

## Rachel's Systema Diary

*logs from November 2003 through December 2008, documenting my first few years of Systema training*

### Training diary #4

I'm so glad that 3 people have joined this group. One of my hobbies is writing, so I thought I'd start to share some of my "newbie's" thoughts about Systema classes. Usually after class I think about the things we've learned for several hours, and jot down a few notes in my training diary. Yesterday, Saturday, was our (me and my mom's) fourth Systema lesson. The first was a seminar with Martin Wheeler. For more on Mr. Wheeler, you can read his bio here: <http://www.ironmonkeyma.com/3.gif> (if the image looks small, click anywhere on it to enlarge). After that seminar, my mom and I signed up for classes at a NYC dojo, Fighthouse ([www.fighthouse.com](http://www.fighthouse.com) but their site seems to be down right now), where we've had three classes with the Systema instructor Edgar Tsakouls.

Yesterday's class started with some stretching exercise, rolling around on the floor, also some breathing and visualization exercises, breathing in "through" one limb or the other, which can be beneficial for pain management and relaxation. We did some exercises with a tennis ball, stick, and partner, some one-handed pushups, and slow- count leg lifts and squats. Once we were all in a state of controlled fatigue (emphasis on the \*fatigue\* here for me and my mom!) we worked on some yielding exercises where we all shoved each other, and tried to shove back at the same speed and intensity, first in pairs, then in large groups. I was paired with our instructor and I must say it was a challenge to shove him back with the same feather-light touch. I see where the terms "soft work" originates.

Then we worked with our partners on evading punches, knife thrusts, and using the shoulders and elbows to deflect blows and strikes. We spent a lot of time working on elbow joint locks, and pushing on the face, back of the head, and neck to unbalance our partners. Anatomical knowledge would probably be helpful to the Systema-ist. After I post this, I am going to look for an anatomical muscular chart to help me better understand the six vulnerable points that Edgar mentioned to us in an earlier class (head/neck/shoulder, elbow, wrist, hip/groin, knee, ankle...or am I mistaken? Please post a correction if so). I will post a link to an anatomical chart in the Links section of this group.

I had some trouble not stepping away and behind my partner during the knife exercises, that is my first instinct, but for the elbow joint locks, we were trying to step close and straighten the attacking arm by holding it close to our chests. I also had some trouble knocking the knife out of my partner's hand. One of my partners asked me to step on his wrist to make him drop the knife. Couldn't make myself do this, I guess the aggression just isn't there. This particular partner is one of my favorites, he always starts chatting with me as he comes at me, so that my instincts take over and I disarm him more effectively, though I suspect there is some co-operation on his part, I find it easier to disable or un-balance him when I am so relaxed. One highlight of yesterday's class was getting knocked down, then mock-slashing at my partners' legs with the training knife after they forgot the point of the exercise was to disarm, not to fell, our partners!

As always, much fun was had by all. I will be posting more descriptions of our classes and I hope that anyone interested in Systema will become as fascinated as am I, because it has been so beneficial to me physically (because I'm recovering from an old injury, and it's greatly improved my range of motion), and emotionally/psychologically, (I am far more relaxed and in harmony with fellow human beings, is

the only way I can describe it). I recommend you find an instructor in your neighborhood by going to [russianmartialart.com](http://russianmartialart.com) or find a training partner and practice with some videos that you can buy from the same Web site. Systema has changed my life for the better in just a few short weeks, and I've also met some great people in the community. I know it can do the same for anyone who has interest, enthusiasm and an open mind.

\*Vsego nailuchshego\* (All the best),  
Rachel

**Training diary #5**, Wednesday's Systema class at Fighthouse ([www.systemanewyorkcity.com](http://www.systemanewyorkcity.com), instructor Edgar Tsakouls):

Class started with the usual grueling warm-ups. For the record, I can't do one-handed pushups and forty-count squats. But in trying to get to the "controlled fatigue" state, I just give it my best shot. For the pushups, some women place their weight on their knees, so that the pushup isn't so difficult. I don't like to do this, having just recovered from knee injuries that required 4 months of physical therapy. I get into pushup position but barely lower myself down, sort of a baby pushup. If my arms feel like they are going to give way, I just hold myself in the pushup position, which is pretty hard for me to do. With the leg lifts, where you are supposed to lie on your back and slowly bring your legs over your head so your toes are touching the floor behind you, I generally can't get my legs any further than straight up, perpendicular to the floor. Same with squats, my butt isn't almost touching the floor, as in a true squat, I am more in a sitting-in-a-chair position. I modify the exercises in this way to follow the breathing patterns, in through the nose, out through the mouth, and avoid any gasping intake of breath, but use the short "puff breaths" if I am running out of oxygen. I'd rather cheat on the physical aspects of the warm-ups and follow the breathing than, say, use a giant exhaled breath to force my legs over my head, which I can certainly do, but the idea for the warm-ups is controlled movements and breathing. My mom's in much better physical condition, she's been working with free weights, but she tends to cop out on the pushups. That's perfectly fine, we're not in a high-school PE class, and anyone can opt out of any exercise or drill, but I think it's better to try, corny as that sounds, I think it shows a more dedicated student, to do just one modified warmup exercise and breath with the instructor, than to sort of collapse laughing and cop-out of an impossible exercise like a one-armed pushup or forty-count squat.

The practice part of class always begins with a yielding exercise. Today our feet were planted while our partners shoved at us, and we practiced yielding with just the parts of the body that were being shoved. The idea is to teach your body how to move all its limbs and muscles separately, very challenging. Then we proceeded to "sweeping aside" arm strikes, sort of like a swimming motion with the arm to redirect the force of the blow away from our body. Partnered with our instructor, I did pretty well on this drill, and the instructor encouraged me with much positive reinforcement: "Yes....yes...beautiful!" as he struck at me. However, we added a quick sort of pressure-point strike to startle, followed by an attack on one of the "six levels" to "fold" our partners down to the ground. So, although Systema has no techniques, per se, we were working on a three-part exercise, and when partnered with another, very talkative classmate, I just lost it. The exercise was first, sweep aside the blow, next, inflict sudden pain on a tender area: twist the skin overlaying the ribcage, or dig into a certain point near the collarbone that I never did find, or the back of the neck, again, couldn't get that point, or the lower back, which I had an easier time with, or the armpit, which I found pretty easily. These points correspond to areas where many people are ticklish, so that part wasn't so hard. The only thing is my partner kept talking. Granted I need all the instruction I can get, and he is an experienced Systema-ist, but it's impossible for me to process detailed verbal instructions about the exercise and at the same time, employ the movements in an instinctual way. I was making good progress but once partnered with the talkative classmate, I had to step backwards in the exercise until I was just trying the "sweep aside the blow" part of it with absolutely no success. The instructor noticed my difficulty and took over; the talkative partner took a break and I fared much better after that.

I sought out my mom to practice the "folding" part of the exercise, because I know she will yield to help me learn. She did help me figure out how to do this exercise in one smooth movement: sweep aside the arm, inflict momentary, startling pain, see where the body is off-balance, then use that oh-so-evasive "wave-like" movement of Systema to almost rock the opponent down to the ground. It's very hard to

describe this “wave-like” movement, so effortless does it appear to be when a Systema-ists employs it to down someone. My mom and I practiced on each other, and it’s worth noting that newbies like us can practice together just as effectively, sometimes more so, as a newbie and an experienced partner. Note that I have had some good sparring with my talkative classmate, but for some reason last Wed. we just didn’t click.

I also got a little exposure to “pain compliance,” in the form of one of my partners bending back my wrist until I groaned in pain, also our instructor twisted the skin near my ribcage rather sharply and that, too, was pretty agonizing. Pain compliance is a big part of Systema, getting used to a state of discomfort. It’s good to know the limitations of your body, and expand them. For example, with my partner who bent my wrist, he was pretty amazed at how far he could bend my wrist back without causing me to even wince, and by doing the exercise a bit more sharply until I fell to the ground, I know now that my wrists are much more flexible than I had supposed, perhaps all the typing I do, LOL (I am a professional webmaster). But as far as grabbing the skin over my ribcage, where there’s no muscle or fat to provide a softening layer, I think that anyone would have to yield to that kind of pain, no matter how flexible or stoic they are.

Class, as usual, extended a good hour beyond the time it’s supposed to end, then there were just four of us left. Because of this small group, Edgar took some time to teach my mom and I some groundwork, rolling, falling, yielding. That was the most fun as we rolled around the dojo pushing each other like kids romping around the room. Also, rolling on the floor is relaxing and good for the spine. One exercise I like to do is curl up in a ball, holding my legs against my body either by wrapping my arms over my shins or underneath my kneecaps and against the back of my thighs, and rolling backwards and forwards over the floor, keeping my spine curved. It’s a Pilates-type exercise that massages each vertebrae and is so relaxing and invigorating, I try to do this exercise before each class.

I hope you’ve enjoyed my training diary, I will be keeping it up, describing my twice-a-week lessons and perhaps some of the practice I’ve been doing out of class with my mom and one of my classmates with whom I’ve become friendly.

\*Vsego nailuchshego\* (All the best),

Rachel

## Training Diary #6 Wednesday

Warm-ups as always consisted of 5 pushups, leg-lifts and squats with "in DOWN/out UP breathing", then 5 more of each with the breathing reversed, out on the down-press, in on the lift. I was thankful that we got off relatively easy on the warm-ups and moved right into some work on the floor, rolling and falling. Our partners twisted our arms and gently forced us into a forward roll. My rolling could use some improvement. Exhaling audibly as I rolled helped a good deal, but I couldn't do a backwards roll. My falling is much improved. I've come to realize the floor isn't really so far away and rolling and falling in a relaxed state is actually fun! Sometimes we stretch by extending our arms and legs and rolling from side to side on the floor using our shoulders to lead the movement, it's very soothing to the shoulder muscles. Edgar demonstrated some offensive rolling, a very impressive aspect of Systema. If you're interested check out video clip # 5 Offensive Rolling at <http://groups.msn.com/RMAHamilton/videoclips.msnw>

I guess the warm-ups were easy to conserve our strength for the yielding exercises, which were sort of grueling and painful. Usually the yielding exercises are soft and gentle work. But we started by trying to escape as our partners grabbed and twisted one of our wrists, then we added a third person and tried to escape with two people twisting our wrists and arms. You have to go in the same direction of the twisting of the arms by being very flexible and loose with your shoulders and slipping free of the twists. The pain was fleeting though I had to ask for mercy a few times when I was about to hit the floor. It did teach us that our limbs are more pliable than we think. The body's instinct is to overprotect vulnerable areas, so pain compliance exercises in Systema teach your body to scale back its instinctual protective instinct to only the degree that is necessary to preserve you so your energy can be used for more important tasks, like thinking! At least that's how I see it.

Defense against the knife was the theme of Wednesday's class. Our instructor allowed a lot of individual creativity for these exercises. He demonstrated only a handful of moves, and let us work free-form on our slow sparring, prompting us to change partners periodically, but our class was much less structured than previous ones. I enjoyed the groundwork in the beginning of the class a great deal so when I was the "attacker" with the practice knife, even after my partners knocked me down, as in last class, I "slashed" at their legs and ankles and we took the slow sparring game down to the floor. Here's an article by Arthur Sennott that explains the principles of Systema's slow sparring game if you are interested <http://www.dojoofthefourwinds.com/sparring.html>

Although I don't have much aggression, and sometimes don't apply enough force to my "attacks," I like to follow through and pretend it's a real fight, in which case an opponent with a knife will continue to slash even when injured or down on the ground. This is how I experienced some of Systema's more deadly moves. One of our more advanced Russian classmates, who must be about 6'4" and truly enormous, got me into a nifty headlock with his knees and could have broken my neck with a slight twist of his hips. He showed me how to break someone's leg once they are on the ground, which you can do by holding it straight against your thigh as a lever and jerking your knee upward, a joint lock with the most painful consequences. Edgar (our instructor) demonstrated a few other finishing moves for work on the ground and pantomined slashing the throat or some other representation of fatal force when disarming and taking the knife away from his "attackers" (which he makes look totally effortless). In a similar principle, Edgar showed me how to use the handle of the attacker's knife as a lever to break their fingers.

I am somewhat timid, not your typical martialist, I guess, and so I don't like to choose a partner, even when the instructor prompts us to switch partners, I partner with whoever's left by default. Also, I'm sort of curious to see if anyone wants to spar with me. Our instructor, Edgar Tsakouls, usually partners with the senior student, but he happened to be absent and we had an odd uneven amount of students, so I ended up partnered with our instructor for much of the class.

The challenging thing about sparring with Edgar is the principle of Systema whereby you return the movement at the same energy level as your partner. "Like dancing," he always says, and he does look like he's dancing. I don't think I look like I am dancing, though. I probably look like I am trying to ice-skate across a gravel driveway, if you can imagine that. Edgar is impossibly light on his feet, but he'll return any force or speed with the same velocity and pressure. Some of the guys like to challenge him and strike a little faster as a learning experience, but I don't feel quite ready for that kind of learning. I always strike at him as slowly as possible, not wanting to hit the floor any harder than I have to!

As always, class extended about an hour beyond our schedule, we certainly get our money's worth at Fighthouse!

\*Vsego nailuchshego\* (best wishes),  
Rachel

## Training Diary #7 Saturday

Our warm-up exercises were as always 15 pushups, leg-lifts, sit-ups and deep squats, reversing the in/out breathing pattern after 5 of each, also doing 5 without breath but at the same speed. This is hard for me to do, my tendency is to do the exercises faster, and I usually can't do it without inhaling. As on Wednesday we practiced rolling as part of our warmup. Edgar showed us how to rotate our shoulders, and change which side we land on mid-roll. We roll on one shoulder or the other, so it's not a true somersault. My classmates are accomplished rollers, but Edgar had to twist my arm to get me to roll—literally! Seriously I did find it easier to relax into the roll when he makes it uncomfortable for me to do anything but roll. This is hard to put into words, but it's a teaching method that I find helpful in learning Systema. I remembered to exhale as I rolled, and that helped a lot with relaxing my spine. Edgar demonstrated diving forward into a roll and let us try that on the mat. He held an arm out at waist-height and we lined up to dive over it. Well, the guys did. I just slowly leaned over his arm with my arms extended and allowed him to tip me into a diving roll. I wish I could have practiced the rolling a bit more on the mat, but we moved into the yielding exercises. For that we practiced walking straight into our partner while they escaped by swiveling their hips, then two people walking straight into one person, then the whole class in a melee of walking into each other and some light-hearted references to Penn Station at rush hour. Living in such a crowded city, I think we all did quite well on the yielding exercise.

Edgar spoke a little bit about breathing, in probably the longest verbal instructions he's given us in my six weeks of classes. He reminded us not to stop breathing especially during rigorous or taxing drills. For example, if someone startles you, a sharp intake of breath is a typical reaction. Likewise, during exertion most people start to breath faster. He drew a comparison to Eastern meditation where breath is regulated, and emphasized the use of breathing in Systema. You are supposed to breath audibly before exertion, not during. I did find it easier when I remembered to exhale when my partner took me down or when practicing a roll.

We started with some legwork, which is really my first exposure to kicking and avoiding kicks. Our partners walked towards us while we kicked them, on the shins or kneecaps, or tried to trip them, and they had to escape or avoid our kicks.

We also practiced the sort of wave-like movements of the hips and arms that characterizes Systema. The flying center of gravity that we are all trying to obtain. Instead of brushing aside the attacking arm, Edgar asked us to try a figure eight movement: intercept on the inside of the attacker's arm, but quickly "weave" your arm over his to get into a joint lock or disarming position.

I had a really helpful partner for much of Saturday's class, he had been taking classes at Fighthouse for about 4 months, and explained a lot of the drills we worked on, always demonstrating the movement. I am grateful that he took the time to coach me.

One thing I had trouble with is the "sliding" footwork of Systema. It's a little bit like ice-skating, I think. I limp a little bit on my right leg, and so when it came to avoiding an attack by swinging a leg underneath the attacking arm and sort of sliding/pivoting into a position behind our partners, I could only do it on my right side. That's because I am still hesitant to put my full weight on the right side of my body, so I can only swing the right leg and pivot on the left one, not the other way around. I'm going to pay another visit to my orthopedatrician on Monday. But I should push back my carpet and practice that movement on the floor at home, maybe in socks. Perhaps a trip to the ice rink would be helpful!

\*Vsego nailuchshego\* (best wishes),  
Rachel

### **Training Diary #8 Wednesday**

Extra-tough warm-ups tonight as our instructor demonstrated a variety of gymnastic/athletic feats like balancing on his shoulders with his legs straight in the air and “walking” across the room using only his shoulders. About half the guys joined Edgar in these warm-ups, while the rest of us, and the school’s kung fu instructor, just watched in awe of his total flexibility and strength. We had started with the usual conditioning/breathing exercises: 14 pushups, situps, leg lifts and squats, following an increasing/decreasing breathing pattern: e.g. first pushup we breathed in for a count of one on the downpress, out for a count of one on the up, second pushup, breathe in for a count of two on the downpress, etc., then reversed the breathing after 7 of each and did 7 more exhaling on the downpress. Then we formed a circle and did one-handed pushups with one arm on the floor, the other around each other. Then we switched arms. This is hard! To be perfectly honest, my mother and I sometimes try to evade the latter exercise, neither of us can do pushups easily, and one-handed pushups even less so! But Edgar gently insists that we all do it, although every other exercise in our class is strictly optional. I think it helps to develop a positive physical interaction with your classmates, and a sensitivity to their energy patterns, which I try to maintain all the time, even when we don’t do this particular group exercise.

We practiced laying on our backs sidling across the floor using just the shoulders, then on our stomachs, and then with just the butt with our legs balanced in the air, going forwards, backwards, and side to side. Our yielding exercises started with pushing our partners, and returning the push at the same speed and force. Then we did this exercise while hopping on one leg. Who would have guessed that hopping on one leg would be my hidden talent. The rest of the class was staggering about a bit, and Edgar told us it was OK to switch legs, but I had no problem hopping on one leg for the entire exercise, I and could have happily finished the class on one leg or the other. Then we grabbed one of our partners’ legs, and they held one of ours, and we pushed each other, hopping on one leg, practicing avoiding and yielding to pressure.

Our first drills were defense against the knife, first with avoiding knife strikes by turning the body in the direction of the blade, so as not to allow a surface for the blade to pierce. Then we practiced capturing the blade flat against our chests, and turning and bending sharply to disarm the opponent. Edgar demonstrated how the pectoral muscles can be used to capture the wrist and fingers in a joint lock or with a quicker motion, inflict pain that would cause the knife to drop out of the opponents hand.

I had to modify this drill a little bit. Being a woman, I don’t have hard pecs to use as a brace for joint lock or as a hammer for a quick and painful thump. I’m actually kind of soft up there, and also I confess I was a little shy about squishing my partner’s hand against my breasts. So I practiced capturing the arm, rather than the hand, using an elbow joint lock and sometimes my upper chest and clavicles as a lever to get my partner to drop the knife. It worked pretty well. The beauty of Systema is that it’s totally customizable.

The dojo had suddenly gotten very crowded because of a large capoeira seminar that night, the shoji screens were opened and all three studios were full, so we retreated to the grappling mats in the corner. We were all delighted with working on mats and the guys immediately started diving and rolling. Edgar jokingly warned us that we’d be doing the exact same exercises on the hard floor next time!



I had been looking forward to learning about Systema kicks and Edgar and Oleg, a senior student, demonstrating some breathtaking footwork on the mats. Edgar showed us how to defend with only the knees, and how to roll offensively. We practiced tripping our partners with leg sweeps and manipulation of the knees. It's amazing how a little pressure on the crease at the back of the knee, or a sudden push of the knee to the inside or the outside, will unbalance your partner. It's like the elbow, by which even the strongest person can be led, the knee leads the way for the direction in which you can drop your partner once that they are unbalanced.

We also practiced freeing from holds, including the half-Nelson and a "bear hug" from behind, as well as leg holds with one person on the ground grabbing the legs and the other standing. Edgar showed us what other Systema-ists have called the "Ass of Death," where you unbalance your partner, then quite literally fling yourself backward onto their shoulders or basically any part of their body that is horizontal. It's amazing how much this can hurt. It's one of the few exercises we learned where "explosiveness" is required, most of the time we spar slowly, but the "Ass of Death" doesn't work if you just sit on the person, you have to really fling yourself at them and of course, know exactly where you're going to land so you can be on your feet again while they are down and gasping for breath. Edgar told us you can break someone's spine with your rear end. "It's the heaviest part. But you know that!" he said, laughing merrily.

Class ended with an exercise we generally do in the beginning, where you twist your partner's wrist and arm and they have to avoid by rotating in the same direction. This exercise can really hurt, but the benefit of the pain is that you know you are doing it wrong. Tensing up or trying to twist in the opposite direction that your partner is twisting can be rather painful. But if you stay relaxed and remember to breathe and go in the same direction as they are twisting, evading is second nature, your body will avoid the pain naturally. It's not unlike dancing, as Edgar reminds us every time we train.

\*Vsego nailuchshego\* (best wishes),  
Rachel

## Training Diary #9

Pushups, leg-lifts, sit-ups, and squats are our standard conditioning exercises for warming up. Next we stretched with our partners, back to back, locking arms and one person bent over to lift the other up into the air and shake them around to stretch the back. We also stretched each other's shoulders by having one person face a wall, while the other pulled their arms backward and away from them, and pulled the two arms together, which was at times painful. Edgar instructed us to breathe the "puff breaths" to tell our partners when the pressure was too much.

A quick note about breathing in Systema, which many experienced Systema-ists have told me is the most important of the Four Cornerstones (breathing, relaxation, form, and movement). Since Systema is all about survival, and has no sport application (no tournaments, ranks, or "rules"), breathing is paramount. As Systema instructor Rob Green explained, in a combat situation, breathing "might be the only thing that is left of "you." Breath for as long as you can, then there is a chance you can survive." Breathing sustains the human body, it also brings relaxation, but in the case of life-threatening injuries, as Mr. Green points out, remembering to breathe may be the only thing that staves away death long enough for help to arrive.

The Systema "center" is not the lower abdomen, as it is in the Eastern arts, but the solar plexus, and the breathe is sometimes envisioned as coming from that area, although Systema-ists breathe from the lower abdomen as well. You are supposed to breathe in through your nose, out through your mouth, and often during class, Edgar asks us to breathe out "audibly" as a reminder to be mindful of our breathing. Systema-ists exhale before exertion, exhaling audibly is a major component of some of our drills. Especially during hard exercises, breathing out audibly is helpful in relaxation. While falling or rolling, or trying to "escape" from some painful drill like limb-twisting, or even before performing a difficult strike, the audible "exhale" can make a huge difference. But as Vladimir Vasiliev explained on one of the Systema instructional tapes (<http://www.russianmartialart.com>), you don't want to "whoosh" all your exhaled breath out of yourself. The exhale should be nurturing your body as much as the inhale. The exhaled breathe is controlled and a little bit rounded back toward yourself, almost as if you are whistling, and this circular type of breath provides additional protection.

The other kind of breathing is the "puff breaths" to extend endurance or moderate pain when you feel a muscle about to give way, such as during conditioning exercises. This kind of breathing is like short, shallow panting like a dog and is very helpful when it seems your stamina is about to fail.

Next we moved to light sensitivity work, shoving our partners gently while they returned the shove with the same force. Not just the same degree of force, but trying to "channel" the force of their shove into ours, passing energy back and forth, as it were. Nothing New Age-y about this exercise, just a drill to develop sensitivity. Then pain compliance with first one then two people twisting our arms while we avoided by going in the same direction as the twist, going underneath our arms in circles to both yield and escape. Then we had to sit on the floor while two people grabbed our wrists and began to twist, quite a bit harder to escape from this one.

Then we practiced leg-work and kicking. We kicked our partners lightly with the feet, then with the knees, then the hips, while they avoided. Then we moved to takedowns using just the legs, mostly the knees. Our partners walked towards us at a normal pace while we practiced a variety of ways to trip and take them down, leg sweeps, trapping the ankle and pushing the knee, using the hands to abruptly push

the knee in or out to disbalance. We practiced pretending to knee our partners in the groin, and using that momentary withdrawing motion to kick one foot out from underneath, “faking them out,” as it were.

I am still working toward that elusive “wave-like” motion of Systema where you take the person down gradually using the six levels, in stages, with a sort of swaying motion of the hips, squatting, while keeping form, and using the downward motion of the squat to disbalance the opponent without losing your own balance.

We finished the class with a sensitivity exercise. Edgar moved his fist over Oleg, a senior student, not touching him, just sort of running his fist an inch or two over his body, while Oleg gracefully avoided it. Then he pressed his palm flat on his chest and asked him to resist his pressing hand and “pulse” his muscles against his hand. He did this for a few seconds then pressed his hand almost to Oleg’s chest, but at the last second stopped, and of course Oleg leaned forward as if to pulse against him in the same pattern they had been following. Edgar explained that this leaning forward is entirely involuntary and asked us to try it on each other. This exercise I think was meant to demonstrate the Russian concept of “happy fist” where you make your opponent believe he has struck you, although he has missed. Since his body has already “committed” to the punch, it’s too late for his mind to understand that no contact was made. Edgar explained was a Special Ops technique. The Oleg stood with his back to Edgar while he demonstrated running his hands over Oleg about an inch away from his body, and asked us to try to influence our partners in this way. Oleg good-naturedly shook his head, he couldn’t “sense” what Edgar was doing to him. but when they switched places, Edgar, with his back to Oleg, did seem to bend and yield to his invisible touch.

\*Vsego nailuchshego\* (best wishes),  
Rachel

## Training Diary #10

Conditioning exercises of the usual grueling variety were followed by some practice rolling which is always fun and relaxing. The class was large and the space a little tight for rolling but that was part of the practice; Systema teaches you to be aware of not just your partner, but all your classmates. We also stretched each other by locking arms back-to-back and then bending over and lifting our partners off the floor, shaking them around to stretch the back. Then we tried doing backbends and placing our palms on the wall, “walking” down the wall and back up again using just the hands. This is very difficult so we spotted each other. My arms are still a bit sore from this exercise. Then we did some avoidance and yielding exercises, kicking lightly and gently at our partner’s shins while they evaded, then striking just with the knees, using a pivoting, swiveling type action to lend force to the kicks, with optional takedowns using the legs only. Systema footwork is still elusive to me; it’s almost like sidling across the floor, with some pivoting in elliptical motions, but always with the knees slightly bent and the hips tucked forward. The knees are not supposed to be “locked” straight.

We practiced “steering” our partners by the shoulders while pivoting, sort of rolling them back and forth between both arms, as if rolling a barrel, “like dancing,” said Edgar, inevitably. Systema’s slow sparring looks more like dancing than what we generally consider to be a martial art, and that’s a big part of its appeal to me, that it’s a gentle method of self-defense, always following the natural inclination of the body toward avoidance of a threat, making double or triple use of every movement of the body, e.g., motion to avoid turns into a strike, blurring the line between defense and offense.

