

# FORM, FLINCH OR FLOW:

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In trying to understand a specific style of martial art, the temptation always exists to judge it based on how it looks. In looking at Russian Systema, many have noted that some elements resemble Aikido. Others find similarities between it and Bagua, Hsing-i or Tai Chi. Some notice moves that are similar to Kali or Indonesian Silat. Others see something entirely different. The fact is, the human brain is image-driven. Our brains are constantly working to process and categorize what they see, into something familiar and simple. This process is called pareidolia. It's what instinctively allows us to see what seems like recognizable faces and shapes in clouds, or in tree bark or in a random shape. It's the reflex at the basis of ink blot tests and the roadblock that prevents many from enjoying abstract art.

The pareidolia reflex is largely context-based. For example, a grilled cheese sandwich recently sold for \$55,000 on E-bay because it was alleged to contain the image of the Virgin Mary burned into the bread. This assumption was due in large part to the fact the audience was Christian. Buddhists living in Thailand would be far less likely to make the same connection. In much the same way, a friend of mine who is a Judo practitioner recently watched a video clip of Systema on the internet. Because he saw one loose leg sweep being performed he concluded that we were little more than a sloppy version of Judo or Sambo, in making this leap, he completely misunderstood our basic approach. As the old expression goes: *"When all you've got is a hammer, everything starts to look like a nail."*

All martial arts must necessarily share similarities since they all share physiology. As Bruce Lee said, so long as we have two arms and two legs, there can be only so many ways to punch or kick. Granted, cultural values may interpret how a movement is perceived or expressed, but in the end, we are limited by our biology. For this reason that I'm always cautious about defining Systema according to one person's expression of it over another. The fact is, these expressions are more reflections of that individual's own bodily limitations and strengths and individual mastery. As an educator, I've always looked instead at the training method at the root of that expression--the path taken to arrive at the summit, rather than the destination itself. It is precisely Systema's educational approach which I believe is so unique.

The Russian martial arts were created in an environment of extreme diversity, in terms of climate, geography and natural opponents. From this multiplicity came a fundamental dedication to adaptability. Whereas contemporary Asian arts were generally culturally inclined to pursue form, ritual and memorization, Russian warriors encouraged autonomy, freedom and spontaneity from the very beginning. This sole principle was continually reinforced for centuries until it became a culturally embedded ideal. Then, in 1917, when the Communist government banned the public practice of their indigenous combat systems and restricted the arts solely to the most elite

tiers of their Special Operations Units, the art underwent an even greater change. It's important to remember that at this point, the full resources of this massive country were literally poured into the military and Systema was given unrestricted support and funding, which included research in athletic performance enhancement, psychology, strategy and weaponry. This was a period where for nearly 100 years, the sole goal of the government was to create nothing less than the ultimate soldier. This combination of adaptability, the existence of unrelenting military opposition and battlefield experimentation and a century of government support, led to the maximization of Systema.

From this perspective of learning methodology, I classify all martial training into 3 fundamental classifications: Formal, Flinch and Flow Training.

### **Bodily Re-Education:**

**Formal Training** refers to most traditional schools of martial arts, which deeply respect rank and ritual, often adhering to aesthetic or philosophical ideals and using ancient forms and routines to instruct. In the language of Bruce Lee, these styles are like factories that force the individual student into a single mould. While this type of "cookie-cutter" approach does have its advantages, it does little to incorporate the psychology of the individual.

**Flinch Training** is largely comprised of the modern "combative" or reality self-defense schools. These approaches place full stock in the idea that during an adrenalized crisis state, the human body's performance will erode and the startle-flinch response will be triggered. Minimizing movements to the simplest gross-motor movements, these methods use instinctive reflexes and positions as triggers for their trained arsenal. In doing this, they arguably achieve faster learning curves, but this shortcut may come with a hefty price tag. In reinforcing the more aggressive instincts of the body, the practitioners may in effect be bypassing their natural inhibition to harm and exposing their bodies and minds to needless levels of stress hormones. In effect, training becomes as chemically harmful as combat and evolves into a source of trauma and injury that may intensify aggression and lead to Post Traumatic Stress Disorders.

**Flow Training** takes a more holistic approach to combat preparation. It seeks to do more than just prepare the individual for the possibility of physically defending themselves; it also seeks to insulate them for the emotional aftermath of harming a fellow human being. This is achieved by familiarizing the student with their individual fear responses. Rather than indulging and reinforcing the flinch response as Flinch Training does, Flow training seeks to maximize the practitioner's natural Relaxation Response and reinforces lucid thought and authentic reaction to every situation.

Unlike formal training, which often imitates the gesture or actions of animals despite massive differences in our basic morphology, Flow Training seeks to maximize the greatest weapon our species possesses--our highly

evolved brains. It is precisely our brains that have allowed us as insufficient creatures, lacking the claws and fangs and proportionate muscular strength of the other dominant species on our planet to achieve the position of power that we hold. Whereas Formal Training often gets lost in the quagmire of this metacognitive gift, over thinking and over philosophizing their approach, both Flinch and Flow based training seek to maximize the full strength of our rational minds by using it to forge a more successful training approach.

Flinch Training does succeed but it does so in most cases without any regard for the intrinsic spirituality or emotion of warriorhood. While it does well in preparing the soldier to harm at a mechanical level, it does little to prepare them to reap what they have sown and scarcely addresses the idea of the emotional aftermath. All reality-based systems are certainly not created equally and some fantastic schools do exist, however, overall, I have seen too many whose proponents are driven by blood-lust and the desire to harm. The goal of Flow Training is to protect the self and not to harm the other.

Flow training, at its root, seeks to create a student that is humble and self-aware not aggressive and seeking violence. Its goal is to create a student that enters into every situation authentically and responds to the unique context around them rather than according to some artificial limit. In the end, Flow Training seeks to do more than just protect the student in the unlikely or rare event that they are attacked by a knife-wielding attacker in an alleyway. It seeks to also protect them from the inevitable daily attacks of stress, from self-doubt and illness and from the temptation of becoming what they are seeking to protect themselves against.

*He who fights with monsters might take care  
lest he thereby become a monster.*

**Friedrich Nietzsche**