a punch or kick will have nowhere to go—which is why it damages tissue.

That's why systema teaches practitioners to take short breaths when the heat is on. A series of short inhalations and exhalations decreases the likelihood that you'll be caught in the middle of one long inhale or exhale, and it enables you to keep your torso in a more defensible condition. "If you only breathe with the top part of your lungs, your stomach muscles will remain slightly contracted even after



STRIKE THE THIGH: Systema stylist Vladimir Vasiliev (right) assumes a natural stance in front of his opponent (1). As the man readies a kick, Vasiliev takes a small step to his left (2). It's crucial for him to act while the opponent is still concentrating on his attack because he's more vulnerable. Vasiliev uses his left fist to strike the lower part of the man's inner thigh (3). Unable to use that leg for support, the opponent can't stand or complete his punch (4-5). Off-balance and helpless, the adversary can be hit again, if necessary—a strike to the cheek, rather than the bony parts of the face, will protect the defender's fingers from damage (6). Note how Vasiliev steps slightly to the left to prevent his chest muscles from becoming too tense and to allow his right arm to punch freely.

a punch and the punch will remain on the surface," Vasiliev said previously. "This type of breathing allows you to take a series of punches while staying mobile."

Learning to do this in a fight, of course, takes plenty of practice under a qualified instructor. If nothing else, my 20 years at *Black Belt* has taught me that when it comes to self-defense, a little knowledge can be a dangerous thing without proper guidance.

And that's precisely why I walked out of the Vladimir Vasiliev photo shoot with one thought: How far away is the nearest systema school? ✂

About the author: Robert W. Young is the executive editor of Black Belt. For more information about systema, visit russianmartialart.com.

THE MAN BEHIND THE MARTIAL ART

I have had the privilege to train under many great martial artists over the decades—men who have honed their skills through determination, rigorous training and full-contact experience. To describe Vladimir Vasiliev as simply the best one of them does him a disservice. His movement, his physical ability, the deep internal relaxation he has cultivated—all are attributes associated with a true legend. But the road he has taken to get there is not one many could have traveled.

As a highly decorated member of the Russian special-operations group known as the Spetsnaz, Vasiliev trained under such men as Col. Mikhail Ryabko, founder of *systema*. While doing that, Vasiliev experienced things that would be difficult to justify even within our highest-level military units—of course, in actual combat.

Despite those brutal hardships, he is the most gentle of men. He's humble, sincere and filled with a genuine desire to share his amazing art as if it were a gift. The systema he teaches is profound and unique, as much a map of the human condition as a martial art. If I were to say Vladimir Vasiliev is simply the most decent human being I have ever met, I think that would be the most accurate description. His martial art, if you have been lucky enough to experience it, is purely an expression of that.

—Martin Wheeler