Edgar decided we were too tense and made us do “40 count” pushups, leglifts, situps, and squats, counting to twenty on the down-press, then back to twenty on the up. I don’t have the strength to even hold myself in an upright pushup position for 40 of Edgar’s counts (he likes to offer lengthy training advice in the middle of counting, add a few “fractions” to the count as we get up to 18 or 19, etc.) He advised us to use the short “puff” breaths when we felt our arms about to give way.

Next we moved into knife disarming, “like a snake” Edgar explained, as he first redirected the knife attack, and then wrapped his forearm around the flat of the blade like a lever, sort of rolling the blade away from his partner. It’s almost impossible to describe this movement, Edgar sometimes refers to it as the “Number Eight,” i.e., figure-eight. We practiced manipulating the elbow by shoving it upward, capturing the arm against our body for an elbow joint lock, “sweeping” aside the attacking arm. Edgar always pantomimed slitting the throat of his partner with the practice knife, and my partner told me that if I was ever disarmed a real knife, I should always slash the attacker, not to kill, but to shock into complacency. I was partnered with the most talkative of all my classmates, we stopped sparring for a good five minutes while he talked about knife fights. I learned a lot from him and we worked together effectively, but of course I’d rather be training and talking at the same time.

\*Vsego nailuchshego\* (best wishes),  
Rachel

## Training Diary #11

Although I usually kick back, read the newspaper, and write in my journal after a Systema class, I watched a movie after Saturday's class, and by the time I got home and sat down with my journal, I had kind of forgotten what happened in class. Blame it on "Pirates of the Caribbean." I do remember that at a certain point, when we were practicing ducking underneath punches, Edgar had us swing at each other about waist-high with short, blunt sticks, while we had to duck underneath by sliding one leg until it was almost parallel with the floor. My butt is still a little bit sore, we were practicing takedowns for a good twenty minutes, basically "freestyling" sparring by attacking one of the six levels (head, shoulders, elbows, hips/groin, knees, ankles).

Due to lack of notes about class, this post is a little bit different. It's a rundown of a typical Systema class. Systema class is always different, every single time. Systema is a form of self-expression, though some do not believe it's an art, certainly every Systema-ists tailors the basic principles to fit their own physical and psychological profile.

Class is scheduled for an hour-and-a-half, but we generally work for two-and-a-half and sometimes even three hours. Clearly our instructor is generous with his time. He is always available before or after class for anyone who has questions. Class generally follows this format but of the following exercises, only the beginning warm-ups are standard. Class is different each time and we never know what to expect. We might work on yielding exercises, or practice nothing but slow sparring takedowns, or pain compliance drills, for the majority of class. Sometimes we slow-spar in a freestyle sort of way by showing us a drill, then turning us loose for a half-hour or so to practice variations.

Stretches: we lay on the floor and stretch freestyle for several minutes

Conditioning/warm-ups: pushups, situps, leg lifts, and squats. We do five breathing in on the downpress, five breathing out on the downpress, and five without breathing at all. Sometimes we do 7, with the first a one-count, breathing in on the downpress, out on the up, the second a two-count, etc., then reverse the breathing and do seven more.

Partnered stretching: We sometimes help our partners stretch their back or shoulders.

Rolling/floor-work: we sometimes practice rolling or other floor work, such as laying on our backs trying to move across the floor by wiggling only our shoulders.

Yielding exercises: light pushes, walking "into" partners while they avoid, evading punches and light kicks at shin level, sometimes the partner returns the energy in the same sort of push, sometimes this takes the form of a "melee" where we form a circle and push or walk toward one person standing in the middle.

Pain compliance: limb-twisting, usually of the wrists by one or more persons while the person being twisted had to yield and escape, sometimes the person being twisted lies on the floor while one or two people twist their wrists or ankles.

Slow sparring: most of our class is slow sparring, very often with practice knives.

“Refresher” conditioning exercises: Once in a while, if we are too tense or sleepy, we do more pushups, leglifts, situps, and squats, usually of the forty-count variety, in the middle of class, then we resume slow sparring, takedowns, disarms, etc.

Sensitivity exercise: sometimes we end class with a sensitivity or pain-compliance exercise.

So that's a typical class for us at Fighthouse. A Systema class is a unique experience, unlike a typical martial art class or workout experience. The sense of "flow" that develops from the breathing and relaxation, and sparring in slow motion, is addictive. I would recommend it to anyone regardless of age, skill, or physical condition. You can find an affiliate school in your neighborhood at Vladimir Vasiliev's site: <http://www.russianmartialart.com>

\*Vsego nailuchshego\* (best wishes),  
Rachel

## Training Diary #12 Monday

This was our makeup class for Wednesday since the dojo closed early on Christmas Eve. So there were only three of us to start the class, me, a new female student and a male student who has been practicing Systema for 4-6 months. This was a great opportunity for individual attention from our instructor. We started with freestyle stretching, then trying to move across the floor using only certain body parts. First just our shoulders, laying on our stomachs, and the same thing laying on our backs, not using the legs. Then we sat on the floor on our seat-bones, legs slightly elevated, and tried to move back, forward, and sideways using just the buttocks. Then we moved into our usual 15 sit-ups, leg lifts, pushups and squats, with varied breathing patterns including holding the breath for five reps.

We moved into limb-twisting, and I wanted to pair with the other woman, but knowing that neither of us put as much pain into the limb-twisting as we should, Edgar quickly broke us up. Somehow I always wind up paired with our instructor for this exercise. Although generally he has a light touch, and is very gentle for most drills, he shows no mercy when it comes to developing pain compliance! At this point my mom showed up, her train was late and she conveniently missed the grueling warm-ups.

We also tried one partner on the floor while the other twisted the wrist, using side-to-side rolling to escape. Then we worked with practice knives for more than an hour. We practiced turning the body so that the angle of the knife was changed from a stab to a relatively harmless slash. One person pressed the knife to the other's chest, and then you were supposed to roll the shoulder and chest muscles until the angle of the knife was changed. It's hard to explain and sounds like it wouldn't be too effective, but it does work. Edgar explained this method is not for when someone is stabbing or slashing at you with a knife, but when someone "holds you up" with a knife, presents it against you and demands your wallet or otherwise holds the knife relatively motionless as a threat. We also practiced elbow joint locks, moving to the inside or outside of the attacking arm. Also we practiced an odd drill where our partners charged us with the practice knives and we had to "walk" our fingers up the attacking arm at the same speed, then use the strange wave-like motions of Systema to take our partners down using the six levels, "folding" them as it were.

"Don't think!" said Edgar, as I tensed up and began to move against the natural "sway" of our sparring. (He also told me to "think!" as I failed to evade his limb-twists in the beginning of class.) A key principle of Systema is not to plan, to use only the body's natural reaction in formulating defense.

A new experience for me was that the last hour or so was just us three women, as our male classmate had to go (actually I think he was just tired, as he stuck around the dojo even after the class was over, but he had to endure much ribbing from my mom about 3 girls being too much for him!) I really enjoyed working with just the women, as I think we are somewhat under-represented in Systema. Until last week my mom and I were the only females studying Systema at Fighthouse of maybe twenty-five students. Maybe it's the camoflaug pants and the fact that Systema is a military style that puts women off, but it's such a gentle martial art, in my humble opinion, it's absolutely ideal for women, especially those that don't want to bother with ranks, pyjama-like uniforms, bowing to "the master" or my particular pet peeve, a lot of yelling. When we strike in Systema class, we do not yell or shout to channel our aggression as encouraged in some eastern arts. Aggression is not something that Systema seeks to develop, it is not necessary for effective self-defense. We workout in whatever we find comfortable, for most it's camo pants or sweatpants, a tee-shirt, and wrestling or martial art shoes (though some prefer barefoot or just socks).

This stands out as one of my favorite Systema classes ever due to its small size, and partly to the fact that we were three women AND newcomers. We are all new to Systema, the new girl (who is Russian) had 2 classes and my mom and I, 10 - 12. We all got a lot of individualized attention sparring with Edgar, who Edgar has a light and gentle way of fighting, in addition to being a mild-mannered person. For this reason it can be a huge challenge to spar with him, as one of the principles of Systema is returning force with the same degree and velocity of force, hitting hard and fast is easy, hitting hard and slow very difficult. Both partners have to move at the same speed for slow sparring to be an effective training tool.

Abandoning the practice knives, Edgar demonstrated the “four points” of Eastern martial art, which are right below each shoulder and right above each hip. After each sharp poke, he explained to the class where I was off-balance and how to make use of this to take a person down. I was the lucky guinea pig while Edgar poked me quite hard in the stomach and chest, then followed up with a takedown.

Then we worked on attacks with one partner in a crouching position by pushing sharply on the lower back, then manipulating the knee and ankle. Again I was the guinea pig for Edgar’s demos and got knocked down to the floor about a million times as he demonstrated how to follow up the initial push with creative manipulation. By “creative” I mean that you have to look and see where your partner is off-balance, usually you want to push them backwards. When all else fails, the hand over the face works great. Most people don’t like to have someone else’s hand over their eyes, for anyone who doesn’t seem to mind, all you have to do is push the hand harder. I have trouble using the shoulder as a method of takedown, but for many it works great. I tend to go for the face instead, back of the head works well too if the person is in a bent position. Also the armpit is another sneaky point of attack.

\*Vsego nailuchshego\* (best wishes),  
Rachel



## Training Diary # 13

No conditioning exercises tonight, for the first time in more than 6 weeks of classes, I didn't have to struggle through pushups, situps, leg-lifts and squats. Instead we warmed up by practicing rolls and other floorwork. First we tried moving across the floor on our backs using just the shoulders, then on our stomachs, then sitting with feet elevated using just the butt to move forwards, backwards and sideways. Then forward rolls, starting on all fours, extending one arm and turning it forward so the shoulder rolls. Systema rolls aren't somersaults, you are never supposed to roll on your head, but always the shoulder, and turning so that one shoulder or the other is bearing the weight. Usually my rolls are more like "round-offs" as I always end up sideways. We were supposed to do backward rolls by laying on our backs and swinging the legs over our heads, but I couldn't do this. I need someone to spot me as I can't really get my legs behind my head. Then we were supposed to dive into a roll from a squatting position but I was too scared to do this on the hardwood floor. Seeing this, and my mom's hesitation to do the forward rolls (she has no problem with backwards rolls, but she says the forward rolls hurt her bony shoulders), our instructor Edgar Tsakouls let us move onto the mats. Of course he increased the difficulty of the rolling exercise once we were on the nicely padded surface. We practiced diving over a stool and into a roll from a standing position. Although the guys went into the roll at a run, I had to roll by lifting one leg behind me until it tipped my balance forward. Even in the swimming pool, I never run into a dive, I just kind of stand there and tip forward. Then we practiced a similar exercise where you walk toward someone and they grab one of your legs and pull it behind, forcing you to dive into a roll. I was pretty brave on the mat despite being a huge scaredy-cat on the floor. It makes a huge difference knowing that there's a protective surface to soften your landing. But one thing I've learned from Systema class is that the floor isn't all that far away. You can fall on the floor from a standing position and not hurt yourself as much as you might think. It's just that the body is conditioned to over-protect itself and the "flinch" response to perceived impending harm is pretty hard to suppress. Edgar told us we must be perfectly silent when we roll and fall on the floor, in case we are on a special ops assignment and have to use stealth, but he smiled and laughed, knowing we are all just ordinary New Yorkers and not intelligence operatives.

After the rolls, we worked on kicks and legwork for a good long time. Evading and catching the kicking leg, trapping the kicking leg between our thigh and foot, various ways to unbalance a kicking opponent. We tried kicking high while our opponents ducked underneath it, considerably easier for me paired up with a guy who's over 6 feet tall, than it was for him, me being about 5'7" and not good at kicking super high. Then we applied the same principles to punching, ducking underneath the punching arm. Edgar stressed that evasion is always the first step, before ducking or trying to redirect force, we should first ensure our own protection. He demonstrated using one or both arms to cover the head and "roll" off the attacking punch as you duck underneath it in a "combing your hair" kind of movement, sweeping the arms back and over your head with palms facing outwards. "Like a monkey," he said, laughing as he demonstrated how to move the arms in this way. We finally moved into takedowns, but most of the class was spent on ducking, evading, swivelling the hips, and that elusive "figure-eight" movement that is used to trap an attacking limb.

\*Vsego nailuchshego\* (best wishes),  
Rachel

## Training Diary #14

Lately we've been starting class with this exercise where you are in a backbend type position, I think it's called a "bridge" but I'm not sure. Then you are supposed to flip over into a pushup type position but with your back more rounded and your hands and feet a bit farther apart. The trick is you are supposed to swap the exact position of your left hand and your right foot. It's harder than it sounds to keep the placement of your hand and foot exact. Then the usual 15 pushups, situps and leg lifts, but we didn't have to do squats, and these exercises went a bit more quickly than usual, although I still have trouble doing the 5 while holding my breath (an exercise which is supposed to build confidence as well as strength). Then wiggling across the floor using just the shoulders and then just the butt, backwards, forwards, side-to-side.

At this point Edgar introduced me to his friend and fellow Systema instructor (who would no doubt prefer the term "student with teaching certificate") Rob Green, who had stopped by Fighthouse. Rob had posted on Vladimir Vasiliev's forum that he was going to stop by to say Hello. He was the first person in New York City to teach Systema classes, and a remarkable writer of essays and posts about Russian Martial Art. Check out his posts on RMAForum.com and his monthly column in Martial Talk at MartialTalk.com for some examples, and you can visit his own Web site at <http://www.rusanyc.com> It was nice to meet Rob after our virtual correspondence. Rob and I didn't talk long because class was in session, but we wished each other a merry "Russian" Christmas, most Russians celebrate the holiday on January 7. From what I've heard, people in Russia celebrate the season every day between December 24 and January 8, quite a long party.

We then moved into some partnered exercises using tennis balls. We had to hold the tennis balls between us as we did pushups, keeping the tennis ball lodged between our upper arms. Then we had to stand back-to-back and keep the tennis ball between our backs as we squatted, then sat with legs outstretched, then we had to stand up again and not lose the ball. I had trouble standing up without using my hands, my quads are still a bit weak from runner's knee.

We then moved to an interesting peripheral vision exercise. Systema-ists should be alert and aware of all surroundings. The "Systema gaze" is a little above the opponent's head, and slightly unfocused, which is why more experienced Systema-ists sometimes appear cross-eyed while sparring. The unfocused gaze allows your mind to take in more than when you are determinedly focused straight ahead, as is more natural. So one partner stood with legs and hands apart, squatting just slightly. The other stood behind and pitched the tennis ball up and over the head. Tennis balls were flying all over the floor of the dojo, but I'm happy to report that I caught each one and my ball never touched the ground as my partner threw it over my head, between my legs, over and under each of my arms. I was partnered with the most senior student and he knew how to pitch the balls perfectly, I suspect the reason for the bouncing balls was faulty throwing rather than lack of peripheral vision skills. When it was my turn to pitch, I didn't do so well. I got the ball over my partner's head OK, making sure to throw it as high as possible to allow his peripheral vision enough time to spot it, but I couldn't manage to lob it between his legs and up to eye-level. Unfortunately I just nailed him in the crotch with the tennis ball three times in a row, bringing a whole new meaning to the phrase "throw like a girl." We decided to abandon the between-the-legs tennis ball drill for obvious reasons.

We returned to floor, practicing keeping both arms locked behind our backs and falling forward onto our chests from a sitting position. The way to do this is to keep the chest open and the shoulders back. The body wants to hunch the shoulders forward and doing this of course you land painfully on your shoulder

rather than on the chest which, particularly in my case, being female, is better equipped to cushion the fall. Then we stood in a row and put our arms around each other a la Chorus Line, and practiced falling backward, and getting up again, all together. Then we practiced falling forward and getting up again, which is harder than backward. At least for me, I could not get up again from being on my stomach without using my hands.

Then we moved into our yielding exercises. A group pushing exercise where we stood in a circle and shoved each other, then pairing up to push and return pushes with the same force. Not simply the same degree of force, but the same motion, channelling our partner's force back into them. We tried pushing each other while standing on one leg and then with one hand only, linking the other arm together. Then each of us held one of our partner's legs and they held one of ours and we practiced pushing each other that way. Because of my recent bout of physical therapy, I'm quite good at these one legged exercises. I can stand on one leg without having to hop around and I don't have to change legs. Most of the class had a difficult time with the one-legged exercises. Then we tried "steering" our partners around between both of our arms, but using the force of the step, rather than the arms, to steer them. We did the same thing with a swivel, rather than a step, backwards and forwards (the backwards is kind of like rolling skating backwards, if you can imagine).

Most of the class time was spent on yielding exercises, but we also learned how to deflect strikes by rolling the limb off. Ducking underneath punches by rolling the shoulders, rolling an arm around the attacking arm "like a snake" as Edgar describes these figure-eight-type movements. Also rolling our stomachs and chests around a punch, and continuing the rolling movement to lead into a takedown. A few elbow locks and Edgar demonstrated how to manipulate the elbow when the opponent works free of a joint lock. Continuing with the attacker's own force by pulling the arm forward as soon as it's straightened. "Roll, roll, roll!" instructed Edgar, reminding us that in Systema, motion, especially of the circular or wave-like variety, is critical to self-defense.

\*Vsego nailuchshego\* (best wishes),  
Rachel

## Training Diary #15

We started almost cold today, warming up only with floor hip and shoulder exercises, i.e. wiggling across the floor using just the shoulders while laying on the back or stomach and then using only the butt, backwards, forwards, side-to-side, while keeping your legs bent and off the floor. The side-to-side is difficult, I think I moved about an inch or two to the right today for the first time. But despite that, I barely broke a sweat, in contrast to the usual warmup routine which leaves me breathless. We moved into drills with practice knives. We stabbed at our partners as they lay on their backs or stomachs, then up against the wall. The object is to avoid by moving just the body part being stabbed. This was a light yielding exercise, not a sparring one. Edgar told us it is like a massage for the pressure points. We also practiced avoiding a knife slash by redirecting the attacking arm and swiveling behind our partners, “like dancing,” as Edgar frequently reminds us.

We practiced elbow joint locks and I had some trouble with these. I am a little afraid of hurting my partner, and I can’t help but think that even a nudge to an elbow held straight across my body would be too much painful leverage on a delicate area. But even my Mom, who is not exactly stoic about pain, kept asking me to put more aggression into my attack. Luckily we moved into different sorts of exercises, the rolling and trapping motions of arm and shoulders. We practiced avoiding attacks to the neck, waist, and legs by ducking under or over the attacking arm, by weaving an arm around it to capture and by pulling the knife arm further in the direction of the attack, with corresponding takedowns.

My favorite drill was on the ground, trapping the attacking knife by rolling from side-to-side and following up with a takedown. I’ve always thought whoever is on the ground would be at a huge disadvantage in a fight, but to my surprise we all managed to execute takedowns from the floor without struggling. I think I finally got the hang of the weaving motion to trap an attacking arm, figure eight, snake-like movement, or whatever you wish to call it. Something about the floor encourages intuitive motions, I think. Perhaps it reminds us of the natural movements of childhood; most of us sat on the floor a great deal in elementary school. The floor also has a massaging effect, it’s helpful to use the floor as a passive stretching partner if your shoulders or hips are tight. I would love to do even more floor-work in class, I find it so relaxing and fun.

We worked with practice knives for the entire class. For our final sensitivity drill, we stabbed and slashed slowly at our partners while they avoided and “rolled” around our attack. There was a general theme to the class: maintaining contact. Thought precedes action, as Edgar demonstrated by maintaining contact with my arm as I stabbed at him, mirroring and even predict my attacking motions.

\*Vsego nailuchshego\* (best wishes),  
Rachel

## Training Diary #16 Saturday

We started with our customary 15-set conditioning exercises with varied breathing, and then wiggling across the floor using just the hips or shoulders. We stretched our wrists and shoulders, using both the floor and our partners for static resistance. We held our partners' heads while they had to fall backwards with back perfectly straight. Then we did some unusual and challenging gymnastic exercises with our partners on the mats. One person knelt on the mat and tilted forward while the other stepped on the back of toes. The idea is to keep your back straight, but most of us had to use our hands to break the fall. Our instructor demonstrated doing the wheelbarrow with someone holding your ankles, hopping forward with your hands and clapping between hops. Once in position, I found simply standing still to be a challenge, hopping, much less clapping, utterly impossible. We also tried rotating around our partners monkey-style, starting in piggyback position, which turned out to be equally difficult for the partner pretending to be the tree. I tried a few of times and didn't even get halfway around, despite clinging to my partner's neck with all my strength.

We worked on the mats for the entire class, focusing on rolling with proper attention to distance, direction, and timing. We had to roll toward and around our partners, with one arm leading and grabbing their legs to guide the rotation, and then using our feet or hands to take them down. I found it challenging to end up in the right place, but I enjoyed this exercise. I felt more aware of the reach of my body afterwards. But I am far from getting the hang of strategic rolling. Here's a video clip if you're interested in seeing some accomplished offensive rollers, it's #5:  
<http://groups.msn.com/RMAHamilton/videoclips.msnw>

We also practiced kneeling while evading kicks launched from behind, from the front, and sitting down evading kicks from the side by swiveling the knees, keeping one leg straight, flattened out in a ballet-like position. But the trick is not just to avoid, but to use the momentum of evasion to immediately swivel and rotate back toward your partner. It has to be simultaneous with the kick: flatten, swivel, and come back. These exercises were like the warmups that we do starting in a backbend, and exchanging hand and feet placement while flipping over into a pushup sort of position.

My mom and I were trying to master the art of rolling, so we did not practice takedowns quite so much. I wanted her to teach me how to do a backwards roll, but I was too scared to try it more than a couple of times. I can't figure out how to tuck my neck properly and I have to confess, I am frightened of breaking it. But at least I got the chance to improve on my forward rolls. By the end of class I had figured out how to change direction in mid-roll to land closer to my partner. I am still a bit skittish to roll from a standing position even though we were on the mats. I can't quite dive forward, I have to lift high behind me and let the weight of my lifted leg topple me forward.

I sometimes roll in my apartment but it's quite small and I can only roll once in two directions. Avoiding the furniture is an exercise in itself. The park is a more suitable place to practice rolling, weather permitting.

\*Vsego nailuchshego\* (best wishes),  
Rachel

## Training Diary #17 Wednesday

I was still sore from Saturday's class on the mats. I thought it would be easier falling and rolling on the mats, but actually the hardwood floors are smoother and allow for glide, I think the mats are actually harder on the muscles. Also I had been sitting at a computer for far too many hours. All that hype about ergonomics is spot-on; no-one should type for extended periods of time without a proper posture chair and a dropped keyboard tray. My company would probably save thousands in health insurance claims if they would invest in these simple precautions.

I digress. I started class with a stiff neck but felt a hundred times better by the end of the session. Doctors always recommend rest and sometimes this is good, but there are other times when I think it's best to train gently through moderate injuries like stiffness.

So we started with the usual conditioning warm-ups and "scooching" exercises, trying to move across the floor using only hips or shoulders. Our instructor can actually "walk" on his shoulders with his legs straight up in the air; I can't even get into this position, much less move across the floor. Then we did a self-hypnosis type of breathing exercise we have not done in a while: breathe in through the right side of the body, out through the left, in through the right leg, out through the right arm, etc. Systema advocates using breathing as a pain management tool; if a certain body part is injured, you should visualize "breathing" through that body part. Then our partners stepped on us while we rolled the body parts away from the stepping motion. Then we stood up to attempt the "climbing around partner like a monkey in a tree" exercise. I suppose this has a name, but our instructor usually demonstrates by hopping up on one of my classmates, piggyback style, and swinging completely around until he was back in the starting point. Only one of my classmates can do this tough exercise. Try it sometime; it's harder than it looks. It's also hard on the person being the "tree."

Then we did this steering-our-partners exercise that I sometimes have trouble with. You are supposed to "roll" your partner between your outstretched arms while stepping back and forth, rolling them like a barrel, but the trick is that you cannot use your arms to steer, you have to control their direction with the stepping motion of your body and use your arms only to guide them. From simple stepping, this drill progresses to stepping and changing direction, and then stepping backwards. Kind of like roller-skating backwards, if you remember what that was like (that is, if you grew up in the oh-so- stylish Roller Disco 70s as did I). I can do the backwards one, but the forwards, where you step, swivel, and step in the opposite direction, eludes me. Then we did the same steering drill crouched down a little, then finally bent almost in a squat, which I could not do, my quad muscles are sort of weak from runner's knee. I have not been doing my physical therapy knee-strengthening exercises at home very much lately; I must try to continue with these.

Next was one of my favorite exercises, avoiding kicks while laying on the floor. First we had to use just our legs, then just our arms, rolling and passing the kicking leg from one side to the other, ducking underneath when possible. We didn't practice too many takedowns; Edgar kept telling us "no obligation" as he demonstrated the drills. He wanted us to explore the movement and not worry too much about the outcome.

Then we divided the class into 2 groups for multiple attackers drills. The other group was 3-on-one; my group was just 2-on-one but since one of the two was Edgar, I'd say we were about even! He and my other partner tried to get me to relax my arms for a "no-hands" avoidance drill. They assured me that I will learn eventually; both of them were extremely helpful and encouraging. We practiced variations of

the multiple attack on the floor and standing, while staying in the same place and rolling away, using just the legs, just the arms, etc.

We finished class with a pain-compliance drill, the ever-popular twisting of the wrists by two people. The goal for this exercise was a takedown of one or both twisters, using their own energy to accomplish this. Edgar demonstrated how jumping up and down can sometimes release the tension that is formed between your body and the floor during the twisting exercise. As silly and cartoonish as it sounds, it is possible to effect a takedown with both wrists trapped by moving the two twisters together. We practiced this exercise while the person being twisted was on the floor, as well. "Does it hurt?" my courteous partner asked me with concern, as he twisted my wrist unmercifully. Actually it was pretty painful, but just as I was about to ask for mercy, somehow, the pain became more tolerable. I was sure that I'd have to ask them to let up and go easy on me, yet somehow I got through the whole drill without having to cry "Uncle." But I admitted that it did hurt a little. "A little pain is healthy," said our instructor. He also told us to keep breathing. "If you stop breathing, you will die," he said matter-of-factly. Conscious breathing is a big part of Systema philosophy. Although in everyday life we do not necessarily have to concentrate on breathing consciously to sustain ourselves, in situations of extreme injury or life-threatening circumstances, the ability to achieve this simple biological function may be the only thing that preserves life, so best to practice conscious breathing while we have the luxury.

\*Vsego nailuchshego\* (best wishes),  
Rachel

## Training Diary #18

Denis “the Menace,” a Russian Systema teacher visiting NYC from Arizona, was our guest instructor on Wednesday night. Edgar told us Denis had many years of experience in the military and working as a bodyguard, then joined the class to train along with us for a change.

Denis started us with a number of breathing and visualization exercises on the floor. Then we did pushups, 20-count pushups, one-armed pushups in the circle, it was exhausting. I was relieved when we lined up against the wall so Denis could check our form. Since I was at the end of the line, I watched him correct the rest of the class, and adjusted myself accordingly, so by the time he came to check me, by putting his hand between my lower back and the mirror, I had my posture correct. The trick is to hold that position and step away from the wall. The hips are slightly tucked so that the spine is straight, but the knees are also bent, hips and ankles aligned. I have a habit of locking my knees when I’m standing, so it’s hard for me to remember to keep the form.

Denis picked up a light bamboo practice sword and told us to try and touch him as he swung it around us in a circle. I’m afraid I mostly hid cringing out-of-range, as did several of the other girls, although he still whacked us a couple of times; it does not really hurt, but I still avoided it.

Then we did more conditioning exercises. Throughout the lesson, Denis had us drop to the floor several times for more pushups, situps, squats, and leg-lifts. Edgar usually has do these in the beginning, all at once, and we generally do a set of twenty or one forty-count, not both. Denis had us doing both varieties, although he did offer a choice between the 40-count and something he called 45 degrees, but all the guys chose the 40-count, much to my disappointment. But Denis told us we could do girly pushups on our knees and even that was a challenge for me.

We did a few typical yielding exercises, pushing our partners, and having several people push at one in the center of a circle. We worked on the six levels of unbalancing an opponent: neck/head/shoulders; elbow, wrist, hips, knees, ankles. Denis had us use two levels to escape from improvised locks, half-Nelsons, bear hugs, and other scenario type of attacks. We also used the levels to take down our partners as they attacked us with practice knives.

Denis was my partner for these drills; he demonstrated an aggressive attack on the street by shoving my shoulder and saying in a gruff voice, “Hey, what’s up?”, a phrase which must be more ominous in Russian than it is here.

At the end of class, we practiced rolling, most of the class held wooden swords in one hand but I just held my arm stretched out. Denis explained that the rolling with swords is why the outstretched arm often leads the roll in Systema. I have gotten a lot better at rolling although I can’t yet see myself using it in a combat situation. But I have gotten the hang of changing the direction of the roll in mid-air. He also explained how falling with the back curved and yielding provides protection from rolling on swords or other weapons. I didn’t realize that I have been falling incorrectly, landing on the bent leg side rather than the straight leg side. Denis and I practiced falling together, arms around each others’ shoulders.

Class was fast-paced; we changed partners and drills frequently and Denis talked to us the entire time, explaining the history and applicability of specific movements and how some of them could protect you in combat. Denis has a more direct teaching style than Edgar; he told us frequently to keep our backs straight, to correct our form, and to breathe, breathe, breathe, but he’s so good-natured and mischievous



that he doesn't come across as a drill sergeant. He showed us a few gun disarming moves with a pink rubber pistol, and promised to teach us gun disarming at the next class.

We circled up twice, once when a few people had to leave, and again at the end, after rolling. Denis asked us to share our thoughts on the class, which we don't usually do with Edgar, perhaps because class often is twice as long as scheduled and generally half the class has left. Our classes are getting progressively larger; they have been double in size lately, from 4-6 to 10, 12 or more. We all said a few words about the class. Edgar explained that Systema has more than 200 principles, and that very few people know all of them, so there is much benefit in training with a variety of teachers.

\*Vsego nailuchshego\* (best wishes),  
Rachel

## Saturday Martin Wheeler Seminar

I thought you might enjoy a writeup of the Martin Wheeler seminar. I've seen requests from reviews from the moderators, so hopefully this won't be the only review posted here. Please note this is straight from my training journal so it might be a little more colloquial than a typical seminar review.

It was nice to see Martin Wheeler again. He was our first Systema teacher and he happens to be a good friend of my best friend who lives in Miami. In fact, she would sometimes talk about her friend Martin, but until the seminar last year, I had no idea that her friend Martin was Martin the Systema teacher. It's funny how Systema makes the world smaller, I have met several friends-of-friends in the course of my studies.

Our regular teacher, Edgar Tsakouls, briefly introduced Martin as one of Vladimir Vasiliev's top students. Martin told us that there were mats in the corner, if anyone felt more comfortable on a padded surface, but he'd prefer that we work on the floor as there wouldn't be any nice soft mats in a real scenario. My mom and I did take advantage of the mats for some of the exercises where you had to start from a kneeling position, because we both have delicate knees (I spent four months in physical therapy for my knees last year, shortly before beginning Systema classes.) I preferred the floor for exercises that didn't involve kneeling, because I find the mats make me sore the next day because there is no "glide." A lot of the exercises involved swiveling the hips, and I find it harder to do this on the mats. A few other guys with knee injuries or other problems also worked on the mats for some of the drills, so I wound up swapping partners, they worked with my mom, and I worked with my friend Paul and some other guys who preferred the floor.

Based on last year's seminar, I knew we'd be in for a hard workout. It was no surprise that he started us with a 40-count pushup, and then we did twenty more for good measure. By the end of the lesson, I think we did, no joke, about a hundred pushups. I gave it my best, but I can only do about twenty at a time before collapsing, and those are twenty very small pushups, not touching my face to the floor, just going down a little. After three months of training, the pushups have definitely gotten easier. Martin told us bluntly that his intention was to wear us out so we could work more intuitively. I'd say he succeeded admirably.

Next we wiggled across the floor on our backs, and on our stomachs, using just the shoulders. Strangely, going backward while on my stomach, and going forward while on my back, proved to be enormously challenging, although going in the other directions worked OK.

We then did a few partnered exercises. One person on all fours, the other sitting on them facing opposite directions, then the person on top has to lean back and touch their head to the floor, then sit up again. The person on the ground helps a little by lifting the neck. It is a neck exercise for one person, abdominal exercise for the other. Then we sat on our partners facing the same direction, and tried to swing underneath them and end up on the opposite side. My mom taught me the trick to this, even though I had to coax her into trying this exercise. It sounds idiotically simply, but you have to lead with your head. You can't stick your arm through the person's body and expect your body to follow, but your body will follow the head.

This also worked for me when we had to do the climbing-around-partner-like-a-monkey exercise. For the first time, I got about halfway around before sliding to the floor, because I moved my head, not my arm, first. I feel certain I can get all the way around some day. My mom wouldn't try this, even though

she can probably do it. She's extremely flexible, can put her head to her knees quite easily, and likes to sit in the lotus position. Until we started taking classes together, I had no idea she could do these things. We have a strange opposite-effect thing with our Systema classes. I am eager to try the partnered flexibility exercises, even though I can't do a lot of them. But each time I get a little closer. My mom has to be talked into it, although she does these exercises with ease. She is flexible, but our teachers frequently tell her to be more relaxed. Our teachers often tell me how relaxed I am, but I am not particularly flexible. I can't roll backwards, although I practice all the time in my apartment, I have not gotten much closer to achieving it. It makes me a little bit nervous. My mom rolls backwards with ease, but she is nervous to roll forward. I think we are well-matched as partners because we each need to learn the skills that the other excels at, although we are mis-matched in size, so I had to do some of the exercises with a larger guy so as not to crush her (at 5'4" she's a lightweight, I'm 5'7" and pretty solid).

Next we practiced falling forward, catching ourselves with our hands at the last minute, and my mom and I did this on the mats. We also practiced getting down on the ground, and up again, very quickly. Martin clapped his hands, and we all had to drop as quickly as possible. He explained that if we were under fire, any parts sticking up could be hit, so we had to lay as flat as possible. Then when he clapped his hands, we had to get up again, not using our hands. We did this clapping exercise for about ten minutes until I was totally out of breath. He also had us jogging in a circle, and when he clapped, we had to drop. Oddly, I found it easier to hit the floor smoothly from a run, than from standing still.

I was concerned when he asked us to lay on our backs, shoulder to shoulder, across the dojo, because I've seen streaming video of people running across inert bodies in this way. Instead we had to roll over the row of people. I had a lot of trouble keeping a straight line, I kept rolling off the line and having to climb up again.

The theme of the class was groundwork, and indeed we spent the entire session on the ground. It was good to focus so intensely on one area of Systema. Martin amazed us all with his dexterity. He avoided two and three opponents with ease, and several of the guys got to feel the love, as they say, although it looks to me as if they are getting pummeled, but there was no shortage of volunteers. My mom and I got to do some ground-fighting with Martin and he was quite gentle, but sincere, when working with us. Like all the Systema teachers I've worked with, he can sense who is ready for a challenge and who needs to work lightly.

We continued the warmup exercises. Our partners draped across us while we lay on our backs, and we had to "throw" them off by sort of jerking our hips and undulating. Martin demonstrated how when someone has an arm holding your chest, you can puff up your chest, then exhale and simultaneously sweep the arm, effectively taking the stability out from under the arm by exhaling. We practiced arm wrestling while laying side by side, and head to head, and then on the opposite side. The goal was to try and pin the partner's arm.

Then we worked from the mounted position, trying to avoid being mounted, escape from the mount, and other variations. We spent a fairly long time evading kicks using just our legs some of the time. Martin demonstrated how to occupy the space that the kickers were vacating. It helps to swing yourself around or even through the person's legs, and get behind them. We avoided by swiveling the hips, and by rolling forward onto our folded legs, and rolling side to side.

We moved on to being kicked by 3 people at once. Martin told us not to look at their legs, but up at their heads. This is the only way to avoid multiple attackers, as you simply cannot look at all of them.

We did even more push-ups as the seminar drew to an end. Those were the only kind of exercises we did, no situps, leg lifts, or squats, which is a little unusual. At last year's seminar, he did all four exercises. He ended the group exercises our regular classes often begin with. One or more persons in the center, and everyone grouped around them kicking or striking. For the seminar, we, a class of about 30-40, kicked at three people in the middle. Martin spent a lot of time putting us in uncomfortable positions. I believe this has to do with the Russian concept of tempering, getting used to discomfort, and getting comfortable with it.

I learned a ton of new stuff and I thought this seminar was really good self-defense for women, as it's a likely scenario of an attacker lying on top of you or trying to mount you while you are asleep. It happened to me once, so I was very glad to learn ways to avoid ever being in that situation again. Other than that, it was just plain fun. Rolling around on the ground gave the whole seminar a playful ambience. I haven't rolled around that much since I was in kindergarten. I especially enjoyed lightly wrestling with our partners, avoiding and trying to trap their limbs, which we did in an improvised rather than structured way.

It was good to meet Systema-ists from different areas, some familiar faces from last year's seminar, and even from my 2001 Seminar tape of Mr. Vasiliev's, and some friends, like Paul Katz, with whom I haven't worked much lately, and Jackal, whom I know from the RMA Forum, and the newly-certified Systema teacher Frankie (who, like Martin, is a friend of my best friend down in Miami). Martin is a very good teacher; if he lived in my neck of the woods I'd take classes with him in a heartbeat. Not that I'd ever stop taking classes at Fighthouse, but it's good to supplement your regular teacher with other perspectives, as my own teacher told us. I am hoping to learn from other teachers in the future, I know that Jim King and Vladimir Vasiliev will be giving seminars at Fighthouse in the future, and I intend to go to one of Rob Green's seminars in Brooklyn as soon as my schedule permits. I will certainly post review of all of these, as I've found it helpful to keep notes about all of my training sessions.

\*Vsego nailuchshego\* (best wishes),  
Rachel

### Systema Star Trek Moment?

I was watching Star Trek: Enterprise—the one with Scott Bakula. The premise was that the Enterprise was at war, and some army officers had been sent to teach the crew how to fight (they being explorers, sort of NASA engineer/Navy types). During a scene where they were sparring, the Starfleet guy got his butt kicked, and the Army guy told him it was because he looked at his hands, rather than his head. It reminded me of what I've been told in Systema class. The moves were the usual fake Hollywood stuff, lots of high kicks and throws, but there were two moves that bore a faint resemblance to Systema.

## Training Diary #24 – Part One- Saturday

It was a beautiful sunny Saturday, perhaps that's why only 6 people showed up for our Saturday class, which was 10-20 last week. Everyone gets more instruction with a smaller class, of course. I will start attending one daytime class each week, to take advantage of this.

I like to roll around on the floor a bit before class, and I thought I had a few minutes before class, but we have been starting our classes a little more on time of late. I was still rolling and stretching like a lazy cat, to use Denis' phrase, and when I sat up, the other students had arrived and Edgar was sitting patiently waiting for me to finish. I was embarrassed—I hate for anyone to see me warm up—yet it struck me as thoughtful that they silently allowed me to finish.

We did usual four warmup exercises, 30 of each—I could not do the ten pushups without breathing, nor the ten situps. I mainly struggle with situps, as I have very weak abs, but the pushups, I modify them as much as possible, pressing down very little. I learned from Denis to wrap one leg around the other and use the legs to propel the pushup, also, another classmate told me to keep my hands lined up with my shoulders, not stretched forward. So the pushups have gotten a little easier, but the no-breath ones are still a killer.

Half of the class was spent with groundwork, the other half, defense against the knife. Our yielding exercise was both partners sitting, facing each other and pushing and pulling different parts of the body. Then we moved into 3 people kicking at one on the floor, who had to wait for contact, then roll or move away. I always forget to wait for contact and have to be reminded that it's not an avoidance exercise, more like a yielding one. Then we moved into the same thing with avoidance and takedown of one or more people. I like this exercise. I enjoy swiveling around people's legs, or diving between their legs. It's a little bit like swimming, I think.

We returned to one-to-one partnered work with kicking, and avoiding using hands, then legs. With groundwork, Edgar usually prompts us to reverse the roles every ten or fifteen minutes (with standing work, we decide when to switch roles without prompting). But he didn't prompt us to switch for a half hour or so, and my poor partner, I must have thrown him to the ground at least twenty five times, and falling and getting up again is hard work. He worked up such a sweat he had to change his shirt. But he was a good sport about it, and complimented me on my skill on the ground, which I believe is better than my skill standing up.

Then we moved into the knife work, much harder, in my opinion. Edgar gave us a lot of personal attention, checking our form as we executed the drill. We worked mostly with the knife blade held against the body, not against a slashing or stabbing movement, more like a threatening one. We practiced using our bodies as levers against the flat of the blade, turning the body forward, backward, or to the side, so that the blade passed over with minimal harm, then rotating back to cause pain in the wrist and effect a disarm. Although I was able to get control of the knife and stab my partner many times, I had a lot more trouble with the actual disarm. I managed to get the knife out of my path and avoid harm, and sometimes to get control of the knife, but not very often did I effect a disarm, although I usually managed if took my partner down.

With the knife pressed against the throat, Edgar demonstrated how to inhale to create a tiny amount of space between the knife and your throat. He also showed us how to use the chin and shoulder in combination against a knife held to the side of the neck. We worked a lot with the shoulders and torso;

not as much with our hands. My partner and I looked in the mirror to see what we were doing wrong. It's funny, but I never thought of doing this before, except to check my posture during our warm-up squats. Watching myself on video would be enormously helpful.

Edgar has a hands-off kind of teaching style. He allows plenty of room for improvisation. Even when we are all doing the same drill, each person will attack in a slightly different manner, each calls for a different defense, and I believe that is what makes it so beautiful to watch. As much as I enjoy watching kung fu or capoeira, I think Systema-ists are the most graceful of all, even though survival, not appearance, is all that matters.

\*Vsego nailuchshego\* (best wishes),  
Rachel

## **Training Diary #24 – Part Two - Tuesday Day Class**

I missed the warm-ups because I was a little late, coming straight from work, it took me longer to change. I heard Edgar leading the class through breathing exercises as I was getting dressed. The dojo was practically empty and half-dark. Even skipping all the things I like to do before class—showering, stretching, drinking a cup of coffee, braiding my hair—it seemed to take forever to change out of my work clothes.

It was a nice small class, just four students. I joined them as they were beginning to practice rolls where your partner sweeps your arm out as you walk on all fours. I did this on my hands and knees as I still feel nervous about rolling. We also did this exercise with side-to-side roll.

The class was half ground work, half knife work, as the previous class. We started with a yielding exercise on the ground, pushing at each other, and for the rest of the class alternated between avoidance/yielding exercises and disarm/takedowns.

Groundwork is always my favorite. We started with one person on all fours, the other snaking through on the ground, twisting around the limbs, between the arms or legs. Then we did the same thing, but attempted to collapse our partners by leaning on them after we snaked through their limbs. We then moved into free-from sparring on the ground, attacking each other with strikes or kicks, with the goal of ending up on top of the other.

For the knife work, we mainly did exercises where the knife was pressed up against us, as in a threatening matter, rather than slashes or stabs. Edgar showed us how to create a little space when a knife is pressed against your throat by inhaling. Also how to use your chin and neck to disarm a knife pressed against your throat, in case you hands are tied.

Because of the small class, we all got a lot of individual attention. Two of my classmates had to leave after an hour-and-a-half, so I practiced with my remaining classmate for another half-hour or so while Edgar watched and instructed us, it was great to have his undivided attention.

## **Training Diary #25 Thursday Day Class**

The day classes have a nice relaxed vibe; Edgar waited for me to change before beginning our usual four warm-ups, 30 sets of each of the 4. Then we gave each other Russian massages. This is a most enjoyable exercise where you step on your partner's limbs, lean or walk on their back, and stretch their arms back. I was surprised that I could walk on my partner's back, I think my balance has improved. We were so enjoying the Russian massage, I turned around and was surprised to see Edgar and my four classmates waiting for us to finish.

We spent a long time on one exercise, where one person grabs the other's arm, and the other has to unbalance them, eventually moving into takedowns. We did the same thing, where one person grabs the other's arm and then punches with the other arm.

Then we worked on kicks, first, avoiding the kick, then, avoiding and swinging back to land your foot in the same place as the kickers. This requires good timing, and it's very difficult. I kept landing too soon, sweeping the leg, or too late, and instead of moving on to another body part, kept trying to work with the leg. Edgar explained that the idea is to make the other person believe his kick has connected, so he does not reset himself and take aim again.

It was a hard workout as we practiced takedowns for about two hours. Getting knocked down and getting back up again is hard work. I was out of breath and somewhat relieved when Edgar finally wrapped it up.

\*Vsego nailuchshego\* (best wishes),  
Rachel



## **Training Diary #26 Friday**

This was our makeup class for Saturday, when Edgar will be in Chicago at a seminar with Vladimir Vasiliev. We are all looking forward to his sharing what he's learned from his trip.

Our class was very similar to Thursdays. Warm-ups were slightly different then usual, as Edgar led us through slow inhale/fast exhale and vice versa as we did our pushup and other exercises. We did 15 rather than 30 of each.

Then our partners relaxed and stretched our shoulders while we lay on the floor. They grabbed our feet and swung our legs around the stretch the hips. If you are relaxed, your whole body will wiggle around the floor when your partner does this, if just your legs moved, it means you are not relaxed.

We did the same grabbing drill as on Thursday, working up to grabbing one arm and punching with the other. Edgar led us through first avoidance, then maintaining contact, then finally takedowns. Being behind the attacker is a good position to aim for, as it keeps you safe and with the advantage.

We did similar work to Thursday's with our kicking drills, first avoiding, then avoiding and swiveling back in, then landing the foot right next to the kicking leg, which requires good timing, then finally we practiced sweeping the kicking foot out before it reached the floor.

Throughout the class, Edgar emphasized going slow. He told us that moving slowly and soothingly, petting or stroking the attacker, can actually have a hypnotic effect. This is not as far-fetched as it sounds. Hypnotists are usually depicted as working with their voice alone, but the one time I was hypnotized, the hypnotist did so with touch, by patting and touching different areas of my body, mainly the legs and arms. Touch has remarkable psychological effect. A parent soothes a child with touch, and it's an important tool for working with animals. Accupressure and massage have evident effects on emotion, and some manual therapists, such as Reiki practioners, claim to be able to draw deep emotional effects on their patients.

Edgar also told us that Systema is like dancing "in a ballroom, so nice, and beautiful," he said, in a dreamy voice, as if he were drawing on an old memory, waltzing across the floor with an invisible partner.

\*Vsego nailuchshego\* (best wishes),  
Rachel

## Training Diary # 27 Tuesday

I have a confession to make: not all of my Systema classes have been enjoyable learning experiences. Nearly all of them have been, but there are a couple of notable exceptions. In the past, I chose not to post my journals for those classes, but I hope to give an accurate picture of my training. So here's a description of a class in which I didn't have much success.

When I perform poorly in class, it's a psychological problem, not a physical one. In every other aspect of my life, I feel that Systema guides my physical movements. But occasionally my mind will not allow my movements to be free enough to train effectively. Although it's only happened a few times, I view these occasions as discord, imbalance in my life. So I have to describe my state of mind in order to explain why occasionally, I can't be a Systema-ist. You'll have to let me know if you prefer that I stick to the more accurate description of the drills and omit the very occasional unsuccessful class from my logs.

I started off fine with a rolling exercise where you start in a sitting position, keeping your back rounded, lower it on the floor using one shoulder, use the other shoulder, and lift yourself up again. We also practiced swiveling our hips and using them to change direction on the floor. I feel OK on the floor, as if it's a safe harbor for me. Not so much standing up, unfortunately.

We moved into a kicking exercise, which troubled me a great deal. The exercise was your partner kicks you, and you swivel your hips to avoid. Later we expanded it to include avoiding, then swiveling back, and stepping in various directions. It seems rather simple, but I was having trouble with it. When there is any kind of stepping or foot-patterns, I have a hard time following along with the instructor, even on my aerobic tapes at home. There's this exercise called a Grapevine on my Tae Bo tape that I have never been able to figure out. I guess I was standing there with a puzzled look on my face, because everyone started trying to help me all at once. This made me really nervous. I felt that if I just practiced it a little bit, I'd figure out the steps. I asked everyone to tell me EXACTLY what I was doing wrong, but no-one would give me any specific information. Edgar tried to tell me not to get hung up in doing it step-by-step, to just relax and repeat the exercise.

I was feeling sort of crappy because I am not one of those people who picks things up quickly, I have to practice over and over again before I understand the movement. All eyes were on me and I felt a lot of pressure to pick it up. Truthfully I was hoping for more practice, less demonstration and explanation. I felt as if I could only keep practicing, I might get it. But being the center of attention made me feel as if I used up all the class time because our teacher and the rest of the class were preoccupied with trying to help me. I know this isn't logical, after all, they were friends trying to help. But you see, a person like me has all sort of inner conflicts when it comes to interacting with others. The phrase "change partners" brings on a mild anxiety attack, I feel as if I've already made a gigantic effort in securing one partner, and now I have to find **another** person? If you are a person who has socialized normally, perhaps you cannot imagine how it is to be this way, to hope that no-one will notice you, and to feel that any attention from others, no matter how positive, is damaging. I was speaking to our school director afterwards about shyness and we both agreed it has a little bit to do with pride and ego. Although I always claim to be shy, I have a great deal of self-confidence in some areas of my life. As terrible as it sounds, I absolutely hate the way I look.

In any case, everyone encouraged me to practice with our teacher, and he does not talk much, he just wants you to keep moving. I knew if only someone were willing to just kick at me over and over again,

the repetition would eventually provide the solution. Our instructor is fine with allowing us to practice on him over and over again, and does not often expect any reciprocation, except to demonstrate how it's done (generally with my partners, we switch back and forth, usually punching or kicking in sets of 4). Edgar does not need to tell me if I'm doing something wrong, I know this for myself based on the outcome of my movement. If I am falling all over him or stumbling, losing my balance, or if I end up several feet away from him, then I was not doing it correctly. But he'll just keep coming at me and I generally get it eventually, and then he'll say "right" or "good" very quietly to let me know I'm on the right track. That was all right but I still felt as if I was consuming all his time. Edgar encouraged us to be playful, to treat sparring like a game, and generally I do have a merry and sometimes mischievous attitude in Systema class, but I hardly smiled today. That probably made a significant difference in my performance, certainly I felt less relaxed.

Probably I was a little distracted by an impossible assignment my boss handed to me before I left to go to class. Also I was a little bit tired, because I didn't go to sleep at a reasonable hour, and the sound of the theater troupe practicing a musical next door was pretty loud. Everyone was trying to help me at once, our teacher, my training partner, the other classmate, I expected the school director sitting behind the reception desk to start shouting instructions at me. I hate to be the center of attention, even when it's something good. I'll never forget the humiliating experience of my sixth-grade teacher asking if he could read my essay aloud to the class, and when I refused to allow it, he harangued me mercilessly, telling the class, "I'd like to show you how an A+ essay sounds, but *someone* won't allow it."

It's funny how our happy memories fade and our unpleasant ones, like my sixth grade teacher's words to me, persist for years and years, or in some cases, for the duration of our lives. But feeling bad is not something that I can suppress, I just have to let myself get as low as possible until I finally realize, Wait, things could be worse! I still have all four limbs, so what am I feeling sorry for myself for? I will sit on my sofa, drink some ginger tea, and watch the snow, and I am pretty sure I'll feel better tomorrow.

It's about a half-hour since I wrote that last line and I do feel a lot better. The problem is that unsuccessful training sessions like today's destroy my self-confidence. The last time this happened it was a lot more dramatic and I did feel such a loss of confidence, I wondered whether I should continue training. I don't have such an intense feeling this time, but I do have this uneasy feeling of being a bad student, far worse than being a bad Systema-ist. I feel if only I paid attention more or was cleverer, I could learn the movement without taking up all the class time with my own problems. Luckily I have a wonderful teacher, Edgar Tsakouls, who always tells me not to worry, that the exercises are difficult, (though he makes them look easy), and to have fun with them. He's a remarkably kind and caring person with a soothing personality and the calming movements of an accomplished Systema-ist, so that we always leave class, no matter how challenging, in a more relaxed state than when we arrived.

## **Training Diary # 28 Wednesday**

## **Training Diary # 29 Saturday**

## **Training Diary # 30 Ground to Standing Work Tuesday**

I haven't posted #28-30, but since they exist as handwritten logs, I'll maintain the chronology. As usual the day class was small, just three of us and our instructor. Floor-to-ground exercises were most of this class, with one partner attacking from the ground and the other standing, and also with both on the ground. It was a small enough class that the three of us could work together sometimes, two-on-one, and the groundwork made it seem more like play than work.

To begin, one person crawled toward the other with an intended head butt to the legs, which we redirected with a push to the head. We practiced escaping from a grab around the legs from the ground, using various ways to create space or break the hold: twisting the hips and jumping slightly, rocking back from one foot to the other. Edgar showed us another way to move the legs slightly to create a small gap between the leg and the grabbing arms, similar to the small gap created by the quick intake of breath that he previously showed us during knife-to-throat exercises. Then you slip one hand into the gap and the other around the neck, and do a "head crank," using your arms as levers to topple the body backwards in the direction it's already leaning. He told us to be careful with the neck, explaining that it's not a choke, but a way to free yourself by tipping the other person almost gently. For this exercise, we had to maintain some structure in our forearms to use as leverage. I had some trouble keeping my arms rigid enough; I had to remind myself to do so. Cranking someone's head or even just punching is not something that comes to me naturally.

We also practiced escaping from a grab around the legs by falling backwards, using the same motion of the attempt to rock back and away from the attack, and return back with offensive movements of the legs. We also practiced escaping from a grab to one leg, and my partner asked who would attack in such a way (aside from groupies clutching at a rock star). I reminded him that crazy people might attack in any way. No matter how unusual or bizarre, it's certain that someone has already been attacked in that manner.

The floor-to-ground work, with one person standing, was also good practice for falling and moving on the ground. Using the same motion as the grab to fall backwards and slip away was an opportunity for me to explore falling in a spontaneous and natural way. Falling became an extension of movement, and rather than cringing from the impact of the ground, I began to welcome it.

\*Vsego nailuchshego\* (best wishes),  
Rachel

## Training Diary #31 Wednesday, Guest Instructor Rob Green

We warmed up as usual, with breathing and conditioning exercises. Then we practiced moving around on the floor using just the shoulders, on our backs and stomachs, and also using just the hips, by sitting on the floor with the legs bent and lifted, so that your feet do not touch the floor. This is helpful for learning to move your body parts separately. Then our guest instructor Rob Green arrived, he was a bit late due to some mishap with the F train. If you've had the opportunity to ride this train regularly, you know what I mean. It is riddled with problems, often skips stops without advance warning, and sometimes doesn't arrive at all. The F stands for "F-ck off, if you think this train will take you to your destination."

If you read the forums at [RussianMartialArt.com](http://RussianMartialArt.com) or [RMAForum.com](http://RMAForum.com), you may have seen some of Rob's eloquent posts. He was the first certified Systema teacher in New York (there are now 2 others), has 40 years of martial arts experience, and is a seasoned law enforcement officer, though you'd hardly guess by his appearance. You can visit his Web site at <http://www.rusanyc.com> to learn more about Rob Green and Systema.

After Edgar's brief introduction, Rob spoke to us about Systema. This was most welcome, because Edgar says his English isn't good enough for explanations (we always understand him just fine). He told us that other martial arts have much to offer and we should not discount them because they aren't Systema. He showed up a Wing Chun exercise called Sticky Hands, where you work on maintaining contact with the punch, and using this contact to guide it away from your vulnerable areas. He also explained about "changing levels," raising or lowering yourself to a different point than your normal standing position (which in Systema, is typically about one inch lower than a standing position, the hips slightly tucked and the knees just a little bent, to allow for maximum mobility). Rob explained about the Russian concept of "happy fist," allowing an opponent to believe he has made contact when he has actually just missed. It takes sensitivity to the attacking energy of an opponent as well as good timing. This is both physical and psychological tactic, and because the opponent thinks he has been successful, it allows you to continue the work uninterrupted by any counter moves.

Rob asked us to have one person place their hands on the others' shoulders, and press down hard, and we practiced dropping one shoulder to unbalance our partners. Because they were pushing down quite hard, the sudden loss of a stable shoulder upon was effective in throwing off their balance.

Next we explored whip- and wave-like motion, and how this kind of movement provides a natural self-defense. Movement that isn't stiff and pre-planned is also free and spontaneous, reflexive, and so it lacks the tension and aggression that can further antagonize an opponent. Rob used the example of children who are first learning to walk and to interact with the world. They feel their movements, rather than think about them. They fall softly, without fear. He explained that we should aim to remember this uninhibited range of motion that has been re-shaped by the life of an adult.

I find this wave-like motion to be a challenge, especially with one exercise where we had to punch our partners lightly using the energy created by this wave. Most people (Systema-ists aside, I mean) think about punching as a movement of the arm, but in Systema, we move our entire bodies, and a punch starts more from the hip than the arm itself.

Toward the end of class, my mom asked me to come at her without warning, rather faster than I prefer to work, so I did, and I must say, I couldn't get near her. I am 3 or 4 inches taller and many pounds heavier

than my petite mother, but she handled me quite well. Of course I was not using Systema to attack or to avoid, just ordinary thug punches, kicks, etc. I was impressed, but I still prefer to work more slowly.

Rob came over and worked a bit with both of us. He asked us to relax and then shook us energetically, observing the tense parts. My mom is a bit more tense than I am, of course, parents tend to have more concerns than their children. Also her job is more high pressure. I have a lot of tension in my shoulders, which Rob explained is often found in women. Some of us tend hunch over to hide our breasts, to make ourselves less visible. I asked him if it had anything to do with typing all day? I am a webmaster by trade? and he said that it probably has something to do with it. But as you may already know, tension is in the mind, not just the body. I have a pretty strong desire not to be noticed, and I think this affects my posture.

We learned quite a lot more than I have written here, but this class took place a few weeks ago and I've forgotten some of the other aspects of that particular class. (I wanted to first make sure it was OK to mention him in this public forum). My handwriting is not so good? most people describe it as the worst they've ever seen. So I always try to post these within a week of the class, otherwise, I won't be able to decipher my handwritten logs. But Rob has promised to come back and teach us again, and so I hope to share a bit more of that experience with this group, as Rob as so kindly shared his own experience with us.

## Training Diary # 32

Because there are so many more handwritten than typed logs, I can no longer keep the chronology. They will just be numbered as they appear. I'm reaching the six-month mark, and I now intend to pick and choose what I type from my handwritten logs, to offer you only the most insightful training descriptions and tips I pick up during this exciting journey.

But this group, as it turned out, is really my online journal. There have been occasional comments, but for the most part, it's been all about my training. That can change whenever the group members wish it to, but until it does, my posts sometimes go beyond the boundary of Systema training, and include aspects of my personal life, just as my personal life cannot be separated from my Systema training, now that it has become my chosen path. Systema-ists speak through movement, and we all have a unique voice, which draws its resonance from the experiences that have shaped our souls.

I don't always have an easy time during training, I feel as if I am learning the skill I never learned during my grade school years—getting along with classmates. I'm 32, and I must learn to play well with others. It's important not only for Systema, but for my social and professional life as well. I've become much friendlier, through Systema class. I thought I preferred my solitude, but I tried it the other way, and I believe it's much better to love than to be indifferent. If you ask the right questions, most people are interesting, and have tales to tell, life experiences to share, regardless of outward appearance or first impressions—many are like myself, frosty upon meeting, warm once the acquaintance is made. "It's not just about you, it's also about them," as my mom used to remind me.

It's too bad that this log isn't about our guest teacher, Denis "the Menace" (Edgar is away training with Jim King in Tennessee :). Denis is a fun teacher, a jovial and merry person, and his voice is loud enough to be heard all the way in the ladies' room, quite the opposite of Edgar's soft voice, which is difficult to hear over the capoeira music. I worked with Denis a little, on the ground, while we had our arms wrapped around the sticks, like POWs in "unfriendly countries," as Denis politely refer to them, or, as I think of it, like milkmaids. I love to work with the stick in this way, and I asked Denis when we circled if we could tie our legs together in the course of our training.

The exercises were tougher than usual for me, particularly the squats, I can hardly bend my leg without pain, and sitting on the floor is the only way to sit comfortably. I'm embarrassed by my pain, not because I feel it makes me look weak, only because I hate to be noticed, and hobbling around with my giant splint, groaning, and sighing, it's hard not to be noticed. Pain is such a personal, intense feeling; everyone relates to it differently. If there was any way to practice Systema alone, I'd have discovered it, but training with a partner gives a clear advantage and for reasons described above, interaction is very much a part of training, as both my mom, and another Systema teacher, reminded me.

This log is more about that second teacher that was there that night, to our good fortune. I was having some difficulty. Sometimes I get nervous, especially with as large a class as our night classes are. My training doesn't always go smoothly, as you may know if you've read the other logs. I am a bit short-tempered of late, due to the injury described in a long-winded earlier post. The pain makes me irritable and wired, like I've had too much coffee. It helps to sit and roll on the floor, so Systema class has been good for me.

But as always, it's hard for me to partner with anyone, I feel nervous about it when the classes are large. I don't like to work with the rough guys; Human energy is not without force, we should move with the

same care as we handle weapons, yet without thinking or planning, as a bird flies through thick treetops at high speeds without getting caught in the branches. Systema is not about strength or speed, because the degree of strength or speed you possess might vary at any given moment due to circumstances beyond your control. Speed and force are sometimes necessary, as we all know, there are no rules in Systema, yet the energy must be channeled, directed, focused, not haphazard, frayed with emotion and vulnerability. We must act beyond the movement to its ramifications, and use the least force necessary. After all, no one likes to be battered, though many of us do not mind being soundly beaten.

My partner was too fast, entering the speed trap, it's hard to avoid that, as Arthur Sennott described in his article about "Free Sparring: Overcoming The Kickboxing Trap" (<http://www.russianmartialart.org/html/ikfkicktrap.html>). Given my injury, I should not have worked with this classmate. I don't like unnecessary speed, as I try to present a challenge suitable to the skill of my partner, which is a challenge in itself, so there's no need to use speed on me—I yield, and with my injury, it does not take much force to take me down. Given that my partner knows I am walking with a cane these days, the speed was especially unwelcome. I want to help others learn, as others taught me, but I myself do not have enough skill to be instructing them, and more importantly, I don't have the skill to communicate with them. There is plenty of assistance to be had, we sometimes have the benefit of two teachers, in addition to the longtime students, but they will not offer help you if your mind is not willing, it will then be up to you to ask for the help.

I'm not what you'd call a people person, for me, the distance between myself and another person is always a great divide. Someone else would have been more helpful, but I got annoyed with my speedy partner, and what I perceived as his arrogance. Working with such people can be helpful, as they do mirror the population of the real world, but you must have the strength of will not to descend to their level of aggression or resentment. That distant look in the eye has a purpose. Its state of mind allows you to act without engaging either the body or the mind, but both in one unified, thoughtless action, so your reactions are quicker, and more adaptive, than the most sophisticated thought process.

My partner was struck at me and said, "Gotcha now." "Can't you see that I can break your arm," I said, as I got him in an arm lock and hit him with my shoulder. "I never spar competitively," I bitched—sorry, there is no other word for it. "I am not trying to win here, just learn." I got a little pissed off, and like I said, I'm not the most even-tempered person in the world. I wanted to hurt him, and that's a terrible sensation, which I want to avoid at all costs, as that is what got me into trouble all those years ago. I am wary of anger.

I was lucky, another teacher was there; he helped me right away, with a typical Systema efficiency. I told him I felt tense, and frustrated, and I asked him to hit me. Edgar hits us while we spar, he hurts me only occasionally, everyone, only as much as they can take it, as the teachers do. This was the first time I took any punches. It was relaxing, almost like a massage, except for the last punch, which hurt in strange way, like a whip, very stinging, but it sank to the depths of my stomach, and hurt for a few hours after class. Chronic and nagging pain makes you old before your time, but Systema pain keeps you young and limber (For your own safety, work with an experienced practitioner when exploring this exercise.)

The teacher shook me up a bit, pushed me, made me move on my feet, and I felt more relaxed, as he knew I would. Then we began to work lightly, and he took me down a few times, and I fell much more softly than I would have before his punching/shaking/pushing exercises. The pain of my leg was a great deal lessened, due to relaxation, and the contact with the floor is relaxing (since it is an old injury, small



fractures the result of a long-ago sprain, movement helps. But always get treatment for a sprain, you could have broken bones and not even realize it, because the pain of the sprain disguises it. The most common cause of a sprain is an earlier, untreated sprain. "Treat your joints like porcelain," Martin Wheeler advised us. )

Limbering up helps me, without it, I feel aches and pains. Someday, I will recover my flexibility, and relaxation warm-ups won't be necessary, but working around this injury makes me realize how far I have to go, in terms of my relaxation, my social interaction, my physical fitness, my strength of will. I expect it will take another year of training 3X a week to recover my physical fitness, and I'm back in physical therapy, as I was before I started Systema, but I am very happy to be finally getting therapy for the old injury, and Systema and the Russian Health Systema are also a form of physical therapy. Dousing, breathing, stretching, and massage with Peggy's Dit Da Jow, and a glass of red wine before bed helped me a great deal more than the doctors at the hospital. I'm not just saying that because of all my horrible experiences with doctors, but only in terms of the measure of pain relief. I iced only once outside the emergency room, didn't use crutches, didn't stay off of it, didn't use the brace, didn't wear running shoes, opted for the wine instead of the Benadryl (the doctor suggested either for the pain).

I enjoyed working with this teacher; I felt at last as if I were doing Systema, sparring slowly, I don't always feel this relaxed in class. My partner's tension affects me a great deal, it's like I don't have the strength of will to distance myself from the emotions of others, which is strange for someone who was once so solitary. But after training with the teacher, all I can say is what a difference the state of mind can make on a training session. It's like the mind lets the body think for it, and the body lets the mind move it. Words are insufficient to describe this feeling. It exists only in the moment, no longer, always different, no moment is the same twice, and can never be reproduced even in recollections. It has some parallels to what little I know of Zen training, but as always, my words are insufficient to describe this moment.

"Now you're doing Systema," he said, as if he was reading my mind. Maybe he overheard my earlier remark—did I say, I don't feel as if I am doing Systema, or only think it, when paired with my speedy partner? But it was delightful to work with the teacher, if only it could be that way all the time. If nothing else, smile and laugh with your partner, freedom of movement should give you joy, like flight, just as it says in the guidebook.

"Have confidence," my teacher said, as he challenged me further, grabbing at me suddenly in various ways, the choke, about the waist. "It's not about you, it's about me," he said, as he came at me (meaning that the initial attack determines the movement; all that follows stems from that energy that your attacker so conveniently provides for you.)

I was talking too much, as I have been of late, from the stress and pain. The subway is the hardest part, I am ashamed to admit that New Yorkers don't offer even the handicapped seat to cripples. I count my blessings that this is only temporary; I can't imagine the difficulty of always walking with a cane in New York. No one offers you a seat on the train, and people stampede over you, and curse at your back because you aren't hobbling fast enough. I'm afraid there's a special place reserved in Hell for Manhattanites, and it's about the same size as the entire island.

The teacher made an interesting remark about people in Grand Central not walking into each other, and people in our busy school bumping into each other all the time. As Systema-ists, we ought to be able to keep from crashing into each other, even in small spaces, but he is right, go to Grand Central at rush

hour, and watch the way people swivel their hips, turning sideways to ease through the crowd, like fish who change direction as they swim.

Anyway, after the teacher's punches took me down a notch, both in relaxation, and arrogance, he challenged me a bit more, moving faster and sneakier (it goes without saying that he was still tailoring our training to my level, not his). He kept encouraging me, and telling me to be more confident. I was afraid of being too rough, as he came at me without warning, using all different forms of attack, and I took him down, often using my legs. We were no longer doing the exercises led by our guest teacher, Denis "the Menace" (Edgar is away training in Tennessee with Jim King), instead we were sparring creatively. I asked him if I was being too rough, and he said No, and again encouraged me to be more confident. "Let Systema be your words," he encouraged me, and I used my legs, which even though one is injured, it's easier for me to unbalance my partner with my legs, as my hips are generally more relaxed than the shoulders, so the legs are more dynamic and effective. It was wonderful to spar that way, it's a peaceful, thoughtless feeling, very internal. If I could find that feeling within myself more often, both inside and outside of class, it would improve my training on a deeper and quite personal level.

## Training Diary # 33 Tuesday

I haven't posted #31-32, but since they exist as handwritten logs, I'll maintain the chronology. The day classes are usually small, but today we started with just Edgar and I, and at first I was a bit nervous about this, wishing there was another student to distract from my mistakes. But I began to relax a bit as we warmed up, the school was quiet, and Edgar's a patient teacher with an easygoing manner. Another of my classmates joined us as we were doing a yielding exercise, pushing and returning the energy with a wave-like motion, yielding, and returning back. Developing sensitivity and maintaining contact were the main themes, we worked slowly and lightly on timing, and the psychological aspects of physical conflict. We escaped from headlocks, full nelsons, arms bent back, and other kinds of grabs, allowing some contact, but slipping away, swiveling the hips, rolling the shoulders, rotation, and other ways to escape and return back. Edgar demonstrated how you would step sideways between a narrow gap, hip, leg and shoulder moving as one, and how the same movement applied to the exercise, and to Systema movement in general.

My partner evaded me with ease, because I was moving slowly. I often do this as well: evade completely when we are working on allowing brief contact. Edgar explained that we should wait for the contact, then slip away at the same speed as the attempted grab, moving away in the same direction of the grabbing motion, using the energy of the attacker to escape and return back, and allowing the attacker to believe he has been successful. Sudden movements or resistance will be instantly discernible and allow an attacker to compensate, whereas subtle and yielding movements will fool an attacker into believing he was successful. (The Russians call this concept "happy fist.") Although subtle movements may be felt through the close contact we were trying to develop, but most people have been conditioned to believe what they see or what they have been conditioned to believe about human movement, rather than what they feel. Timing is everything, and moving away too late, or too early, will not be visually effective, nor will it utilize the same energy.

Edgar demonstrated how to escape from tighter holds as well. We worked a bit with freeing from elbow and wrist locks, using leverage of the forearm. I found it difficult to create enough tension in my forearm, which was necessary for both my partner and I to practice my leverage. My arms are very loose, and I had to really concentrate on maintaining enough structure to make the exercise effective, both for my partner, and myself, when it was my turn to free myself from the hold. Edgar showed up how movement of the wrist and fingers could even help to free from a painful lock or twist of the delicate bones of the hand. By now I know that Edgar will twist pretty hard with any sort of limb-twisting exercise—I mean, the point is to find a way to escape, and that's not really possible unless there is some pain from which to escape (unlike a punch, which can be worked on avoiding without necessarily feeling the pain of impact). My classmates, and myself included, don't twist nearly so hard. But I moved my wrist and fingers, and Edgar's twisting became considerably less painful. My classmate kept asking me if it was working, and I kept telling him that I was afraid to stop to see how much pain was actually abated, but he continued to ask me. I don't think he realized how painful it was to do nothing about Edgar's twistings, but I stopped moving my fingers long enough to confirm that yes, the movement eased the pain considerably.

I was the only one who hit the floor today, while Edgar demonstrated how to free yourself from a half nelson. We were working so lightly, I didn't even break a sweat. We were working largely on developing awareness of each others' movements; feeling rather than seeing. I think my partner was looking for some more combat-oriented applications, because he asked how these exercises might be used in scenarios, and how to escape from a grab or choke hold, rather than slip away from an attempt.

Edgar explained that the exercises were not necessarily to be employed in real scenarios, but to fine tune the senses to fight effectively without aggression or tension.. Edgar talked to us at length about the physical and psychological aspects of internal martial arts, and how it differs from the external martial arts. He spoke sincerely about how challenging it is to acquire such skill, and we were reminded that he is also a student, despite how accomplished he appears to us.

\*Vsego nailuchshego\* (best wishes),  
Rachel

## Training Diary # 34 Wednesday

After our usual sets of pushups, leg-lifts, situps, and squats (30 of each, the last ten without breathing), Edgar had us do what he calls “friendly” exercises. We formed a line, arms around each others’ shoulders, and fell backwards in unison, then stood up again. Then we did the same thing falling forward. With these “friendly” exercises, synchronicity and teamwork are crucial. “All for one, and one for all,” is the MO here, as if one person’s timing is a bit off, the rest of the line will not be able to stand, either. Sometimes we succeeded, sometimes not, and of course we couldn’t help but laugh when parts of our line collapsed.

Then we did “friendly” one-armed pushups, in a circle, with one arm around our neighbor’s shoulder, then the other arm. Our yielding exercises were with the whole class, as well, everyone pushing each other, yielding and returning. Then we milled around in a tight bunch, maneuvering around and through each other, a fitting exercises for New Yorkers who ride the subway during rush hour.

Next we did one of my favorite exercises, where our teacher claps his hands and we all have to drop to the floor as quickly as possible, and rise again. We did the same thing with rolling instead of falling. I find it much easier to fall and roll when I am walking, than when I am standing still. I think it’s not only the motion, but also the lack of planning that helps me. “Too much thinking,” Edgar sometimes tells me. Apparently I have a habit of looking at the ceiling when I am planning my movements, rather than feeling them.

We worked on manipulating the head to unbalance, then following up with suitable movements depending on where the tension is. Also on avoiding punches and capturing the attacking arm, and avoiding kicks and swiveling around and behind, and back again, in the elliptical movements of Systema. The subtle practice of maintaining contact, yielding, avoiding, but not flinching or blocking it, requires sensitivity. Instead of generating new, forceful, noticeable energy to counter or block the attack, you direct, but not impede, the attacking energy, allowing the opponent to believe he is still in control, and giving you the opportunity to complete the work uninterrupted by any counter-moves.

For me, this was a whole new way of thinking about physical conflicts. If someone grabs your arm, you go with the motion, allow them to take it, and use the yielding motion to slip away. Expending minimal effort to disable your opponent also minimizes damage to him. It’s very different from H2H combat you see in movies, in most other martial arts, and in actual street or bar fights. As so many maintain, Systema can’t be described, it has to be experienced. To a casual observer, it might even appear as if hardly anything is happening between two sparring partners, yet one will go down. Some of the movements are intended to fool the eye, to mislead the attacker, and to be as invisible and subtle as possible. (This subtlety leads some to believe that Systema sparring is choreographed, but anyone who spars with a Systema teacher tends to lose this notion rather quickly.)

Movements are never isolated in Systema; one person begins the motion; the other sustains and redirects the same energy. As Martin Wheeler told our class, “The attacker determines the movement,” and yet, the Systema-ist directs it. The attacker physically and psychologically feels in control of the situation, right up until the moment it becomes apparent that he is not. This is also somewhat hard to describe, but it’s the key to the fluid movements and often graceful movements of Systema. Systema-ists aren’t trying to look graceful, but rather to have freedom of movement, and movement that is free and natural appears to be graceful. Nature provides excellent examples of this in the flight of birds, the leap of the panther, the glide of dolphins as they move through the water, Even the tumbling of babies learning to walk,

though not graceful, is free and soft, unfettered by the limitations we learn to impose through social conditioning. It is the same kind of soft and yielding movement towards which Systema-ists aspire

**Training Diary # 35 Gun disarming with Guest Instructor Martin Wheeler**

It's been awhile since my last post; training has been a little difficult for at times, but lately I've been enjoying class again, and I am remembering how important is the state of mind in which I ought to approach training. Relaxed and accepting that things are the way they are—an opportunity to better understand myself and my fellow human beings. Smiling and laughing while training is also good for me, as I sometimes get nervous about interacting with other people if we are not well-acquainted.

So tonight Martin Wheeler was our guest teacher; he's here for the weekend seminars at Fighthouse. Martin is one of the most accomplished Systema teachers that I have seen in my few months of Systema. It's amazing to watch him spar, he's so light on his feet, and always in contact with the person attacking, sometimes inflicting great pain with hardly any visible effort, or manipulating the other person's movement without contact. Those who say the no-contact work is choreographed should spar with Martin or some other high-level practitioner to feel it—or not feel it, as it were—for themselves.

Dennis led us through some breathing exercises while we waited for Martin to arrive. Martin went easy on us with exercises tonight; one twenty-count pushup, backwards (in a backbend position) and fingertip pushups; the latter two I found difficult, well, perhaps impossible is a more apt description. We also did rounded situps, where you lie back, roll from one shoulder to the other, and come up again, in a circular motion. Then we practiced holding one leg straight out, bending the other, and going as low as possible, keeping the spine straight, until sitting on the floor, like going into a fall. This takes strong quadriceps. But that was all, and previously, when training with Martin, we've done pushups every half-hour or so.

Martin also had us stretch each other, one hand over the head, standing side by side, and the other person grabs both wrists and pulls the hand further to one side. Also the arms behind the back stretch, palms out, and the other person pushes your arms together and upwards, and then you both sink to the floor and the other person pulls your arms out further behind you.

To start, we simply punched each other, practicing takedowns, as good way as any to get in a Systema frame of mind. And I think Martin may have wanted to watch us for a few minutes, to get a sense of the variety of students present. Next we practiced the same thing with our feet in place, without stepping, as our partners punched or attacked us. Then we practiced using only the legs with our hands behind our backs. During these exercises, Martin stopped us several times to offer more suggestions. The pace was nice and relaxed; we had time to pause for more instruction several times throughout each exercise.

Martin explained what to do when your partner is tense and sort of wooden, rooted to the ground, or clenching in a death grip. He told us to break the tension light punches or other blows, restoring motion. I've wondered about this it happens occasionally that my partner stops moving once I manipulate them in one direction, and I'm unsure how to continue with a takedown. It's easier for me if the person remains in motion. Constant movement is a principle of Systema; in a real scenario, the action will be more dynamic than can ever be simulated. I am not sure if I have the skill to find, or break, my partner's tension; we spent several classes with Dennis learning how to find the tension while our partners played "statues" and allowed us to explore their structure.

The last half-hour we spent on gun disarming; Martin showed us many different ways to escape from gunpoint, a situation that some would consider hopeless. Personally, I'd use such actions only if my

personal safety were threatened. If someone demands my wallet or other material positions in my possession, my instinct would be to hand it over and hope the person is just a desperate thief, not a murderer. I never carry large sums of cash, and nothing in my wallet or on my person is worth taking a bullet for. But if my personal safety were threatened, that would be a different story.

Martin showed many different ways to escape and disarm a gun pointed to the forehead, to the back, to the stomach, the temple. He demonstrated how to first evade the direction of the gun by turning the body parallel, then disarming as one would a knife, using the body for leverage to turn the muzzle back to the attacker.. Martin also demonstrated using kicks, in the case of restricted hands, and changing levels, going to the ground to unbalance the attacker.

For a pointed gun, he showed us how pushing the gun toward the attacker also pushes their finger away from the trigger. Also, to our amusement, he demonstrated feigning putting the hands above the head, with a worried expression in his face, then grabbing the gun away with both hands. He also showed how to slap a pointed gun from a person's hand, by slapping the knuckles and the bony parts of the hand very hard; I pointed the gun at Martin so he could demonstrate and was surprised, as I often am, by the pain inflicted by an apparently effortless motion.

I think we all enjoy our guest instructors; we've been fortunate to have Martin and Dennis train with us, aside from being accomplished Systema-ists, they have security, personal protection, and military experience; real application of the principles of the System. We all enjoyed the gun disarming, as was revealed when we circled up. As Edgar told us, it shows how Systema is not merely hand-to hand combat. It is a tool for survival, that can be applied anywhere to any situation, as described in the Russian System Guidebook, a skill that "can't be seen until used, and can't be taken away while its practitioner is alive."

## Training Diary # 36 - Fundamentals Class with Six Beginners

Six or seven beginners joined our class tonight, an unusually high number. The weekday kung-fu classes were cancelled, and they were all refugees from that class. Many had only just discovered that there would be kung-fu class that night, but they were commendably good-natured about joining Systema.

It was just me and them, putting me in the unusual position of being the most experienced student. It was fun to work with the beginners. Most adapted well. Their kung fu is also an internal style so I imagine there are some similarities. Before class, some of them expressed some trepidation about rolling, which they apparently don't do in their class. So Edgar spent a good half-hour teaching us to roll. I was so happy to be in this class as I had been wanting more instruction in rolling. I am not very good at it and still get scared to roll from a standing position. After almost a year of instruction, I cannot help but feel as if it's holding me back, and as much as I try not to notice, it is apparent to me that most people catch onto rolling much faster than I have.

So we started with the easiest rolls, from a kneeling position, which most everybody had no problem with. Then from all fours, knees off the ground, which is kind of a bumpy ride for me but I'm getting used to it and losing my fear. I keep hitting my head, but maybe that will teach me to tuck it under. Then we tried rolling from a low squat, duckwalking and tipping into a roll. I was just plain scared to do this; part of me believes I'll break my neck rolling incorrectly.

Then we tried rolling from a standing position. Edgar explained how leaning into a roll, you are not any farther away from the floor than if you were on all fours. You start standing, but it turns into the same roll you'd do if you were on the floor. He's often mentioned this, as logical as it sounds, there is still a psychological barrier for me.

We then practiced our dynamic rolls; our partners swept a leg forwards and backwards, and we practiced letting ourselves be pushed into a roll, and also rotating around and rolling in a different direction with the leg sweep. Surprisingly, I found this easier than rolling from a static standing position. If my partner simply swept and actually lifted my leg, I just tilted forward naturally and my roll was quite soft. For some reason I found this a lot harder to accomplish without the momentum my partner provided with the sweep.

Our partners also pushed us from the back and the front and we fell into a roll. Maybe I was just getting used to it, but I find these dynamic rolls to be easier, and I felt that I progressed a great deal in just that short lesson. It's just a matter of practice, to get over the fear; there is no physical reason why I cannot learn to roll.

Then we spent a few minutes on falling; a new student asked me why I always fall with one hand behind my head. Edgar hadn't mentioned it when he demonstrated falling, and I noticed that he doesn't always cradle his head, so I was hesitant to tell the new student that's the way you're supposed to fall. It's come in very handy because we are often in tight quarters and I end up falling against a wall, a chair, or some piece of equipment. The hand has protected me from some unpleasant knocks.

We practiced sweeping our partners into a fall as well. Most of the kung fu students were quite soft in their fall. A few seemed to find the repeated falling and getting up again a bit strenuous. Their general fitness level seemed quite good, everyone got through the conditioning exercises pretty well for



newcomers; I've seen some fit-looking new guys collapse during our one-armed pushups or forty-counters. We skipped the later, which had become a regular part of our warm-up.

The newcomers applied themselves to learning to roll quite admirably, considering that many of them had expressed some trepidation before class. Edgar makes it look so easy, his rolls are so soft, it is really impressive. Rolls are deeper than they may appear. It's been said, by either Vlad or Mikhail I don't recall which, that rolling changes your perspective, because you turn yourself upside down. Rolls are also like a massage for your muscles, if done properly. And the floor does not let you get away with anything. The floor will show you exactly where your tension lies. It's very helpful for confronting your fear. The newcomers progressed a great deal, in no small part due to the way they really tried to work through the fear of falling. Edgar explained how, as children, we are unafraid of the floor, but as we grow older and have more control over our muscles, we lose touch with this freedom. To become friends with the floor is to become closer to the freedom of movement we all once had as children.

After the rolls, we did our very typical yielding exercise, pushing our partners from front and back. Then the same thing, only back-and-forth, exchanging energy, using the same amount of pressure and velocity. I enjoy this sensitivity exercise a great deal. I usually avoid demonstrating exercises, even in a class full of newcomers, but Edgar at times has sought me out to demonstrate this one. I'm sure I'll be accused of stereotyping, but I've noticed that women and young people are more sensitive than other students. They seem to grasp the sensitivity work more easily, perhaps because they are unaccustomed to using force. It was nice to have another girl join the class; my mom does not train as frequently as I do and I'm often the only female. The guys are great, but it's good to have more of a balance. Ying and Yang, it aids in harmony. There was one young guy, maybe 17 or so, who was quite naturally relaxed. With that many beginners, it's typical that at least one will be a natural at Systema because of this relaxation. Such people don't have to remind themselves to relax; it is their natural state, and I believe they have an advantage.

To my surprise, this young man turned out to be one of my most compatible partners. Sparring with some rare individuals, I feel we are tuned to the same frequency. That is my most memorable training, slow sparring in a state of flow. Not everyone wants to work this way, or is able to. Later on, I sparred with a guy who was much too rough, but he didn't know it. Usually beginners are more dangerous than the more experienced students. It can be hard to let go of the mentality of "someone's attacking me slowly, so obviously I want to come at them hard and fast." Such tactics appear to be successful to those who aren't abiding by the rules of the slow sparring game. All action must be possible at top speed; speeding up isn't possible when you are already going as fast as you can go, and likewise hitting harder won't work if you are already hitting full force.

But it was his first class and it takes some getting used to it. Because some people are naturally adept, does not mean that others, who have to work harder, cannot excel just as much.

We worked on a very basic exercise, partner punching or kicking anywhere, and doing a takedown pretty much however you wanted to. The newcomers had some initial difficulty with this concept of "avoid, then do what comes naturally." I sensed that they were looking for some technique. Edgar showed several different ways to take down someone who was punching. Then we all tried it. I think many of the new students were surprised by how easy it is to unbalance someone. It's movement, not force, that is so effective.

After a few minutes of improvised sparring, cultivating our natural movements, Edgar demonstrated work on the six levels. We skipped the first level, the wrists, but came back to it later during the elbow exercises. We started with the head, which I particularly dislike. I don't like people messing with my head for some reason. Maybe because one time this girl was way too rough with this exercise, shoving down quite hard on my head, which hurt my neck. It's hard to understand that there is no competition in Systema, except of the friendly, good-natured kind. Instead of trying to beat each other up, we are trying to help each other learn. A training partner might make your work hard to take them down, but pain shouldn't be inflicted except for tempering. In reality, I could prevail against many of my training partners, I could actually break someone's arm or smash their head against the hardwood floor, but my training partners aren't really threatening my life. There has to be some difference between training and fighting for survival, otherwise, when those dire times arrive, you will have nothing in your reserve, having accustomed yourself to using it in everyday circumstances.

But most people who are new take anywhere from a few hours to a few months to get the hang of it, and most of the pain inflicted by newcomers is quite accidental.

After manipulating the head forwards, backwards, and to the side, we moved to the shoulders, part of the same level. We pulled on shoulder forward, or pushed it back, and manipulated the other in the opposite direction. We pulled both shoulders forwards and backwards simultaneously. And we held our partner's arm above the elbow and rotated in a large, sweeping circle, up and back, very effective for such a small movement.

Next was the elbow, Edgar showed us the now-familiar ways of leading the body with the elbow. With the hand on the crook of the attacking elbow, dropping the body weight down in a wave-like motion. Also stretching the attacking arm and dropping the shoulder onto the back of the elbow. There are many painful ways to lock up an elbow. Most people will drop easily to avoid doing harm to that vulnerable area. Edgar often tells us that the elbows lead the body.

We also worked on the wrist, Edgar demonstrated a little bit of close work; some of the students had been asking about it, having seen Jim King demonstrate some sophisticated applications. One person pretended to draw a knife from the front pocket, the other hit the elbow, which actually locked the wrist against the person's thigh. Edgar also demonstrated how you could hit the elbow and make the person hit their own groin. We also practiced grabbing both hands in the somewhat fanciful scenario of an attacker drawing a knife from both pockets.

Next was the waist, I find this one of the easiest of the levels. Simply placing both hands on the waist from behind and stepping backwards is enough to start the movement. A poke into the waist area works well, too. These were all starting points, usually, we had to add a hand or leg to effect the takedown after working on specific level.

I found my partner to be very stable in the hip area. He explained he was from a mountainous area of Russia and was born under the sign of Capricorn, as the reason for his stability. I can see how people from windy mountainous regions might be more stable than those from mild climates, but I don't know if your horoscope has anything to do with it.

He had no trouble attacking my hips by simply grabbing my waist, but I found pokes and shoves to be more effective to de-stabilize him.

We finished with knees and ankles in the same exercises. One person on the ground, the other standing, and the one on the ground used either hands or legs to manipulate the knee in two directions, also capturing and locking the ankle. I found this easier to do with my feet than with my hands. With the knees, you really need the two directions. Of course you can also hit the kneecap straight on, but it's a delicate area. I very much dislike when someone, for example, steps on my foot and hits the front of my kneecap with their leg, it's quite painful, but mainly I just want to protect the whole knee area as it's difficult to rehabilitate. "Treat your joints like porcelain," as Martin Wheeler told us.

Throughout the class Edgar discussed some philosophy of Systema, of not "meeting fire with fire," he gave the example of just apologizing if someone was angered by your action. Even if they are right and you are wrong, better to pacify with words than fists. It seems a simple thing, yet it is noble, to let go of your pride, to respect another person even if they haven't earned that respect, to be a man of peace, it's a simple way to live, but far from easy. He also talked about becoming friends with the floor, of letting go of fear and tension, which causes damage. He explained how to be a good training partner, of how you can learn to avoid, and to fall, by letting your partner take you down rather than competing with them.

I hope some of the newcomers return. It was fun having them in class and the one young man was so naturally adept, I very much hope he'll return. I sensed that the students are closely bonded with Edgar; who taught their kung-fu class. Many had been training with him for years. It was funny to see them all bowing to him and addressing him as Dai Si-Hing (elder brother) when he has always been just Edgar to us. He explained that we shake hands in Systema and that they should call him Comrade. But it will be hard for them to drop old habits. But I think they will make the transition to Systema easily if they do return.

It was an excellent class, really memorable training, and I found it so helpful to do fundamentals, particularly the rolling, and the improvisational sparring. The fundamentals are not boring at all; the depth to which you apply them is limitless; and after a certain point, you realize there are no fundamentals or advanced techniques, it's all just movement, and survive.

\*Vsego nailuchshego\* (best wishes),  
Rachel

## Training Log #37: Practice with hold, grabs, and chokes

Our last few classes have been fascinating, and very challenging! We worked on various grabs, chokes, and holds. Systema, though not aggressive, is quick, brutal, and efficient; even in slow motion, some movement is so subtle, it can be hard to see what is happening. Although I had specifically wanted to learn more about this particular topic, I don't find this work as enjoyable and relaxing as slow sparring. We placed each other in uncomfortable positions, and you either find the solution, or else endure the discomfort. Planning your action is not only detrimental, but can be quite painful, as well.

Watching Edgar's demonstrations, it seems that freeing from holds can mean sudden movements, "breaking the tension," of a static situation, as I have heard it described, with sharp blows or other surprising movements. As Edgar explained, it's a little more "physical" than other kinds of work. As I found out today when I asked if you can also hit with a locked elbow. Indeed you can, and very effectively, too, as he demonstrated with a painful jab to the ribcage with a mere tap of the fist of his locked arm. I can only imagine if that tap were a little harder. I think that I would have hit the floor in less than a second, and it gave me a lot of respect for the work at hand, and its value to the professionals.

Although some of the work eluded me completely, other ways to free myself seemed almost too easy. My mom had both hands around my neck and was pulling me down, and I was able to free myself by taking a step and simultaneously pushing against her hip (with correct timing, of course). It seemed too easy to really work, but it's simple physics, as Edgar explained. There is nothing magical about it whatsoever and anyone can learn to use these principles. But you must believe that there is always an escape, if you think that escape is not possible, you will be less inclined to look for it and more likely to remain trapped. I thought my mom must be going easy on me because we were both tired, so I tried putting both arms around her neck and pulling down as hard as possible. I tried several times to do this, but she threw me off quite easily, simply by taking a step and pushing my body away.

We also practiced several other variations in movement that allowed us to escape with minimum effort. We practiced both avoidance, with correct timing, and escape, with more sudden movements. Several different wrist and elbow locks, grabs around the neck, under the arms, also a few chokes, and various holds, and ways to escape, such as rolling to escape from a grab around both legs (an attack from the ground), and swiveling with the opposite leg in order to free a grab to one leg. With the latter, it's easy to break the attacking arm. With holds to both legs, Edgar demonstrated how to roll free and change direction to attack--offensive rolling. He also showed up how to rock back on one heel, then forward, to break the hold by creating a little space. You only need a little space to free yourself, as we learned. I found it helped to view freeing myself one step at a time, by first creating a little space, instead of thinking, how can I break out of this uncomfortable position?

We also practiced pushing each other's heads in a downward direction, such as pushing straight back, or to one side. The head must follow the body, right? Edgar showed us an easy way to escape from a push to the side of the head, by letting the head be pushed, and then, simply by sinking a bit and rotating the body underneath the head to match the angle so the posture is restored and the spine is straight. I'm sorry I cannot explain it better, but it was such a lovely escape, so simple, seamless, and almost invisible, allowing a few more valuable seconds in which to work.

That last exercise in particular helped me better understand the "flying center of gravity." When I first read the description in the Guidebook, I had trouble grasping this concept. I remember thinking, OK, the body rotates in circular or elliptical fashion, but it also moves up and down, and also sways like a

pendulum? Huh? Training is the only way to understand such concepts which can seem daunting on paper, but really are not so difficult in practice.

I think this kind of work is excellent preparation for defense against criminal attacks, especially for women or for those who might be likely targets for kidnapping. (Obviously anyone can benefit from such training, but those two scenarios spring to mind.) It clearly demonstrates that superior strength does not mean the attacker will have the advantage. Also, it's helpful pain-compliance exercise, as you learn not to tense or resist against the pressure, but to take the path of least resistance, to relax and yield, and of course, escape from static positions, so it's also a confidence-building exercise. The arm may be locked, but the body is free, and the escape can be as simple as taking a step.

Some of the chokes and grabs we practiced are situations which I once would have thought inescapable, but when Edgar demonstrated the various ways to freedom, I was suprised at how simple it can be. I noticed that focussing too much on the trapped limb seemed to counteract my escapes, and remaining relaxed helps with the discomfort, and also, to avoid injury. Although not really painful when my classmates placed me in wrist locks or twisted one arm behind my back, it was definitely uncomfortable, and the longer I hesitated to find the solution, the greater the discomfort. Certainly an incentive to avoid the pitfalls of planning and thinking instead of just moving.

When my mom grabbed me, I found that simply by yielding, and not tensing up, I was halfway to freeing myself, and a taking a step, three-quarters of the way, and escape was just a matter of a few pushes. But, as Edgar told us, timing is everything, and there were a great many exercises I didn't find so easy and effortless. He explained to us that it's best to avoid such situations altogether by escaping. But he emphasized that you don't want to make your escape too obvious to the attacker. Movement should be smooth and fluid, and timing correct, and this way, the attacker will be fooled into thinking his grab has been successful. Such fluid movements fool the attacker's eye, as well as his body, because you "slip away while maintaining contact," as the Guidebook describes it. So the attacker's sense of vision and the sense of touch are fooled into believing the attack has been succesful and the mind also believes. Such fluid, "seamless" movements can also be calming. "Pacing and leading," a well-known NLP technique, illustrates how physical actions can be used to influence the unconscious behaviour of others. It sounds rather dastardly, but it's actually quite commonplace and I feel it's just human nature, not some mind-control trick. There are many positive ways in which we respond to movement and touch. Posture and body language offer clues to our personality and intent. I use often use body language with animals, with horses, for example, my body language says that I'm the "alpha," but with horses who have been abused, I assume a non-threatening neutral posture because there is no need to establish a hierachy when the animal is already terrified of you. Much has been made of the "horse whisperers," but such a skill is not a unique talent that only certain gifted people possess, it's just being sensitive to the language of animals, instead of trying to teach the animals how to comprehend human language. Sensitivity is an important part of maintaining harmony with the world; I find it's better to change myself to suit my environment that to expect that I can alter my surroundings to suit my own personality. "Like water," is an oft-used analogy of martial arts; water can break stone, yet it can also slip through the smallest crack.

I consider movement, body language, posture, even handwriting to related aspects of the same kind of non-verbal communication. And I think non-verbal communication is a means for protection as a species. Whatever dangers are affecting one animal, chances are the entire herd will be affected. It's no longer necessary for humans to act with "one mind" but the mechanism is still there, for example, panic spreads easily among a crowd.

But even if you do not believe movement can affect another person's emotional state, a relaxed and smiling demeanor may defuse the situation by conveying such a sense of confidence and control that the attacker begins to doubt his own capability to carry out the attack. That is how Vlad explained it on the H2H tape, and you can see this smiling confidence in the security clips of his brother Valentin disarming the knife-wielding thief (these were posted to Vlad's forum, <http://www.russianmartialart.com/forum>). I do not think it is an exaggeration to say that a conflict might be de-escalated by calm movements and a light, non-threatening contact, but it's best to reach your own conclusions based on your explorations into this fascinating subject.

I have drifted considerably from my original topic, our work with holds, grabs, and chokes. Writing about Systema has made it especially apparent to me that you can't separate it into this or that element, it's all the same, it's not doing one thing in particular, to me, it's more like a state of mind. Whether it's taking a breath, or defeating a life-threatening attack, or even "buttering toast," as Mikhail Ryabko describes it.

Edgar presented some useful principals for working with holds, grabs, and chokes, which I have included below. They aren't unique to working with holds, grabs, and chokes, in fact, he has often mentioned them in other contexts, but I think he presented them to us as especially useful for our topic at hand, because especially with chokes, there is very little time in which to find the way to escape.

Follow...do not resist. When someone pulls your arm or tries to choke you, do not pull back or resist, but yield in the same direction, while keeping your posture, or restoring it if your partner has broken it. Also do not be tense or rigid, as it will be easier for someone to break your bones if you are rigid.

Create support. It's hard for me to explain this concept as I am only just learning about it. If someone's got your neck locked and is trying to push your head forward, you can place your hands in front of your head to halt their push. Or similarly, if they are trying to bend your wrist towards your body, you can place the other hand flat against your palm to limit the extent that they can lock you. I think it's not unlike slipping your hand against your neck while someone is trying to choke you. This may not free you, but it will give you a few more seconds of oxygen so that you have time free yourself.

Make the other person "weightless." Start by moving them a little bit, by taking a step, rotating the neck or shoulder, or moving the part of the body upon which their balance is resting. Don't plan for anything further to happen, or try to maneuver them into a favorable position, just move see if you can move them "two inches" and other opportunities will crop up. Most people will want to restore their balance once it has been broken, and this means less mental energy to devote to completing the attack. And this is why the high-level practitioners like Martin Wheeler are so amazing to watch, because they are far less likely to focus all their consciousness on restoring balance, since they can work from literally any position.

Please do not forget that I am new to the System! This is my training log, my personal experience with Systema class, and I don't think it should be viewed as a recommendation or suggestion for other students to follow. It is just a documentation of the experience, but words on a page, no matter how numerous or carefully-crafted, can never capture the experience, as my teacher always tell us when we ask too many questions, "Just try!" And I think that is very sound advice.

## Training log #38: Knives - not just for stabbing

Hi,

Here are some pages from my training journal about knife attacks. Part one is a description of incidents in New York City involving knives being shown, rather than used. This is the extent of my experience with knives outside the training floor, so any professionals may want skip this part, as it does not involve any actual knife fights. Part two is the applications we learned in Systema class about working with the handle and the flat of the knife. This training took place a few months ago and it's not as complete as most of my training logs. But it's useful information that I wanted to share with you. I hope you enjoy it.

\*Vsego nailuchshego\* (best wishes),  
Rachel

Part one - "flashing" the knife I used to carry a knife because I was often alone at work, or walking to school or town. I never got my driver's license and I was crazy enough to hitch-hike; also while driving with friends they would occasionally pick up hitch-hikers. But I don't consider it safe. I never hitch-hiked without a large rock in my purse and knife in the pocket of my jacket. When I first moved to the city, I was unused to being in such close proximity to vast numbers of people, some of whom just by virtue of the odds, were a few cards short of a full deck. I lived in the Financial District, one of the most dangerous neighborhoods I've ever lived in. The few residential areas are mostly luxury high-rises, but after dark, when the stock market closes, the streets are desolate. It's mostly office buildings and retail business that do not stay open late when there are few pedestrians. I felt unsafe when I first moved here, and continued to carry my knife. In just a few years, there was substantial decrease in overall crime in Manhattan. It has not gone unnoticed by the city's residents. I ended up living in a neighborhood where I had previously warned never to venture: Alphabet City. Junkies lay on the streets, families lived four people to a single room apartment, dealers tried to sell you heroin, assuming that you wouldn't venture into the area unless you were seeking drugs. Between the Hispanic gangs and the Hell's Angels, you had the feeling of always being on someone else's turf. A few blocks from my new home in Alphabet City, my friend was beaten up and had his jaw wired shut for months. But by the time I moved there a few years later, it was an entirely different place. The streets were never empty and fashionable stores began to crop up. I relaxed a bit and stopped carrying my knife. In retrospect it wouldn't have been much use anyway. My theory was that if I showed the knife to someone who was going to attack me, then might draw away. I guess you could say I carried it "for show," and fortunately I never used it or else I might not be writing this today.

I did once "show" it to someone who was menacing me. I was returning from a bar in the Financial District at about two o'clock in the morning. I walked down to the Chambers Street subway station. There was no-one on the platform but a homeless man slumped on a bench, with a wheeled cart in front of him. I walked past him cautiously. When I am wary of a subway platform, I usually walk to the end of it, then turn around and walk back again. I prefer to see who else is standing on the platform with me, before walking back to the most well-lit or well-populated area. I walked past the homeless man cautiously, giving him a wide berth and walking past his back, rather than his front. I thought he was asleep, but as I walked past, he snarled at me savagely, and suddenly whipped an umbrella out of his cart and stabbed at me with it. If I hadn't stopped my approach, he certainly would have hurt me. It took me by surprise, but I tried very hard not to jump. I just stopped calmly, and resumed walking. I didn't want him to see that I was frightened. Maybe I should have gone up the stairs to where the booth clerk could see me. But I walked to the end of the platform, and unfortunately there was no-one else there. I didn't

want to walk past the homeless man again, so I stood at the end of the platform. My knife was in my hand. It has a highly polished, silver handle, but the blade itself is a pen-knife style and it would be useless if I had to use it quickly. I knew the homeless man was approaching me, and I held it in such a way that he could clearly see it shining in my hand. I didn't look at him directly, but I knew he has stopped about 25 feet away from me and was standing, staring at me. He turned away and walked back to the bench. I don't think it was the knife, he might not have even seen it. It might have been my attitude, that I was ready to fight him, or more likely he was just crazy and might have had no intention of attacking me anyway, just wanted to scare me.

I think the main reason I carried a knife was for reassurance. I felt slightly safer with my knife and steel-toed boots. Because I felt safer, I might have been more confident in those the few sketchy situations I've encountered, more than a few of them on subway platforms or on the train. I've met my fair share of wackos. Live here long enough and you see the boundlessness of human irrationality, and how reality can mean such dramatically different things to different people. When I discovered my highly polished knife in the pocket of a winter coat I hadn't worn for years, it was a surprising reminder of the tools I once thought would keep me safe. I have much better tools now at my disposal; there is no replacement for the confidence that my Systema training has brought me. Not that I'd always prevail, only that I have the will to survive, no matter what happens,

None of the fights I've witnessed involved knives. I used to live on a block with many rowdy bars, the sawdust-on-the-floor, no-name-on-the-door kind of bars. I was frequently awoken by a fight on the street late at night. Usually the participants were so drunk they could hardly weave their way towards their opponents. They'd crash into garbage cans or fling them about. Sometimes the residents of the ground floor apartments would open their windows and yell out "Shut up! Shut the hell up!" Twice our front door was smashed in by what was clearly someone's head; the second time, there was blood all over the glass. I've also seen my share of fights in high school, including some mass attacks that ended very quickly. Fights have happened around me; very few involved me directly. But I've never seen a knife fight, never seen anyone draw a knife except to show it to someone. Here are a few descriptions of those incidents.

When I was living in the Financial District, my friends and I were drinking in a lovely old-fashioned bar frequented by Wall Streeters. It was around 1 or 2 AM, and the bar was our last stop on the way home. There were only a few very drunken stragglers, most of them sitting by themselves as they watched a game on television. There was a small commotion at the horseshoe shaped bar as people suddenly moved away from a very drunk man with his head almost slumped on the bar. He was clutching a knife with a blade about 9 or 10 inches long. He didn't appear to be ready to use it; he was slurring his speech and the only direction he seemed headed was down to the floor. But people were alarmed. My friend, a take-charge sort of person, immediately went over to him, spoke softly to him and patted him on the shoulder. He asked him to put the knife away, and the man agreed. He asked if he would like to take a taxi home, but the man refused. The bartender came over and joined in the suggestion for him to take a taxi home, but he insisted on remaining even though they had stopped serving him. My friend asked the bartender to put him in a taxi when the bar closed, my friend offered money but the bartender pointed to the money the drunken man had left on the counter and said there was enough. My friend, who was later killed in a fire, was a gentleman in every sense of the word. He was studying to become a social worker. He often helped the desperate, those who the rest of us do not even wish to look at, much less speak to. He approached the drunken man with the knife without fear, with only love in his heart. He was a rare soul and special influence in my life.



A few months ago I saw two teenagers sitting on the subway looking at a stiletto. It was about five inches long and looked pretty dangerous. With a flick of the switch you could inflict serious damage and possibly death without having to thrust or use any strength at all. They were flicking the blade in and out, marveling at the mechanics. The people around them were casting wary glances and giving them a wide berth. I knew by the way they were examining the blade, that they had recently acquired it and were unfamiliar with the feeling of holding or using such a knife. Their interest was purely mechanical. I am not saying they would not use the knife, but not at that moment. I sat across from them, read the Times, and was unconcerned.

More recently, I saw an incident with a knife that did alarm me. It was a rainy night and I was returning from Systema class. The subway was crowded as I exited and walked up the stairs to the street. As often happens when it rains, people riding the subway don't realize the weather until they get to the top of the stairs. Then everyone stops and fumbles around for the umbrella, or just stands there trying to wait it out. Naturally the people at the bottom of the stairs don't appreciate this bottleneck. And it's also inconvenient for those trying to go down the staircase as people start to flow around the bottleneck and ignore the "keep to the right" convention of subway stairs. A scraggly-looking guy with a long beard was trying to get down the stairs. Seeing the one guy who was causing the bottleneck (who was foolishly standing at the top of the stairs under the canopy, not moving, to avoid getting wet), the scraggly guy yelled Hey, you've got to keep moving, or something like that. Finally the guy moved off, but Scraggly Guy wasn't satisfied. He abruptly turned back up the stairs he had just been trying to get down and followed the bottleneck to the street, weaving his way through pedestrian traffic. I stopped to watch him, curious to see what he'd do. He approached Bottleneck at a traffic light as he waited for the light to turn. I noticed he was fumbling around the back of his pants for something. As he fumbled, his shirt lifted up, and I saw a large flat silver item tucked into the back of his pants. It wasn't a knife, it was way too rectangular. It was also covered with ornate detail. I have no idea what it was, but clearly it wasn't what he was looking for. He slowed his approach to Bottleneck so he could fumble around some more in his pants, and I became suspicious. Why would he slow his approach, if he was so angry? Finally, he found what he was looking for and became to walk quickly to catch Bottleneck before the light turned. The slowed approach was so he could have his timing right to brandish his weapon as he approached Bottleneck from behind and tapped him angrily on the back. Then he showed him what he had pulled from the back of his pants, a long, bluish metallic cylinder that I immediately thought was a gun. Bottleneck looked terrified and jumped a mile. Scraggly Guy quickly stuffed it back in his pants and turned toward me, I hurried away. I heard him growling at the pedestrians as he lunged at them. I have no idea what he was carrying, it might have been the barrel of a gun, but it was longer than a pistol. It looked kind of like a silver nightstick. Whatever it was, he just wanted to show it to Bottleneck, not use it on him. He got the desired effect, Bottleneck was frightened. But I knew that he had no idea that he had held up Scraggly Guy on the staircase and invoked his wrath, and that it was a completely random incident in his mind. I think I was the only one who noticed the whole exchange from start to finish. And I don't know why I hung around. I would not have intervened, because Scraggly Guy clearly had a few nuts loose. There's no telling what he might have done. But there are always plenty of cops near this subway station and I would have sought one if things went bad. But when Scraggly Guy lurched towards me and the other pedestrians, I moved away immediately, fearing for my own safety.

As you can see, I have very meager experience with knives. I've only seen them being shown, not used. And I sure hope that's all I see as far as knives are concerned.

Part Two - Working with the handle and the flat of the knife

A few months ago, Edgar showed us how to use the knife in ways other than cutting. He explained why it might be more to your advantage to control your attacker rather than just damaging him. Some of my classmates seemed surprised by this idea and asked why not just stab the attacker? Edgar demonstrated several scenarios where controlling was more useful, such as forcing someone to go with you to the police station, or getting them to give you information. It's more of a professional use of the knife and as I recall, some of my classmates didn't seem to take to it. When Edgar demonstrated forcing someone to give information by using the handle of the knife on the fingers, they thought he was pretending to mug the other person. It's such a different perspective, civilians vs. professionals. But though we are civilians, we can learn a lot from studying the professional techniques.

We spent some time talking about why it's best to avoid fatal stabbing of an attacker for legal and ethical reasons. It may be because my classmates were largely not from the U.S., but it was a very strange concept to them and my classmate told me that he'd just "carve someone up like a turkey" if they attacked him. There's a widely-held belief that "self-defense" entitles you to use lethal force. But you will be much better off to use the minimum force. Most importantly, if you have the capability to disable an attacker and keep yourself safe without killing the other person, that is the more ethical action. Killing in self-defense may seem like a good idea in conversation and speculation, but it will change your life forever. Legally, you may end up in jail or even facing the death penalty. Especially if there were no witnesses to your acting in "self-defense." It's not merely a matter of saying to the jury "I acted in self-defense." If it were that easy, then every murderer on trial would try the self-defense argument. When the person who attacked you is dead, you're alive and healthy, and there was no-one around to witness what happened, the jury has only your word that your actions were necessary to preserve your life. It is only responsible of the jury to prove that you had no choice but to apply lethal force. Even if you wind up severely injuring the attacker, it may still be hard for you to argue self-defense if there were no witnesses. Sympathies may drift to the attacker if he's severely injured. He'll probably have family members to tearfully testify how they have suffered because of what you did to the attacker. It's not as straightforward as just saying, I had no choice. If you can use the minimum force to keep yourself safe and disable the attacker, that will make your life a lot less complicated from a legal standpoint. And from a spiritual standpoint, it may change your life in ways you can hardly imagine. You will have to live with the knowledge that you might have disabled your attacker but chose to kill him instead. That could make for some uneasy nights.

There may be times when you have no choice but to use lethal force, but as it describes in the Russian System Guidebook, you should never do so callously. In killing someone, you take away "all a man has, and all he's ever going to have," to quote Clint Eastwood (Unforgiven). Controlling someone through pain compliance can be a better solution than just killing them; from a legal and ethical standpoint.

It's funny how when given a practice knife, we want to "cut" with it. partner continued to use the knife to "cut" me rather than trying any of the pain compliance. A knife has a dramatic impact on the psychology of the one who wields it. As Denis demonstrated to our class recently, the hand and wrist that hold a knife become tense as the consciousness is focussed on the knife. So we started by trying to relax these parts. We held the knife while our partners grabbed our wrists. Edgar showed us how by relaxing the wrist and hand, you can rotate the knife around and use the handle to apply pressure to the underside of the forearm to get your partner to release. Other parts of the forearm are also sensitive to pressure.

Also we worked on avoiding a grab to the knife hand by capturing the fingers with the handle of the knife and using that to apply leverage. The fingers are very sensitive, especially over the nails. It was easy to make my partner drop by using the knife handle on the finger or fingernail. Edgar showed us

some more advanced work: how to present the target of the knife wielding hand, move the hand slightly to "draw" your partner as his hand follows the target, and then rotate the hand around and capture the fingers with the handle of the knife.

We also used the knife handle against the collarbone as our partners punched us. Edgar showed us how to keep someone down with the knife handle after they've fallen by using it to press on key points. We practiced trying to rise from the floor while our partners applied pressure with the knife to keep us down.

Edgar also demonstrated how to slap someone on the arm with the knife handle. It makes a loud noise, stings a little, but doesn't hurt much. Edgar explained the effect is psychological, and the attacker loses confidence after being touched with the knife blade.

We finished the class with a little work on drawing the knife from the pocket, waistband, or ankle. For a faster draw, you move the body part where the knife is concealed toward the hand. In the front pocket, you can stretch your leg straight back as you draw, keeping your spine aligned straight with your leg. This pushes the knife from the pocket into the hand. If the knife is carried in the waist, front or back, you can swivel your hips to bring it into your hand. For an ankle holster, you bend your leg to bring it closer to your hand without breaking form. We found drawing from the ankle to be the hardest, maybe because we were drawing from our socks in lieu of holsters.

It's hard to imagine I'll ever be proficient enough with a knife to carry one for self-protection. I am learning a lot about knife disarming and I would feel less threatened by a knife attack today, than a year ago before I began my training. For example, if someone threatened me with a knife and told me to get into a car, or tried to get me to walk somewhere else, I would not be as likely to comply as I would have been before I learned Systema. In addition to learning the mechanics of knife disarming, I've learned a great deal about the psychology of those who attack with knives. Those who attack with knives to commit violent crime are often mentally unbalanced. Keeping a cool, professional attitude when faced with a highly emotional, violent knife attack may ultimately be the best defense.

## Training Log #39: Christmas at Fighthouse Sword Class

Our last class before Christmas was very small, only 3 of us showed up. Denis asked us what we wanted to do. He usually gives us a choice but has a general idea of what we need to work on. Today he opened the floor for suggestions. I rarely offer a suggestion when he asks us. I'm happy to work on anything. I also have this feeling that the things I'd like to work on are the things that are easiest for me, so better to work on other things. But I do have some favorite topics, such as groundwork, working with just the legs, and against the wall or other confined spaces. My mom likes to work with knives and has demonstrated proficiency with this topic in particular. Denis asked if we'd like to work with swords instead. I suggested that we do both and so we all agreed.

To warm up we did these very hard pushups with each person holding a knife. One lays on their back with hands raised, the other holds their hands and gets into pushup position, then the person on the floor lowers their arms and the person above sinks down as if they were doing a pushup. This is very hard without even holding the knife, which added an extra challenge. Then we did the same thing with the person above sideways (perpendicular) rather than above the person on the ground. Then, in the same position, we tried to stab or slash each other, difficult because of the constriction of having to link hands.

Denis brought us some wooden practice swords which were a little more realistic than the lighter wooden ones in that they were slightly heavier and had a hilt and pommel, rather than being just a loosely-shaped piece of wood. Of course they were nowhere near as heavy as a real sword. I was expecting some instruction on how to hold the sword or wield it, but except for a brief comment from Denis not to let the tip of the sword drag on the ground, we just plunged right into the topic. Just as we often do with knives, we started by pushing our partners while they remained in place and yielded just the body part being pushed, then we did the same thing while they stepped, and finally we stabbed and slashed at them with the swords while they avoided. Then we practiced counter-offence by using the sword to defend against our partners' attacks and return to them. This was unlike anything I've ever done in Systema class before. I always figured with swords, you had to spend a long time learning to draw and hold the sword properly, and that a beginner wouldn't start sparring until mastering the basics of sword-fighting. But we took a Systema approach to our sword-work and just dived right in. To make it more fun, we had two, and then three, people, attack one person as they used their sword to defend and counter-attack. I quickly found the principle of constant movement to be the key in avoiding the three swords as they slashed at me. I was most successful in avoiding when I stepped "through" the sword after I used it to block an attack, just as Edgar taught us to step through the "holes" left by your attacking partner when you manipulate them. It's kind of like the "hair-combing" method of passing off a blow, by "brushing" your arm back and over your head and stepping through. So it was less of a block with the sword than "passing" the attacking blades off with my own sword and then moving through the hole. It was a challenge with three attackers, and I found myself moving all over the room to avoid them, trying not to get distracted by looking at one person's blade but rather keep all three within my peripheral vision, keeping an eye on their shoulders, rather than the blade itself, to see the movement before their swords entered my space.

Edgar and Denis also took their turns with the three students attacking them with swords. I was very impressed with the way both of our teachers evaded the sword and maintained a position of advantage against the three of us. Denis in particular evaded us with ease but Edgar was also quite skilled in gracefully foiling the three slashing swords. I know that both of them have many years of martial arts experience and that they have probably studied a sword art, but I also think that Systema in itself prepares you to fight with any kind of weapon, and that the principle of constant movement will always

serve you well when faced with multiple attackers.

We then spent the remainder of class working with knives in close quarters. We stood side by side with our partners, shoulders touching, and then one person attacked the other with the knife. Edgar explained to us that you have to feel the attack first, with your shoulder or your arm, rather than waiting for the knife to arrive in your personal space. An important part of Systema--maybe all martial arts, but I've never studied another--is to feel the attack before it happens, using perception and sensitivity, and move before the knife is pressed against you. Of course this isn't always possible, and that's why we also work on freeing from holds, grabs, and chokes, but whenever you can, move before you end up in such a vulnerable situation.

We also did this exercise side-by-side facing in opposite directions, and with our eyes closed. Then we tried the same thing back-to-back, which is a lot more difficult. You have no choice but to feel the attack, as you cannot see what's coming. Closing the eyes actually didn't make a big difference with the back-to-back exercise because your perception is most dependent on feeling, not vision. Then we did the same exercises in chairs, side-by-side, and side-by-side facing opposite directions. Here the chair can be a useful accessory, as you can use the back of it to apply pressure to the arm or to the hand as your partner attacks. The idea with the exercises above was only to disarm the knife or foil the attack, but we next moved into more vigorous applications as the three students sat on the couch. The one on the end was the attacker, the one in the middle the bodyguard, and the one on the other end the target. The attacker tried to stab or slash at the target, who just sat there pretending to be a dumb celebrity, and the person in the middle had to defend them. We switched this around so the target and the attacker were sitting in different places on the couch.

To make things interesting, Denis asked my mom and I to remain on the couch and we'd defend against knife attacks as a family. Edgar attacked my mom and the third student came at me. We were actually very effective as a team and were able to use the attackers against each other to take them down. I was using my legs a lot as I've found, with your back against the wall, that if you simultaneously draw in the attacker in and kick their support out from under them, it can be very effective. Denis told me I should go lower with my legs and not target the waist, as it's more sneaky and surprising. My mom was doing very well against Edgar's attacks and we were all impressed. Then Edgar and the other student took the couch. To my surprise, they didn't find this exercise as easy as we did and our attacks were more successful. But there could have been any number of factors; perhaps we were more resistant to falling than they were. But without a doubt, working with the knife is one of my mom's favorites, and she likes confined spaces as well, because she doesn't feel her petite frame is a disadvantage as she does when we are doing leg work, for example. I have long legs for a woman and that's probably why I like the legwork, so, just as it says in the Guidebook, every body type offers some different advantage. Afterwards, we had our small Christmas party. Peggy gave my mom and I gifts, as the Number One and Two girls with our attendance. My dedication to training and unwillingness to miss a class did not go unnoticed by them! I was touched by their thoughtfulness. They also had laid out a nice post-training snack for us, and we spent a few hours in the back room drinking several bottles of wine and talking of life and Systema. Edgar and Denis related to us something they had heard "Systema just happens to be a martial art." I thought that captures Systema very well. "It is so much deeper than that," said

Edgar, looking thoughtfully at me, and I felt that he truly understood how much Systema means to me; it has become my way of life. I have just finished one year of training at Fighthouse, and as I look forward to many more years of training in Systema, I'm extremely grateful to have made the acquaintances of such fine people who so willingly share their knowledge. The camaraderie of the Systema community is

precious to me, it's forever changed my life and not a day goes by when I don't feel grateful to be part of it. Best wishes for a joyous New Year, Rachel

## **Training Logs #39a, 39b, 39c, 39d: Gun and knife disarms, sticks, rolls, with Guest Teacher Martin Wheeler**

Hi,

The first two days, the seminars on Saturday and Sunday, were described in my earlier post, "notes from Martin Wheeler's NYC Seminar December 11 and 12." Martin stayed on to teach the Systema classes at Fighthouse for the next four days. What follows are my training journals from those four classes, plus an additional class on Thursday night, which Edgar taught. So it's kind of long but I hope you will find something useful within it.

Monday night ? Gun disarms

We did our usual warm-ups pushups, sit-ups, squats, ten on the inhale, ten on the exhale, and ten without breath. I can get through about five or so without breathing. Occasionally I can make it through the ten, usually when I have no warning, for some reason, when I try to prepare myself for going without breath, it makes it even harder. We also did this exercise where your partner tries to raise their arms while you hold their arms down just enough to allow them to move their arms up a little at a time. Then when the arms are up, you try to hold them up while they press down, but allowing just enough give so they can slowly move the arms back to the side. Also did this with the legs, both partners in a half-squat, with one holding the other's legs closed by putting the legs on the outside, and yielding a little at time while they push out, then with legs on the inside of the other person's legs holding them open but allowing them to close their legs a little at time.

For the rest of the class we deeply explored gun disarming. First our partners drew the guns from various places where people generally carry weapons, such as front or back pocket, waistband, leg, or under- arm, and took aim, while we had to just step out of the way of the line of fire, or go down if necessary. Usually you want to turn parallel to the barrel of the gun. Martin explained it's generally a good idea to step closer, as the ideal place to be is right next to the person holding the gun, so that he cannot shoot you without risking shooting himself. Then we stepped in and lightly placed our hands on the person drawing, just to get a sense of the logical progression of stepping in. Martin demonstrated finding the tension of the person drawing the gun. The weapon creates tension in the hand and arm and you can follow this to the torso. He had us try to find the tension while our partner drew, and push the tense spot to move our partners. This was very illuminating work. I find it difficult to find the tension without patting my partner all over. I was working with Edgar and he told me to just take my time. It takes sensitivity to learn to feel this tension rather than trying to see it, as it can be too subtle to be perceived visually.

Martin reminded us not just to work on the arms but also the hips and lower back. We practiced moving around our partners as they drew and pulling their hips back, pressing on the lower back, or manipulating them by collapsing their hips.

We also tried defense against double-handed draws and Martin showed us how to snake the hands between the two arms and use leverage to disarm the gun. In a single-handed draw, there is a similar concept he called "spiraling" where you push on the arm holding the gun with both your arms moving in opposite directions. It was a little confusing and I don't know if I can explain it too well, but it was kind of like a scissoring-type of movement.

For about half the class, we drew "Hollywood-style" with the arms extended. Of course professionals do not draw this way as it makes it easier to effect a disarm if you stretch out your arm too much. Someone asked about disarming the professional draw where the gun is held close to the body. Martin suggested just turning the gun into the body. He said it is easier to turn it that way, but you can also turn the gun out and away from the body. He demonstrated how important it is not just to turn the barrel of the gun but also to step in the opposite direction to get out of the line of fire. We practiced simply tilting the barrel of the gun and stepping in the opposite direction, tilting it from side to side as well as pointing up and down.

Martin explained how the angle of the elbow of the person holding the gun shows the direction they will collapse. By pulling the elbow in that direction, the rest of the body follows.

We also worked on manipulating the fingers to affect the release. Martin showed us how, without the thumb in place, the grip on the gun is very loose and easily disarmed. So we practiced prying the thumb off the gun. He also showed us how to use the finger against the trigger, though he said it works better with a metal gun, even so, the rubber practice guns gave an idea of this and it was easy to apply pressure to any of the fingers by pressing them to the trigger of the gun.

We also tried putting our hands up when our partner drew on us. This is the expected reaction and so it can lead to a momentary belief that things are going the way of the person with the gun. Then of course you surprise them by dropping your arm down on the drawing arm, just letting it fall with its own weight, and this can knock the gun right out of their hands.

We spent a few minutes practicing with our partners pressing the gun into our backs. The pressure tells you which direction to move. Martin told us not to simply spin around but to use the fluidity of the hips to turn, dipping the hips down into a bowl shape. He also mentioned that you want to take the shortest path to move the gun away from your back without crossing the barrel over your spine, so if the gun is pressed into the right side of your back, you want to turn to the right to let the gun slip off the shortest distance of your body.

Several times Martin stopped us and told us not to fight, to move slowly so as not to alarm the person. Denis drew on him and Martin moved towards him with obvious haste, which caused Denis to look alarmed and jump a little. Then Denis drew and Martin smoothly and calmly disarmed him, so efficiently that it was hard to even see what happened. It's very important, when faced with a gun, to leave your own aggression behind. It will never be enough to overwhelm a person who believes he has a fatal advantage in being armed. Once again we saw the importance of a cool, professional attitude in life-threatening circumstances.

Tuesday night - Knife disarms

Edgar started us out with warming up by kneeling on the floor and lowering one shoulder, then the other to the ground. Also moving across the floor on the back using just the shoulders, backwards, forwards, side to side. Then on stomach using just the shoulders and hips. Then on butt with legs raised off the floor, scooting across floor, backwards, side to side

Then we moved around the floor starting from a kneeling position and moving circularly by rotating the hips and swiveling the legs under and around without using the hands. It's hard to explain. The funny thing about this exercise is no matter how many times I try, I just can't do it the way Edgar does. I can



move around on the floor just fine by using my hips, I just can't do it in the same way that Edgar does. I've tried getting right next to him and copying his movements, but my legs seem to fold underneath me in a different way and even though I am moving along fairly easily, I am using different movements. It's like I have some kind of logistical block to figuring out how he's moving.

Martin then led us through the usual 30 pushups, sit-ups, and squats back-to-back with our partners. Inhale, exhale, and ten without breathing for each. Next we did the "Russian massage" of our partners by stepping on their limbs and walking on their backs.

Martin asked us what we wanted to do and several people requested working with knives. We started by just getting out of the way of the knife as our partners stabbed or slashed. For slashing Martin showed us how to rotate around completely to avoid the slash, by going in the same direction. The movement of the arm shows you where to go.

He also showed us how to knock the knife out of the hand by passing the attacking arm from one hand to the other, and using a sharp blow to knock it out. Also doing this with just one arm by snaking the arm around and using a sharp blow to knock it out.

Also how to "throw" the attacking arm back in the opposite direction, which I find very tricky. You let the arm slash or stab, guide it along, then suddenly toss it back in the opposite direction, which moves the whole body. We practiced also using pressure on the elbow to control the person as they stabbed or slashed.

The class was kind of unstructured and we worked somewhat freely on the various concepts. For the last five minutes Martin asked us to change partners and my mom agreed. We don't often switch. As I may have mentioned, it is very difficult for me to find a partner as I am too shy to ask anyone, but one of my classmates was happy to work with me, which always lessens my anxiety.

He did ask me to be a little more committed and I feel more comfortable doing this with my classmates than with my mother. I don't like to hit her and I am sure if anyone were to try training with his or her own mother, they might find a similar aversion to striking her.

Anyway, my partner was a young, fit guy and so I wasn't so worried about hurting him accidentally. He took me down and kept coming, and I did give him a little more resistance than I would ordinarily because I love to work on the floor. I'm afraid I tripped him as he came at me, kind of a dirty tactic but he seems to enjoy working with me. When I know my partner can handle himself and is good-natured about sparring, I feel more comfortable using all my skill. It's nice to be reminded that there are a few guys in the world who admire martial women, even though sometimes it seems that most of them are just threatened by women who like to fight.

At the end of the class Martin offered punches; my mom accepted a few. If you have read even one of my training logs, you know that I feel intense anxiety at being the center of attention and so I did not volunteer even though I find taking strikes to be very beneficial. Everyone was standing around watching and I don't feel comfortable in such situations. I am sorry I missed the chance to take strikes from Martin but I guess it was a good lesson for me to try to overcome my shyness.

Wednesday ? Working with sticks

Working with sticks was the theme of Wednesday's class. We began by each taking a stick and rolling it over our muscles to warm them up. Martin reminded us to breathe as he so often does. We placed the sticks behind our neck and over the shoulders with arms draped over, which Denis had told us is used as a POW restraint in 'unfriendly' countries. With the stick in this position, Martin had us fall, and rise again. From a kneel, we fell forward with the stick in the same position. After watching Denis and Edgar, I saw that the trick is to slide your leg back and get that side of your body as low as possible before sliding onto the floor. Also if you open your chest as you fall, it softens the impact.

Keeping the stick in the same place, we also did pushups, but I could barely move myself off the floor in this position. And sit-ups, which were not as tough but still quite challenging with the stick draped over my shoulders.

Then one person took a stick and pushed it into the other person, who allowed the contact to move them. Martin demonstrated not letting the stick cross your spine. If your partner is pushing into the right side of your back, move your body to let the stick slip off your right side, rather than moving the other way so the stick slides over your spine. We pushed each other from the back and the front and all directions. Then Martin asked us to avoid the stick altogether. I was moving in close to my partner and Martin told me to just step out and get out of the way rather than stepping in. We also practiced avoiding the sticks at half squat and full squat.

For the next exercise, Martin had us step into our partners and manipulate them as they thrust the stick. I had a lot of trouble committing to my movements. I stepped in and just lightly placed my hands on my partner's shoulders, rather than trying to take him down. Martin told me to work with more conviction. It took me a long time but finally I gained a little confidence in my movements. But I'm afraid I only felt this way for a few minutes. The stick was a distraction for me. I am not always in top form and training every day always reveals this much more than classes a few times a week.

We also practiced avoiding slashes with the stick by letting the legs move freely. My partner jumped over the stick as I made a low sweep and Martin complimented him and showed us several ways of doing this. The easiest way for me was using my partner to give me support as I leaped over the stick. Then we practiced using just the legs to defend and take the stick away. Martin told us not to get too focused on the weapon, but just work with the person and the stick will follow. If you control the person, you have the stick, too. But the principle eluded me and I wasn't able to do more than brush the stick aside with my legs.

Martin also showed us how you can roll over the stick but I didn't want to try. Under other circumstances I would have given it a go but I was feeling insecure for some reason. I kept wanting Martin to come over and instruct me. Instead of rolling I just went down and worked against my partner from the floor while he slashed at me with the stick, and I found it much easier to manipulate him from the ground than standing up.

We put everything all together for three minutes or so of sparring more freely, then circled up. Everyone seemed very happy with the stick work and described it as a wonderful and relaxing experience. Being a forthright sort, I admitted that I felt distracted by the stick and challenged by the night's work, and that I felt more proficient back in June when we last work with sticks, but maybe I just had lower expectations six months ago. Here's an excerpt from that log

Quote:

I worked with Denis a little, on the ground, while we had our arms wrapped around the sticks, like POWs in "unfriendly countries," as Denis politely refer to them, or, as I think of it, like milkmaids. I love to work with the stick in this way, and I asked Denis when we circled if we could tie our legs together in the course of our training.

And from another log entry about sticks:

Quote:

We've also been warming up with sticks in our classes. Two people holding two short sticks, one in each hand, parallel to the ground, then one person stands between the two sticks and grips them to lower down 10X, without touching the feet to the floor. These are more difficult that you might think, because of the instability of the sticks. Also two people hold the stick parallel to the ground, about waist-high, third person on the ground does pushups, only with the legs balanced on the stick. Then the same thing with the hands on the stick and feet on the floor. And then doing pull-ups, with heels on the ground and hands on the stick. Then the latter three exercises while classmates punch and kick us...which is strangely easier than doing the exercises without being hit. Edgar told us the beating takes the mind off the difficulty of the exercises.

We've also been working on avoidance and yielding exercises using the stick (staffs, actually, in our case). Two people hold balance the stick between them, first on the shoulders, one person rotates the shoulders to move to the other side of the stick, or uses the "combing the hair" motion to pass it, then one person holds the stick at elbow, waist, knee, and ankle level while the other rotates or passes (for the knee/ankle level, you can use your legs to pass the stick up to the arm). These exercises are useful for learning to "pass" or otherwise avoid punches. Also swinging at each other with one or both ends of the stick, while the other avoids, as well as pushing the stick against the legs and between the legs. The latter is useful for loosening the hips, as you have to be loose to avoid becoming tangled up in the stick. We've also practiced holding the stick against the shoulders, parallel to the floor, with arms draped over, and falling and rolling while keeping the stick in place.

It was about six months ago that I wrote that I love to work with the stick, but on Wednesday I felt very discouraged about my abilities and what I perceived as a complete lack of skill. But not every day can be a perfect training session and I just try to remember Jim King's advice that there's always another class.

Thursday day ? Rolls

Martin led us through the usual pushups, sit-ups, and squats, and reminded us to keep our form. Especially for the sit-ups, he told us not to raise the legs off the ground, and to keep the back straight to develop the core muscles.

Then we began to work on slow rolls. These are just Systema rolls done as slowly as possible. It is not so easy as it sounds, it's actually much easier to go faster. I found it extremely difficult, once my legs had passed over a certain point, to slow down my ascent. My legs just kind of fell to the floor. My mom did these slow rolls very well. We also did slow backwards rolls and I found it even harder to go slow. I can stop in mid roll but once my legs tilt to a certain angle, I can't seem to stop myself from falling into the rest of the roll.

Martin had us roll slowly forward, then sideways, backwards, and maneuver around on the floor. Then he asked us to come together in tight formation in the center, rolling and maneuvering around in this way. Martin had to corral me back into the center as I had tried to drift away. When I see a group of people crowded together, it is hard for me to resist the urge to get away from them. We also did this exercise with eyes closed.

Then we practiced rolling from a standing position. Our partners pushed us from behind and we moved forward into a roll. I am still frightened to do this but I just keep trying. Martin suggested that if we felt as if we were going to go down on one knee first, to turn the knee inward instead of letting it touch the ground. I tried this and it made my rolls kind of flop sideways. I actually find it easier to just get as low as possible and hold one leg out straight and let that act as a rudder to tip me forward.

Next we had our partners push us from the front and we had to swivel around, rotate into a roll, and return back to take down our partners. We also did the same thing with kicks or sweeps, where our partners pushed one leg back or swept it forward to move us into the roll, and we had to return back and take them down from the ground. Also we practiced just going straight down and taking our partners down by falling instead of rolling.

"React first, then apply your knowledge," suggested Martin. "It's like driving a car, you don't think about every step that's involved in turning a corner, or whether the brakes or the axel work, you just turn the wheel and the car follows." This is why it's easier for me to roll when someone is pushing me or sweeping out a leg, then I don't have time to plan, I can just let myself be moved. But rolling is still scary for me. It's only because I've made an effort to practice every weekend that I can roll from a standing position at all, and then I have to get as low as possible before I roll. My mom is also scared to roll from a standing position, because she keeps hitting her head. I do too, sometimes, but I just get used to the hard knocks. I find if I hit my head once or twice, it's not such a bad thing, I'm usually less inclined to hit it again. But my mom does have bruises on her shoulder from rolling. I am not quite sure why I don't get bruised, I guess I just have more padding. Still, the only way to get over the fear is just to try. We spent a good half-hour rolling from a standing position and to not try this during that time is missing out on a great opportunity to get some instruction from someone who is extremely proficient at rolling. I can't think of anyone better qualified to teach us how to roll than Martin Wheeler. I guess I have progressed a little more than my mom because of my sessions in the park. It's now too cold for most people to want to practice outside with me, and so she hasn't been rolling as much as I have. The wind is so nippy on the Hudson that I usually practice only for 20 minutes once a week but it makes a difference. Even so, as I admitted to Martin, most of the time when I roll from a standing position, I tense up as I am afraid to hit the floor and this makes it more painful. You just have to relax into it and accept that you will hit the floor. You have to be decisive about it, you're going down, either way, so you might as well relax and accept it and let your body find its natural way to the ground.

We ended class with a 30-count pushup and many thank-yous to Martin Wheeler, who promised to come back in March. Martin took the time to tell me and my mom that we have improved considerably since his last visit, which is always nice to hear. I appreciate that he went out of his way to tell me this, it was a boost to my self-confidence, and I felt as if the hard work of the last year has yielded some positive results.

Thursday evening with Edgar

I took Thursday off, since Friday is my birthday but there's no Systema class on Friday and I wanted to

take two classes to celebrate my birthday. Denis was taking Martin to the airport so Edgar was going to teach the class for the first time in many weeks of guest teachers. There was a guest waiting to observe our class but Edgar was running a bit late with his private lesson, so Master Hun, the program co-ordinator, asked me to lead the class through warm-ups. This is the second time I've been asked to lead the class and once again I deferred this task to one of the other students. I can't get through 30 pushups and I thought one of the guys who can do so, should lead the class. Also I just don't like to take a leadership role. Many of my partners tell me what to do, and even though I am one of the more experienced students, I don't see how they would suddenly defer to me just because Edgar was running late. I just don't feel comfortable in leading the class. There were three other students and they were all from Edgar's kung fu class. Even though it's a different style, they've all been training with Edgar longer than I have, and so I deferred to one of them to lead the class while we waited for Edgar.

So we did our usual 30 pushups, sit-ups, leg lifts, and squats, with 10 on the inhale, 10 on the exhale, and 10 without breathing. Edgar joined us by the time we got to the squats. After we finished those, we did the exercise where you feel the drift of your partner, as we did in Martin's seminar over the weekend. One person stands and places their hands lightly on the other's arms, trying to feel the natural sway of the person as they stand still. Edgar called this the "frequency" of the other person. No-one is ever standing truly still, as Martin explained, as long as you are breathing, you are moving.

After that, Edgar had us do the 30-count pushup, sit-up, leg lift and squat.

We expanded this sensitivity drill into one person attacking with a punch, then freezing, while the other walked around finding the drift and taking the person down. The idea is to find the natural direction that the person will fall, the path of least resistance. It takes some sensitivity to accomplish this. The person freezing can re-adjust as the other person manipulates them, but they should not be too resistant. Edgar demonstrated with one of my classmates who's always a bit tense. He was very resistant and Edgar hit him a few times to break the tension and collapse him.

I found myself "following" the drift of my partner all the way down, usually ending up somewhere near their knees to manipulate them to the ground. We tried this exercise kicking instead of punching. Then we started to use just the legs to take the other person down. We spent much time on this last exercise, simply avoiding a kick and using only the legs to take down the other person, switching back and forth. Edgar told us we could follow up on the takedown by stepping on the vulnerable areas of our partners. My partner did so, and after I got up, he took this opportunity to tell me that in "reality," he would have stepped on me so hard I wouldn't get up again. "Unless I had a revolver and just shot you, in which case neither of us would get up again," I said, irritably. "Or a knife, for that matter, in which case I might have stabbed you." I was annoyed because he's often pointed out to me that if it weren't for him "holding back," I'd be quite dead. One night in the past, we were working on an exercise where you were only supposed to use your legs, and keep your hands in your pockets, and he was getting frustrated. It was his third class, using the legs for Systema work doesn't come to most of us in just a few hours of training. "If I could use my hands, this would be quite a different story," he said. It is arrogant to keep pointing out that you would be so much more lethal without the restrictions of a training environment. Any student would be more effective against an actual threat. There is a parable of two monks watching a fox chasing a hare. The one monk points out that the hare will escape, and the other asks Why? "Because the fox is running for his dinner, whereas the hare is running for his life." You should never assume that you will have the upper hand against your partner in a real scenario. It's good to have confidence in your skills, but it's also important to recognize that your partner is also in training. If you've had a handful of lessons and your partner is much more experienced, you should not assume you can prevail over them.

Humility is just as important as confidence. As Arthur Sennott says, "I just assume everyone can kick my ass and get on with the training."

When you've spent so many years in another style, as my partner had, it's hard to join a different class and be a beginner again. It is understandable to want to retain your senior status from one class to another. I am sympathetic to my classmate's frustration at having to start with a blank slate in a different style, but at the same time, I could do without the arrogant remarks.

Fortunately I switched and partnered with Edgar. We were on the mats and so I was in my socks. At one point as I moved to take him down with my legs, he stepped on one of my socks and captured me there. I laughed but it was good practice in using just one leg to take him down. Maybe we could even create a drill that involved being trapped by one sock and using just the other leg! But I began to get a little tired from all the falling and getting up again, and from the daily training, I guess I am not used to it as I generally go to 3 classes a week. After two hours of practicing, I found myself in the unusual position of thinking with longing of my bed at home and how nice it would be to curl up under my quilt and sleep for a solid 8. Fortunately, Denis returned from the airport and Edgar told us to circle up.

I commented that I enjoyed working on finding the "drift" or the "frequency" as Edgar described it. It is the direction the person wants to go naturally, and if you can be sensitive to this, find it and use it to move them, it is much easier to take someone down, as you are just helping them go in the direction they are naturally going. Edgar offered some critique to me and the other two guys, who had trained with Edgar in the kung fu class. One of them is very tense, he is the guy that Edgar punched during the first exercise, and Edgar advised him to keep his arms relaxed and try to loosen up a bit. The other student, who is just out of high school, is quite naturally relaxed. I was surprised that Edgar told him that he gets a little too physical and to try to keep it more soft. I was expecting some critique from Edgar, in fact I was looking forward to it, but he simply said, "Rachel is much more calm." I laughed and said it was probably because I was so tired from training all week. But I was surprised. Before starting Systema I never would have described myself as a relaxed or calm person. I generally feel anxious and shy around my classmates, whereas other students are more at ease working with everyone, and yet these social skills don't seem to reflect whether or not someone is relaxed.

On a more personal note, after class, as I was standing chatting with Denis about my winter coat (German military surplus), Master Hun took me aside and quietly told me that he needs me to lead the class through warm-ups when he asks me to if Edgar is delayed. He told me its important when we have a guest observing, to start the class on time and that as the senior student, I should lead the class. I explained to him that one of the other students does a good job of leading us through the warm-up exercises and he again insisted that the most experienced student should lead the class until Edgar arrived. But I don't feel as if I'm in a position to lead the class. I may be the senior student but only because our veterans have stopped coming to class for various reasons. I don't feel as if I am the senior student and some of my classmates tell me what to do. I can't expect that all the sudden, just because the teacher is late, my classmates will defer to me. But Master Hun was insistent, saying it is important to Sifu (Peggy) and Edgar, and Fighthouse as well, and he made me promise to lead the class next time he asked. I gave him my word but of course I am hoping it won't come to that again.

Many thanks to Martin Wheeler, if he is reading this, for spending a whole week with the Fighthouse students. I had a great time training and look forward to his return to Fighthouse next year. Of course thanks to Edgar and Peggy for arranging Martin's visit, and to our guest teacher Denis for being on-hand to help with the instruction. I was exhausted Thursday night when I returned from class, and yet now

that it's Friday, I wish I could do it all over again and it seems a long wait until my next class on Monday.

\*Vsego nailuchshego\* (best wishes),  
Rachel

## **Training Log #40: Brief notes on improvised weapons and knife disarms**

During a recent class in which we practiced knife disarms, we spent the last half-hour or so using improvised weapons. The scenarios of this class were loosely based on being "held up" with a knife, such as when an attacker thrusts a knife into your personal space and demands your valuables, or presses the knife to your throat in a surprise attack from behind. Earlier in the week we had practiced knife disarms working from static positions, such as a tight hold. The partner attacking grabs one arm and presses the knife to the body with the other, or from behind, holding the knife to the throat while grabbing the other arm and stretching it back. We explored this topic from both tight holds as well as when the knife is just thrust or otherwise presented as a threat. We practiced avoiding the knife thrust as well as escaping when it is already pressed to your throat. Some of these positions were quite dangerous to contemplate, a knife to the jugular and the arms tightly locked, or being choked with one arm while the other thrusts the knife into your face. Freeing from chokes, and from the knife pressed closely to your throat, reveals the importance of breath. Inhaling and expanding your chest can mean the difference between life and death, another second of precious air, or a hair's breadth distance from the blade.

However, I don't want to get too into that, as I've covered chokes and holds in many previous logs. This is just about the improvised weapons we worked with in the final part of the class. Edgar brought us some props: some clothing, a newspaper, a book, and a wallet. We took turns trying the different improvised weapons. My partner and me were given the newspaper first. This is of course a very likely prop for a New Yorker to be carrying. So I pretended to read the newspaper while my partner threatened me with the knife, and then I threw the newspaper over and around the knife using it to shield my hand while I disarmed. It worked pretty well, I thought. The newspaper has to be open, as if you are reading it, not folded up, otherwise, it's not large enough to wrap around the knife. But once it's tossed over the weapons, you can kind of just slide your hand down and the knife falls away quite easily. My partner didn't think the newspaper was as effective as I did, maybe because it is a little unwieldy. Because it's such a common item, it's good to know that it can be used to protect yourself. And who would suspect a flimsy newspaper could be a weapon strong enough to prevail over a knife?

Next we were given a hardcover book. This was my favorite improvised weapon. Thrown over the blade, it takes just the slightest downward movement to knock the knife clean out. When the blade is shut tightly between the pages, it's very difficult to pull out again. A hardcover book is also formidable weapon by itself. After the disarm you can easily use the spine or the corner of the book to punish the attacker. Vlad demonstrates this on the Confined Spaces tape. The attacker creeps up on him while he's reading at the desk. I love that fact that he carefully closes the book as if to mark his place, so as not to telegraph, before pulling the attacker forward and slamming the spine down on the back of his neck.

Some of my computer textbooks would make deadly weapons, I am sure. Our next prop was a pair of pants. It was meant to stand in for any item of clothing. We practiced simply tossing the pants at the attacking person's face to blind them. You often see this in movies, but it actually works if you aim well so that the clothing is wrapped around the attacking person's face. Then we tried tossing the pants over the knife as our partner's thrust it at us. To do this, you need to use a whip-like motion. My partner was quite skilled in getting the pants to wrap neatly over the blade. He explained that he had lots of practice snapping wet towels at his children!

We also practiced using the tee-shirts we were wearing to wrap around the blade as our partners attacked. Of course a tee-shirt isn't really much protection against a blade, but a jacket or a thick sweater would be enough to prevent you from getting badly cut. Especially a leather jacket, which is very good



protection against a knife.

The wallet I found to be the trickiest, as you have to aim more carefully to wrap the wallet around the blade. But if you were reaching for your wallet and opening it on the pretext of handing over some money, it could work. If the wallet were still in your pocket, though, it would take too long to get it out. However, when properly applied, it does work very nicely to protect your hand and allow you to effect the disarm.

To further illustrate some of the principles, we practiced removing the knives from our partners' hands as they "sheathed it" by pressing the blade between the palms tightly. To remove the knife, you can't pull it straight. You can rock it up or down and then remove it with a whip-like motion (not unlike snapping a wet towel), or twist it a little and then whip it out. If you try to pull it out straight, it's impossible to budge. This is why the book works so well for disarming, it holds the knife even more tightly than between the palms. Since I always have a book or newspaper when I ride the train, I was grateful for these lessons in their practical application as tools for disarming an attacker.

\*Vsego nailuchshego\* (best wishes),  
Rachel

## Training Log #41: Stick class with Guest Teacher Martin Wheeler

This entry is from early March, when Martin Wheeler came for a 2-day seminar at Fighthouse, and taught a few classes in the week that followed.

I was a little stiff, and still sore from the weekend seminars when I went to the noon class on Tuesday. Martin started us off rolling the sticks (I think ours were actually bo staffs) over our muscles to massage and warm them. I had just woken up after sleeping all morning, so this was a nice warm-up. Then he asked us to drape the stick over our shoulders with arms draped over the front a la "prisoner of war," and to fall with the stick in place. I did this by spiraling downward and using my straight leg as sort of a rudder to guide me to the floor, none too gracefully, but it wasn't an impossible descent. Then Martin told us to keep the straight leg off the floor and remain in one place, sinking down to the floor and tucking the hips, basically, a one-legged squat, which is difficult even without the stick! I approached this exercise starting from a walk to sort of give myself the impetus, but I balked. I usually have trouble with low squats, and I felt myself tense up at the prospect of falling from higher than I would have liked. At the same time, I was kind of surprised to discover that my falls were dependent on the spiraling motion, and how difficult it was to fall from a standstill and keep one leg off the floor at all times. In comparison, the stick across my shoulders wasn't much of an impediment. Martin came over encouraged me to do it just once, so I did, rather clumsily, and then again, a little smoother the second time. Looking around the class, it seemed to be a challenge for all of the students, and I think I wasn't the only one to be feeling sore from the previous week's training.

Fortunately we moved onto falling forward. I found this a lot easier than the one-legged exercise. Pushing out the chest really helps protect your face when you fall forward like this. It's hard to overcome the fear response of curling up into a ball, but if you curl your shoulders forward, your head could hit the floor first, and that's rather painful. Laugh if you will, but I think being "blessed in the chest" is an advantage for falling forward with restricted arms. I don't have to worry as much about turning my face or protecting my shoulders, since I know which parts are going to touch the floor first! After falling forward, we also practiced getting up again without turning over onto our backs. "Find a way," Martin said. I didn't find these two exercises nearly as difficult as the first one.

We practiced wiggling around on the floor on our butts, without letting the feet touch the floor and of course, with the stick still in place. Then moving around on our stomachs, still with the stick across our shoulders. And finally, the most impossible of all, doing pushups with the stick draped across the shoulders! I literally felt locked into place for that last one!

We moved on to exercises with our partners. We practiced gently swinging the sticks at our partners and while they just avoided, keeping form. Also the same exercise but swinging straight down touching the end of the stick to the floor, rather than swinging horizontally. Then we did the same thing, only changing the angle of the sweep on the upwards swing. We practiced avoiding swings to the head. Also swinging the stick at our partners by letting the stick fall naturally without aiming, sort of like twirling a baton. For this one, Martin told us to let the movement of the head lead the body. Martin came over and pushed my partner's head around to show him how to let his body follow. I noticed a big improvement in my partner after this. So when it was my turn, I asked Martin to do the same thing to me. He rotated my neck around, but it was difficult for my body to follow because my neck was kind of stiff. He had me rotate his head to feel the difference. Because my neck muscles were tense, he just rotated my head around and around and asked me several times to relax. I tried not to be nervous as Edgar videotaped us. I couldn't help but think how easily my neck could be broken if I tensed up. I think I have a phobia about

my neck being broken because of my own tension. But after Martin cracked several vertebrae, I felt a lot better. Some people feel pain when this happens but for me, cracking joints are always a relief. When Martin returned to pushing my head, it was easier to let my body follow, but somehow I ended up stepping heavily on the floor rather than stepping softly. I was a little resistant, stopping the energy he had sent into the push on my head by stamping my foot. Because my joints tend to be stiff and lock up, it's especially important for me to let my partner's energy travel through me, rather than try to stop it.

Martin said Systema movement was very much like a matador's. He demonstrated with an imaginary cape so we could envision how fluid hips are so important to this kind of movement. He told us how the matador does not run away from the bull, but steps closer. We continued to avoid the swinging sticks, but now by rotating inwards, stepping closer to our partners and placing a hand on their shoulder. Then taking them down using the continual movement of the stick, then finally take the stick away and switching tasks. I found rotating inwards a lot easier than rotating outside the stick; obviously, moving inwards keeps you farther away from the business end of the stick.

Martin told me not to be complacent. Perhaps I was being a little lazy about getting out of the way. The stick deserves extra respect, learning how avoid quickly is important. When we do exercises with the stick, with strikes, or even just a practice knife, I always find out if I've been doing the bare minimum. These objects do not care about your safety the way another human being does. So it's very good practice for moving properly.

Since my partner's job was to hold onto the stick and keep it away from me, his consciousness was focussed into grasping the stick. It wasn't hard to use it as leverage for takedown. But after that, taking away the stick was a bit trickier. After my partner fell, I found it easiest to grab one end of the stick and tilt it, then use my leg to collapse it out of my partner's hand.

We finished by targeting our partners a little with the stick, not swinging in straight lines, but tracking them a bit. Martin and Edgar demonstrated this exercise, a good deal faster than we were doing it, which was pretty impressive. But I noticed that Edgar didn't always get out of the way in time. It looked painful, but this is how the body remembers what to do next time!

I liked the stick class a lot because our focus was mainly on movement and posture rather than applications. We practiced letting the body lead the movement, not passing the stick over by rolling off the arm, as was my inclination was, but letting the arms hang naturally at the sides and moving the entire body. Movement often begins with the hips, but as we saw earlier, it can begin with the head or with any part of the body that must move out of the way first. When the stick is swinging fast, you might not have the option to maintain contact and pass it over you, or even to move the closest leg first. Sometimes, the farthest leg has to move first so you can get out of the way faster. We did a few applications towards the end of class, using the motion of the stick to take our partners down, such as the exercise I described above, but for the most part, the stick class with Martin was just about learning to move honestly.

This was a good class for me because I was a little sore from the previous three days and because I had just woken up less than an hour before class began. I sleep so soundly that my joints sometimes lock up from being in the same position for so many hours. I found myself a little distracted by my cracking joints, a tension headache, my skipped breakfast, and of course, my fear of the stick. As usual, getting hit and taken down a few times relaxed me a good deal, and I felt much better after class. It was a fine day so I walked home. I was so sore, it hurt to step off the 6-inch curb! As I walked, I was thinking that a stick or a staff is a useful Systema accessory for solo training. Last year, I remember watching Martin

roll with a stick stuck down one pant leg, or through the neck of his shirt and down his back, and even across his shoulders. The falling and rolling exercises with a stick are great practice. I'm going to look into getting a bo staff so I can practice in the park the summer.

I returned for Martin's evening class, which was about working with knives, but it's a separate log entry, which I will post shortly.

\*Vsego nailuchshego\* (best wishes),  
Rachel

## Training Log #42: Knife class with Guest Teacher Martin Wheeler

I returned to Fighthouse on Tuesday to take the evening class with our guest teacher Martin Wheeler. We started out with a few conditioning exercises. We did some pushups, changing the position of our arms each time. In past classes, we've done something similar by holding a knife in one hand and switching the position of the knife for each new pushup. We also did backbend pushups, which I find utterly impossible. Then some one-legged squats, with the other leg held straight, lowering to floor and up again. I think Martin was the only one of us who didn't struggle through those! Then partnered sit-ups, with one person on all fours and the other on their back, facing their feet, lowering down to the floor and up again. Your head should almost touch the floor as you go down and drape your arms backwards. I've collapsed a few people during this exercise, and I've also pitched a few people off accidentally. It helps to square off and distribute your own weight evenly before the other person climbs on. And you have to relax and trust the person to support you as you dip down. I think of it as a weight-distribution exercise for both partners rather than an ab exercise.

Next we practiced yielding by avoiding knife slashes, simply getting out of the way, either rotating inward, or stepping sideways or backwards and out of the path. We did a similar exercise with slashes to the legs, letting the movement of the blade "carry" the leg away. Martin showed us how to separate the upper and lower parts of the leg to avoid the blade, by moving just the thigh and letting the calf swing back after the blade had passed. We did the same avoidance exercises at half-and full squat.

Martin asked us to let a knife slash to the legs move us into forward rolls. Perhaps because many of us were rolling sort of clumsily, he also showed us how to fall forward and stop the impact with our hands, but staying as flat as possible. In our class, we've done this exercise by having our partners push us from behind, and falling forward in the same manner. My rolls from a standing position are still quite tense, and yet, if someone is pushing me, sweeping one of my legs, or otherwise forcing me into the roll, it's a little easier to relax mentally. I think for the same reason I find it more relaxing to practice with my eyes closed, because the situation is beyond my visual comprehension, so my responses are more fluid ones because I have limited control.

Martin told us, "Don't plan where you are going to fall, just go down and work it out when you get there." He also told us not to challenge the knife, but to just let it move us. He said it was important to move the body rather than putting the hands out or trying to wrestle the knife away by grabbing the wrist. A dexterous knife attacker will simply cut your arm and hand. He suggested we first move, then see what opportunities exist. I was reminded of his advice to me earlier in the day, to not be complacent about the swinging stick.

Next we practiced rolling or falling offensively as our partners slashed, taking them down during our descent. I did the offensive rolls by snaking my hand through my partner's legs and rolling against him. I can't imagine why this is so much easier for me than rolling from a standing position without an application. Why should I be less frightened, merely because I am touching my partner as I roll? I just don't know!

Then we practiced "entering in," not focussing on the knife, just stepping in closer to avoid the slash, which is helpful when in close-quarters. Speaking of avoidance, I was in the ladies' room for most of this exercise, so I missed a bit of this practice.

One of my favorite exercises followed. I think of it as the sticky knife exercise, because it is similar to

sticky arm exercises in Chinese and other traditional MAs. The sensitivity practice is always my favorite part of Systema class. Our partners slashed at our arms, moving the blade around with dexterity, while we maintained contact with the arm. Since Martin's class, we've done this exercise many times in our subsequent classes, and it's great practice for the timing and speed as well as biomechanical sensitivity. Martin had us do the same exercise with slashes to the legs, and it was more difficult to maintain contact with the legs. Then he showed us how to use just the legs to disarm, for example, using the knee to push the knife away in the same direction of the cut and "see what other opportunities arise." Martin demonstrated several ways to disarm with just the legs, such as avoiding the knife by turning away from it, then swiveling back for a surprising 3-dimensional kick and sneaky disarm. Denis calls this a "horse" or "bucking" kick. I wish I could describe Martin demonstration of defense against multiple attacks using only his legs. It was amazing to watch, but can't be captured with words.

To end the class, we did a little multiple work, two with knives attacking one. Martin told me not to merely move between the limbs, but to step behind one or the other. Otherwise, he said, "...it's just running away, not solving the problem." I chose the person who was moving faster, with more complicated slashes and thrusts, and maneuvered behind him. I discovered it's best to stay close rather than far away where velocity makes the knife more dangerous. Then I understand Martin's advice. We also did the same exercise with our eyes closed. I think most of us enjoyed this. The multiple work is always fun, and with eyes closed, it's more of a game for all three.

Since Martin's class, which was a couple of months ago, we've practiced working with knives a great deal in my class. I think I've learned to be less complacent, as Martin had suggested to me during both the stick and knife classes. You can't be indecisive or lazy about moving away from a stick or a knife. I know that the principles ought to be the same without a weapon. It seems to me that even if the movement is the same, the a stick or a knife weapon adds range and is less forgiving, somehow. So I've learned to commit to moving in one direction or the other, not to stop and linger, but to get parallel to the blade, yet closer to the person wielding it, and to respect the knife and not compete with it.

We ended with some Marine-style pushups, which I find impossible. Martin seems to enjoy ending his classes with these! It was a large and diverse class and when we circled up, the students had interesting comments. Everyone really enjoyed the class. One new student asked where Martin learned all those conditioning exercises and whether he should do them at home. Martin offered some excellent advice on solo training. "Just do one exercise in every way imaginable," and he demonstrated doing pushups: slow, fast, changing his hands, his legs, every which way. He did the same thing with squats, "Both legs, one leg, no legs!" changing his position each time. Another student said that his injured leg felt better in Systema class than it did just walking down the street, and Martin said with old injuries, it's best to keep working through it, otherwise the rest of the body overcompensates, and won't "let go" of the injury even after it heals. He added that a fresh injury should be given rest and medical attention. Another classmate said that keeping his form, breathing, and movement all at once was kind of like spinning many plates, sometimes a plate or two would fall off, but when they are all going, it's a fantastic feeling. I thought this was well said, and I completely agree!

Someone requested a strike from Martin and he offered these to the class, who lined up with the usual enthusiasm. After everyone drifted away, I asked him to hit me, no more than I can take, I added unnecessarily, and he said, of course. He hit me lightly in the stomach lightly a few times, penetrating only the muscle, and it gave me something to think about on the train ride home, and even for several hours afterwards, as the best ones always do!

\*Vsego nailuchshego\* (best wishes),  
Rachel

## **Training Log #43: Several kinds of fear encountered in training**

Several months ago, when we circled up after training, Edgar spoke to us about several different kinds of fear encountered in training: fear of fear of falling, of being deprived of air, and of being struck. Fear of falling he described as the least distressing for most of us. When I first started training, it took a few months to lose the fear of falling. I remembering how sore my ass was for those first few lessons! But now I don't mind falling, actually, I like it because it helps me to relax. Edgar told us the fear of falling can be exposed even in experienced practitioners under certain conditions. For example, I recall seeing some usually soft students tense up while demonstrating for large crowds at big seminars. I sometimes still hit the ground tense when my partner takes me down in a surprising way, if he speeds up, for example. Fear of falling is not difficult to overcome with practice. Edgar told us, "Make friends with the floor," and that it would change our lives. I feel that losing the fear of falling and rolling is taking an important step on the Systema journey. It's a milestone, or at least, it is to me, for I don't quite feel I've lost the fear of falling to the extent that I know that I am capable. It's a leap of faith, to trust your own body to protect itself against something very hard even when going fast.. I have met a few people who are naturally free in this way, without any training. The fear is a conditioned response we acquire as we grow older, and most need practice to overcome it.

As described in the Guidebook, fighting skill should not be dependent on a given set of circumstances, but rather a skill that "cannot be taken away while the practitioner is alive." To resist falling is to waste energy attempting to avoid a particular circumstance--falling down--that may be unavoidable, just as we can't always avoid getting struck. As Edgar told us more recently, "Even the professionals get it sometimes." Some people fear falling because it hurts to fall on the hard floor, and if they tense up, it's even more painful. Other people can fall without hurting themselves, but feel vulnerable on the floor and want to avoid going there at all costs. Even if falling is an unattractive prospect, I think it's good to keep in mind that falling is preferable to a variety of other scenarios, getting slashed with a knife, for example, or shot with bullets. To view falling as a worst-case scenario could prove to be a costly mistake.

A good way to get comfortable with falling is to have your partner push or pull you down gently, or trip or sweep you as you walk. This is a combination of going down on your own terms and being forced to fall. You can also start on the ground and have your partner push or pull or twist one of your limbs so that you must roll. Another good exercise for getting comfortable with the floor is to have the instructor clap their hands periodically as the class walks around, and at each clap the students should fall or roll. It's good to practice all kinds of rolls, forwards, backwards, and side-to-side. Practice rolling to cover ground and rolling in tight quarters, and rolling side-to-side staying as flat as possible (by "threading" one leg through the other in kind of a "4" shape before swiveling your hips to roll over.) Also practice rolling from kneeling and cross-legged positions, and with your hands clasped behind your back, and rolling from side-to-side with hands behind your back, too (you sink down on one knee first, then push that leg backwards and sort of lower yourself down on one shoulder first). Spend some time just laying on the floor and getting friendly with it. You can use the floor as a passive stretching partner just by wiggling around and moving instinctually. Feel the vibe of the floor, and roll around on it like a lazy cat.

Martin Wheeler is amazingly light on his feet, and his demonstrations are always awe-inspiring. He dives toward the ground as if it is a pool of water. We always joke that Martin can actually fly. He told me he loves being on the ground so much that he goes there gladly. Watching Martin, you can see the clear relationship between a willingness to go to the ground and fighting skill. For it's not just the ground, but the broader concept of "changing levels," and the ground just another level. You can also



see how free Martin is in his movements, and it's such a joy to watch. Although he would probably say it is just plenty of hard work, I think Martin is a rare talent and there are few like him in the world. But anyone can learn to learn to meet the floor softly with a little practice.

I fear being deprived of air the most of the three fears. We practice this in every class, doing 10 reps of each of the four exercises without breath, lately on the exhale, though we used to do it on the exhale. After doing the initial 20 reps, I'm usually out-of-breath. Edgar gives us a minute or so to restore our breathing, but I find myself still panting, and then I panic when I hold my breath. If I get to class a few minutes late, I do a lot better with the no-breath reps, and I just wish I could restore my breathing a little more quickly. I used to have an easier time with it. I can't think of any other skill that has deteriorated since I began to train. Then again, it could be the heat of the summertime. I think it was a little easier for me to hold my breath in the winter.

Holding the breath is an important skill. It could easily be the difference between life and death, when being choked, or drowning, or poisonous gases. I find it amazing that my fellow students can do ten leg-lifts without breathing. Edgar told us he's nothing special, and that any ordinary person can hold their breath during ten pushups. Recently I told our kroog that I was having a lot of trouble doing the no-breath exercises, and some people offered advice. Edgar told me that panicking or "freaking out" as he so aptly describes it, uses up oxygen. It's counterproductive. One of my fellow students told me to think about something other than the lack of air, think about doing the exercises themselves, for example. For the other exercises, I don't count. I just keep doing them till Edgar tells us to stop (he doesn't count out loud, except for the slow count ones). I don't like to count because it seems to make them take longer. But for the no-breath ones, I have to count my own, since we all do them at a different pace. I think the counting adds to my freaking out. But I think the biggest factor is losing my breath and not being able to recover it in time to begin the no-breath exercise. Losing my breath is a lesser form of panic, but it's very similar to the feeling of holding my breath. It's hard to believe there are people who can forsake breathing for several minutes!

Fear of being struck has been discussed quite frequently on Vlad's forum, so I won't write about it extensively here. But like the other two, it's a unique and personal aspect of the practitioner. I believe our fears reveal a great deal about our personalities. Our relationship to the floor, and by extension, other objects in the universe, and the way we interpret strikes, says a great deal about individual relationships to the world at large and the other people in it. According to the Guidebook, you don't want to eliminate fear altogether. It serves an important purpose in fostering survival. But physical fear, flinching, or tensing up at contact, should be eliminated. Mental fear, which warns you of dangerous situations with an almost subconscious signaling, should not be eliminated, according to the Guidebook.

A lot of Systema questions seem to return to the same answer: practice. To lose a fear of being struck, practice accepting strikes from a skilled student or teacher. The teachers really know how to strike a student to help him overcome this fear. They have the sensitivity to make sure the strike is tailored to each student's personality and degree of fear. You can always start out by having your teacher or your partner push the strikes into your body rather than hit you. That is good practice for both partners as the pushing one learns how to properly position the fist and the absorbing one learns how to move while the pressure is applied; both learn how strikes affect the body. A good exercise for everyone, but especially students wary of being struck, is to do your regular sets or a slow-count exercise like a pushup, and have one more more students strike you during the exercise. They should aim for the flat muscular parts and take care to avoid the spine, the kidneys, and other sensitive areas. When done with good intentions, this is like an invigorating massage, and the student rises with a of well-being and refreshment.

Strikes should be delivered with sensitivity, and of course precision. (If I've made this sound simple--my mistake!) Wild haymakers, swinging fists, and flailing arms heighten the fear response. Both partners know when the strike is well-delivered. It makes a different sound and feels different (usually more painful) to the recipient. But it's a different kind of pain. Wild punches can hurt a lot, too, but in a way that seems more aggressive. They generate a different vibe in the recipient. A Systema strike is not delivered with hate or aggression, and I think that makes all the difference in the world.

Sensitivity and relaxation are important when practicing striking while sparring. Tense up, and you will quickly be bruised. Our class has been practicing striking for the last few weeks. One thing I've observed: we all get hit, even Edgar. And most of the students have gotten bruised faces or split lips. This may sound scary, but the thing to remember is that it's all done in a positive and even cheerful way. Everyone smiles, even as they pummel you. Edgar seems to enjoy punching me when I'm not paying attention, I always have to be careful about that when I'm partnered with him. Although Systema strikes can generate a great deal of pain (the phrase "cripple with one blow" springs to mind), striking while sparring is often playful and no-one minds getting hit. The attitude makes it quite a different experience than boxing or point-sparring, for example.

And yet, striking does sometimes serve a more serious purpose, as Demetry described in a recent post, sometimes a student is taken down a notch by a well-placed strike by the teacher. I don't think it's an exaggeration to say that Systema strikes can change personalities and even heal the psyche. When I sprained my ankle last year, it was quite painful. I spent a lot of time weeping and groaning in agony and feeling sorry for myself (well, it seemed like a lot of time, it was probably just a few weeks). I asked one of the Systema teachers to hit me a couple of times and I swear it helped with the pain more than all the Tylenol and red wine I'd been drinking (the latter was the doctor's orders, no kidding!).

We train to overcome the physical fear, the panic we feel at the prospect of pain or discomfort, the tension and resistance that come from trying to change circumstances beyond our control. Since fear of the unknown is among the most distressing, familiarity is a good way to overcome fear encountered in training. My advice is to practice diligently and with patience. Do not shy away from your fears or seek to bury them underneath the skills at which you excel. Expose them to yourself and others until they become commonplace. Diligent practice will yield results. Like Eleanor Roosevelt said, "You must do the thing you think you cannot do."

\*Vsego nailuchshego\* (best wishes),  
Rachel

**Training Log #44:** Short Work with Guest Teacher Jim King

See <http://www.new-pony.com/systema/jimguestclasswedmarch2006.html>

**Training Log #45:** Leg Work with Guest Teacher Jim King

See <http://www.new-pony.com/systema/jimguestclassthursmarch2006.html>

**Training log # 46:** Wrestling with Guest Teacher Martin Wheeler

see <http://www.new-pony.com/systema/martinguestclassjune2006.html>

**Training log #47:** A Class at Fighthouse: Line Drills, Calf Massage, Strikes, and Defense from Chairs

see <http://www.new-pony.com/systema/log47.html>

## Training Log #49: Knife disarms and confidence

We had an excellent knife work class today at Fighthouse. (Edgar just keeps getting better and better; he's a gifted teacher :) ) The group was the usual mix - about half beginners, the other half 'veterans' and intermediates. While working on the disarms, I noticed a clear difference between my psychology and emotions during a successful disarm versus one that I just barely managed. In particular, I was focussing on the disarms in which the knife drops to the floor (rather than disarming and taking the blade, or redirecting it into my partner's body.) I began to attune myself to the feeling of a successful disarm, and to notice how that feeling differs from a more haphazard disarm, as well as from the more inexperienced students' disarms. The difference is confidence. This comes from practice, of course, as biomechanics are so important in getting your partner to drop the knife. Some beginners were quite good at securing the knife- wielding arm and locking me up so I couldn't move, but they had some trouble making me let go - they tried swinging the arm wildly in all directions, or just wrenching it out of my hand, or any number of techniques which, while they may eventually succeed, take far longer and are much less certain than the tactics I learned from Edgar (e.g. locking the elbow, shoulder, or wrist, etc. ). And I realized that the students themselves are unsure that they will succeed. I can actually see the uncertainty in the expression on their faces. That's perfectly natural for people just starting out with Systema. It really takes a few hundred successful disarms before your mind accepts that yes, that works. Having the benefit of more training, I also have the experience of having 'proved' to myself that what I do works, in addition to the more mechanical knowledge of biomechanics and of course, familiarity with the movements. But the mental state is just as important. So, I noticed the difference with some disarms, during which I knew what would happen as a result of the pressure I applied to my partner's joints in order to make him drop the knife. Not only did I know that the knife would fall, but I also knew where it would land on the floor, so that I could trap it with my foot (I do this to foster my awareness of where the knife is, even after partner's dropped it, I still think it's a good idea to maintain the awareness). The less successful disarms, I didn't doubt that I'd disarm my partner, but wasn't quite so sure how or when that would happen... it was more like I was just turning his arm this way and that, until I saw an opportunity, but the knife would often clatter away and I'd have no idea where it landed. I thought this was interesting - the difference in my state of mind between responding to the knife thrust or stab, and working with it on a more accepting level. There's nothing wrong with responding - especially when taken by surprise, response is good. It's just that when I respond in the context of Systema practice, I am first waiting for something to happen. Being more 'in the moment' means no waiting - the lines are blurred between stimulus and response, and I'm just moving naturally in whatever environment I happen to find myself - even if that's being attacked. It's hard to put into words; I hope I don't come across too philosophical or New Age-y. But even though I describe this feeling as 'natural,' I would not move this way without all the many hours of training, some of which included techniques, drilling, and even memorization to learn joint locks and effective disarms. The freedom of movement is natural, but the confidence comes from familiarity with the situations, and there's no shortcut to that - just keep training, is my parting advice, and you will succeed beyond your expectations.

\*Vsego nailuchshego\* (best wishes),  
Rachel

## Training Log #50: Solo drills for mobility - December 2008

Kwan Lee's joint mobility solo drills: These exercises are from the May-June 2008 Vladimir Vasiliev seminar at Fighthouse in NYC. Kwan taught us during an introductory segment, after Vlad led us through the four conditioning exercises at full, half, and no tension. I have heard inklings that some of Kwan Lee's health and fitness drills may one day be available in an official release, but to tide you over until that time, this is from my training journal: Kwan led us through some stretches of the joints - particularly, the arms and legs. We rested our knuckles lightly upon the floor, our passive stretching partner, and leaned our body weight into the floor. Next we rested our wrists upon the floor and did the same, adding rotations in both directions. Then we rested our elbows on the floor, rotating the forearm clockwise and counter-clockwise, leaning just enough body weight to provide a nice stretch. Finally we did the same with shoulders, leaning the body weight, almost like the beginning of a roll, and rotating the rest of the arm as well as the head and body. These rotations, in addition to stretching, also release synovial fluid in the joints, which helps with mobility. We did the same with the legs, starting on all fours, and leaning the body weight onto the front of the toes (toes should be bent almost at a 90 degree angle), then the ankles, knees, and hips, rotating around in both directions. The idea is not to put undue stress on the joints, so everyone had to do this in a way that suited their own body. For example, the tendon in my right ankle had been severed for some time, so I didn't want to put my entire body weight upon it. But people with strong ankles were able to do so, and rotate the ankle around in both directions even with full body weight. In contrast, my hips are very flexible, and being a woman, my hips are more widely spread than most men's, so I was able to sit on the floor and rotate around in all directions on both hips without feeling any discomfort. Finally, Kwan asked us to put all these joint mobility exercises together creatively and move around on the ground, from rolling, to low squats, to lying down, and everything in between. One student demonstrated his way of movement and it was quite beautiful to watch. He was a strong man, but unlike many well-muscled guys, he was also quite flexible. Kwan encouraged us to find our own way with these joint mobility exercises. With Systema, you do not force your body to perform in the same way as another person's, but use your own natural way of moving to your advantage. This principle of *\*poznai sebia\** (know yourself) is especially important if you have past injuries. Since we cannot be assured that we'll remain uninjured during physical conflict, it's good to know the extent of your range of motion as well as the limitations. Denis Dmitriev's 'morning wake-up' solo drill: Denis showed our class this drill from his time in the field. You start off on your back, as if you had just woken up. Do a self-diagnosis of your body, with breathing, of course, to make sure that there are no injuries or stiffness in the joints, as is often the case when sleeping out-of-doors. Gradually stretch yourself into a sitting position and as you do so, draw your red gun or knife (you can use anything for the 'alertness' part of the drill, even a pen will do nicely). Choose a target, such as classmate, a piece of furniture, or, if you are out-of-doors, a small tree or shrub. Then begin to move around on the ground while simultaneously maintaining focus on your 'target.' One way to move on the ground is to sit with your legs bent in the same direction - for example, your right heel should touch your left inner thigh. Then move circularly, keeping hips loose and relaxed. Try this in both directions - most people are a little more stiff in one direction than the other. Slowly begin to incorporate rolls, moving forwards and backwards, and keeping focus on your 'target.' When you are moving smoothly in all directions without rising from the ground, put your red gun in the other hand, or pick another target, and begin again. This is an excellent solo drill for mobility on the ground. Note that it's not really a shooting drill - it's more of an exercise in self-diagnosis and awareness of your surroundings, as well as a way to learn to move naturally on the ground.

*\*Vsego nailuchshego\** (best wishes),  
Rachel



## Un-dated Training Diary # 1 – Stick work

Today we worked entirely with wooden sticks—staffs such as used in Chinese martial art. These have a little weight to them, although you do such exercises with a pine dowel about 3-4' long and a few inches in diameter. Or maybe even a sawed-off broomstick. The stick is only representative of a weapon that an attacker might use; it's good practice for defense against a club, bat, sword, knife, even just a punch. As with all our exercises, the principles can be applied to any situation. As we are often reminded, the person, not the weapon, is the threat, and yet, as described in the guidebook, the choice in weapon can reflect personality. Today I saw two teenagers with a small stiletto, with a blade about five inches long. Only a little larger than a pen-knife, but being a stiletto, a lot more dangerous. They were flicking it open and closed, drawing attention to themselves and the weapon, and yet the passengers, myself included, but even the people sitting next to these kids, were unconcerned. It was the way they were clicking the blade open and closed, it as clear that they had just acquired the knife, and were looking at it with curiosity and admiration. Not that they weren't bad kids, perhaps one day they might use it to harm someone. But at that moment in time, even with a weapon, they weren't a threat, and only marginally interested in generating fear; they were more interested in the mechanical object itself. Me and the other passengers made this judgement instantly, almost subconsciously; without even looking directly at the two kids (New Yorkers generally don't make eye contact, especially on the subway).

after doing our usual conditioning exercises, pushups, situps, leg lifts, and squats. Aside from being warm-ups, these also are also to wear us out a bit—"controlled fatigue," which aids relaxation. These are also, of course, for general conditioning and strengthening of the tendons. This is helpful for me, as I would like to become fit and Systema 3X a week is my only workout (unlike some of the guys in my class, who spend hours on their daily workouts).

Then we worked on falling briefly, our partners pushed up back, and we fell back, sinking down with one leg extended, keeping the spine straight until you reach the floor. Then the same thing, but into a backwards roll after falling. They pushed us from behind and we dropped down face forwards, like falling into a pushup, and using the arms to stop the fall, and getting up again by quickly tucking the feet underneath and springing up. Then they pushed us from behind and we went forward into a roll. Then, our partners swept one leg out from under us, and we yielded that leg, swing it around and into a fall. "Like fabric" as Edgar says. He's also used the analogy of hitting the floor and "sliding under the covers." Today he told us "when you get comfortable with hitting the floor, it will change your life." The floor helps to show you exactly where the tension is. I would venture that you cannot be comfortable with the floor unless you are relaxed. For me, learning to fall and roll has been one of the more challenging aspects of Systema. I am finally getting comfortable with rolling forwards, but I'm still a bit nervous to roll backwards. I exhale when I fall, it helps to relax me. It's difficult for our conditioned minds to avoid tensing in anticipation of contact with the floor. It's amazing to see people like Martin Wheeler, working so easily in all dimensions, at every imaginable level.

Then we began to work with the sticks, first, one person on the ground in pushup position, the other prodding, poking, or sweeping and arm or a leg. Same thing in the bridge position (backbend), which is hard for me to even get into. My mom has no problem doing this. She gave me some pointers, place your feet wide apart, keep your hands under your shoulders, and your feet tucked as closely as possible under yourself, and push the hips out. Edgar told us it's difficult to get into the bridge position; most of my classmates had their heads only an inch above the floor.

We then prodded each other with the sticks, while the other yielded, pushing one end of the stick from the front or back, and sweeping the legs. The idea is to allow contact, but yield. Systema-ists do not contest for space, the idea is to allow yourself to be moved, and in constant movement, not only do we avoid harm, we also aim to calm and soothe the attacker. I know this sound odd, but if you give the appearance of going along with what attacker wants to do, if they try to sweep a leg, allow your leg to be swept, or if they push you, or punch, just go with it, but allow slight contact, psychologically, the person will believe they have been successful in the attack. The Russians call this “happy fist.” We are all subject to this sort of mental trickery because the mind and the body must work together to process information. As Edgar explained to us today, “the eyes don’t see, it’s the brain that does the seeing.”

One person held the stick, the other had to go under, first, just sliding or rotating under at shoulder, elbow, hip, knee, and ankle height. You can rotate your shoulders, or move one leg through first, like squeezing through a fence. Then passing the stick.

Then working with the stick swinging or thrusting, while the other took down. Then using two hands on the stick, rotating either end into our partners. While I was momentarily distracted by the kendo class, Edgar took the stick in both hands and slipped it over my neck, attempting to choke me with it. Although I was distracted, I managed to slip out. It’s always the natural reflexes provide a much better protection than any mental process. And that Systema teachers have a mischievous sense of humor!

I find working on the floor helps me identify tension. “Practice rolls every day” Edgar advised us. You just have to get psychologically comfortable with working on the floor.

Afterwards we worked entirely with the sticks. These are traditional Chinese staffs, but you could probably use a wooded dowel a few inches in diameter and 3 or 4 feet in length. Maybe even a sawed off broomstick.

To start, one person got into pushup position, the other prodded and pushed with the stick, or swept an arm or a leg, and the person on the floor yielded. We did some falling exercises with the stick.



## Un-dated Training Diary # 2 – Partners

It's hard for me to work with some people, I wish I could get around it. It's not that they're bad people or mistreat me verbally, some of them even try to help me. But physically, when we interact, I feel dislike for them. They are very rigid, I guess you could say they are tense, and not inexperienced martialists either, though in other styles. Tension is also a state of mind, and it may sound strange, but I think that when we work together, the tension that I feel makes me dislike them on an almost instinctual level. As I mentioned, these people aren't rude to me. Some are too rough, but I don't think they are doing this to harm me. When we spar, I'm just a stand-in for an imaginary opponent, someone they would like to overwhelm. But I've noticed that the people I dislike for reasons I can't quite define are all quite rigid, I've felt this during yielding exercises. And they don't smile. So I think the animal part of my brain is telling me to avoid them, even when they are trying to help me with a particular exercise.

I know it's strange, but that's my assessment. Because I've noticed that I often have a rough time during one particular class, when many of the guys, including some that I like a lot, are very rigid. Like today, I just sort of gave up as my partner was hitting me with a stick, and in Systema, we continue until the 'work' is done. I didn't even try. Same thing during an initial exercise where four guys were kicking me. I usually enjoy this kind of exercise. They simply trapped me in a tight circle and kicked the hell out of me. I mean, I was able to evade them momentarily, but they easily trapped me again, so that I was pinned against a wall, and kicked the hell out of me is the only way to describe it. I couldn't absorb or otherwise evade them. It's more of a psychological problem. No, I'm not crippled by the experience. But I've never taken so many kicks in class, usually I can evade or absorb them or otherwise avert harm. I know they are my classmates, but I just can't be comfortable sparring with them, and sometimes our classes are small and there's no way for me to avoid it. The result is that I accommodate them, I guess this might not be training honestly, but I don't want them to force me down, so I just drop when they start to manipulate me (whereas with other partners, I make them work for it a little more, because I trust them not to hurt me). I've noticed that when it's my turn to take them down, they expect me to treat them the same. If my partner manipulates me and I don't go down, I keep moving, to evade them, and also because it seems more realistic, and finally, because it's easier and many of my partners are less experienced. But the rigid guys, when they come at me, and I start to manipulate them, they freeze like a statue and once they are so rigid, it's hard to take them down, it's easier when someone is still moving. Martin showed us how to break the tension if our partners do this, and so I guess these guys just expect me to hit them, as they do to me, so I guess it just works out to a different way of working.

It's also true that these guys, while they maybe have too much competition, I might have too little. I am not a competitive person, not in any way. I mean, I won't even compete for a seat on the subway or a taxi, as soon as someone else goes for it, I let them. I am probably not competitive enough. In a Darwinian model of the species, I'd probably not survive because I don't compete. I guess emotional comfort—avoiding conflict—is more important to me than physical comfort. And I feel emotionally uncomfortable with these guys.

I mean, yesterday, Edgar tried deconstructing the entire exercise, down to the point where I was just yielding from stick, and I just couldn't bring myself to even try, simply because I felt uncomfortable with my partner. He tried guiding my hands, even putting his hands on my hips and swiveling them, but I just wouldn't even try. My mind was a million miles away, I know I do this when I am uncomfortable, I just kind of drift away so I don't have to deal with it. I go to three classes a week, and I'm only like this in the one class when the rigid guys are there. I always feel bad, as if I should apologize, to my classmates, and to my teacher, for completely flaking out and being mentally somewhere else when I

ought to be in class. I used to love this class, as there are only a few people in it, and this means more instruction. But since these rigid guys joined, I often have a hard time. I am not saying it's their fault, just that they cause me to feel this way. Classes are five times a week, and there's class that I could fit into my schedule, it'd be larger, but these guys aren't there. Is that better? Or should I confront my intimidation?

Edgar always smiles at me in the most friendly way as I leave; it's reassuring to know that even at my very worst, he is always glad to see me in class, as he is with any student with a sincere interest. The guidebook tells us that the most important trait for successful training in the System is desire—"you've got to want it."

### Un-dated Training Diary #3 – Doubts

I sometimes question why training is such a rocky road for me. It happens occasionally that I leave class in a deep state of gloom. By “occasionally” I mean it happens a few times a month. Perhaps I take it too seriously, or expect too much—hoping for Systema to magically make me into a better person. I am sure that my dislike of other people has a good deal to do with my trouble. There are a number of classmates I’d prefer not to work with for various reasons, unnecessary roughness and aggression being a big factor. I hate to be battered; I’d rather take a more painful, yet serious, blow. I don’t go for arrogance, either, smugly telling me “Not bad” when I evade strikes or attempting to teach me via Socratic method (“Do you know why we are doing this exercise? Tell me [so I can correct you].”) is an easy way to irritate me. And sexism, of course, dropping a partner because she’s female, or making another guy partnered with another woman switch so you can be with a man, is sexist and a cause for my dislike. But the fact is that I am not immune to it, either, as I let the other person’s aggression get to me; I can’t keep my emotions distant, and I am easily affected by the mental state of my partner.

The fact is that I dislike a number of my classmates, and don’t want to be partnered with them, either because they hurt me when I ask them not to (which makes me want to hurt them back—a feeling I want to avoid), or because they are arrogant. I don’t know what makes anyone with a few hours’ training in an entirely new System feel as if they are advanced enough to teach the other students. These are beginners, and I do not feel comfortable paired with them, because I cannot help them at the expense of my own training. Nor do I even have enough skill to train with them, much less help them. Not that they would take my help, anyway. But I yield as much as possible, I try to fall as soon as they touch me, but they just keep coming faster and rougher, and I cannot stop myself from disliking them intensely, since they all do a pretty good impression of someone who enjoys seeing me hurt.

I admit, a lot of this is psychological. For reasons of pride, it hurts for half the class to consider me so inept, even if their confidence in their own skills are so clearly misfounded. I aspire to be gentle, but it doesn’t come naturally, I have a bad temper, and it has already led me to some trouble and physical harm. And I’m deeply troubled by my feelings toward certain partners, as I’ve walked a peaceful path for the last five or six years, and have no intention of returning to a life of conflict. But I don’t think it’s inaccurate to say that I hate some of my classmates, and that disturbs me.

I will probably regret posting this, who knows, I may even come back in and delete it later.

I wish I could work lightly more often; it’s rare that I have the Systema “feeling.” But I find a great deal of fault in myself for not being able to get along with all the guys in my class. Other people do it; why can’t I? But I do get along just fine with the other four women who have been my classmates (excluding my mother).

I know what’s best for me: I should avoid these 4-6 guys. But I always seem to wind up with them, and I don’t want to embarrass them or create trouble by refusing to train with them. They will be the only ones benefiting from it; for me it’s actually a detraction.

But practicing Systema should not be dependent on

Even so, I only feel as if I am doing Systema very occasionally.

It's also due to Edgar being out of town. I sometimes feel isolated in class, as if my classmates are my competitors, not my comrades. But with Edgar, I feel as if I have one friend, at least, so I don't feel as nervous. On the H2H tape, Vlad says to find a training partner, "someone you feel comfortable with." That describes only half of my classmates, on any given day, there might be no-one in the class that I feel comfortable with, but usually there is at least one person—Edgar.