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Despite their large size and prodigious strength, horses are remarkably sensitive creatures. They live in a world where the weight of a fly on their coat is an unbearable irritation, where they communicate with their fellows through glances, ear flicks and shifts of weight. Horses are also naturally designed to conserve energy, in case it's needed to affect an escape from a predator. Due to their desire to conserve energy, they also like to get along with those around them – horses and humans alike.

American horseman, author and clinician Mark Rashid strives to work with horses in a way that preserves those essential parts of their nature: their power, their sensitivity, their subtlety and their desire to get along. Rashid grew up under the tutelage of a wizened old horseman in the American Midwest, whose principles still form the foundation for the work Rashid does today. Additionally, Rashid studies the ancient Japanese martial art of Aikido (which translates to *way of harmony*), and incorporates the ideologies practiced in Aikido into his work with his horses and his students.

Rashid has been visiting the U.K. to work with students and their horses since 1999. At his clinics, participants first have their horses evaluated by American Equine Chiropractor Dr. David Siemens, who looks for physical issues that may be contributing to training issues. Dr. Siemens also provides a lecture to participants and riders reviewing equine anatomy, biomechanics and saddle fit. Rashid then works with each student one-on-one every day of the clinic. He has no set agenda for each student and encourages the student to work with him on what they feel is most important with their work with their horse.

PHYSICAL ISSUES

Because horses are designed to get along and to conserve energy, it is suspicious for a horse to expend a lot of energy to avoid doing a task he's been asked to do. Before Rashid approaches issues a horse and rider present from a training standpoint, he first considers the possibility that there may be a physical reason for the issue.

A horse who is "girthy" or "cold-backed" may actually have a pain issue, and his behavior upon saddling or mounting may be the horse saying, "Ouch! That hurts!" If a horse will not stand for saddling or will not open his mouth for the bit, he could be in pain or have saddle fit problems. If a horse hurries home from a trail ride or suddenly acts up during a ride, he could be in pain. Horses in pain can also wring their tails, switch leads, be unable to get a certain lead or lack rhythm in their gaits. Horses in pain may also be difficult to catch.

In the clinic environment, Rashid strives to get to the bottom of the issues riders want to work on. If a problem is physical, according to Rashid, training will most likely not be effective in the long-term in solving the problem. But, if the owner can get the physical issue solved, the training or behavioral issue may go away on its own.

On Rashid's last visit to the U.K. in July of 2005, each horse participating in the clinics was evaluated by Rashid and by Dr. Siemens. Horses were given a number, with 0 representing no pain whatsoever to 10 representing a horse in unbearable pain. Scores for the horses attending the clinics ranged from a 17-year-old Arabian mare who scored a 2, to a 5-year-old Warmblood cross who scored an 8.5. Horses with higher numbers on the pain scale were taken care of physically before taking part in the training portion of the clinic.

ENERGY

Rashid says that he sees horses as "energy", and much of his work centers around the ideas of redirecting energy and influencing energy. Rashid describes horses as having two "circles of energy", one starting at the back feet, coming up around the hindquarter, through where the rider sits, and back down to the ground. The second circle starts at the front feet, comes up and intersects the circle from the hindquarter about where the rider sits, continues on around the shoulder and back down to the ground. The rider themselves makes a third circle, which interacts with both the front and hind circles.

If a horse is particularly stiff, his circles of energy will not be symmetrical. If a rider is stiff or is riding in a poorly fitting saddle, that can drive a wedge between the front and hind circles, effectively disconnecting the front and hind end. The goal, as Rashid sees it, is to have all three circles (front, hind, and rider's) all going the same direction, moving horse and rider forward as one.

Rashid demonstrated this idea in July of 2005 with a dressage rider on a Warmblood cross mare, who wanted to

improve the quality of their gaits. He had the rider simply picture the horse's circles of energy, then had her allow the horse's circles to move her circle. The rider practiced this, and as the mare's gaits improved, she stated that she felt she'd become a "conduit" for the circle of energy from the mare's hindquarter to pass through. The mare became noticeably lighter in front and more active behind. In this case, the rider did not use any "cues" per se to improve the quality of her horse's movement; she simply pictured what she was striving for and let it take care of itself.

In the martial art of Aikido, the practitioner often redirects the energy of his partner, rather than meeting it in kind. In this way, he can actually use the attacker's own energy, augment it if he likes, and bring about a peaceful, if unexpected solution to the situation. Rashid often uses this idea with horses in his clinics.

If, for instance, a horse has too much forward energy, that energy can be redirected to the amount of energy the rider does want. The rider can take the energy the horse offers and perhaps turn the horse in circles and serpentine and random figures, until he slows to the desired speed. Then the rider would ask the horse to go straight at that speed, again turning if he speeds up. In this way, the rider is directing the energy the horse already has, to the energy she would prefer the horse had.

In the case of a horse who tosses his head, once a physical issue is ruled out, that energy can also be redirected. As the horse tosses his head, the rider can "catch" the energy that the horse is putting into the toss, and turn the horse's head. In this way, the horse's energy is redirected, and his head toss concludes unexpectedly – with his head and neck soft.

Due to his Aikido training, Rashid is more likely to direct a horse than stop him. Stopping a horse who is offering energy is not unlike, Rashid says, putting up a poorly built dam in a flowing river. The dam holds for a while, building up water behind it. The pressure increases to a point that the dam bursts, causing a flood. Now there's a mess in front of the dam *and* behind the dam, and the water still hasn't been held back. A horse who is offering energy where it's not wanted has already said, "I can't slow down/stop/stand still!" By redirecting that energy, the rider or handler can help the horse find the desired behavior.

BRACES

A "brace" is present any time a horse or a rider uses more muscles than are absolutely necessary to do a particular movement or job. Braces often result in a lack of movement in the horse and/or rider, and can take on as many forms as there are horse/rider combinations.

A common brace that Rashid addresses at his clinics is horses who push into the bit. The horse who flips his head, pushes on the bit, or does not stop is exhibiting a brace, in that he is tensing the muscles of his jaw, neck and back in order to push. A horse who travels inverted is also braced, and even horses who carry their heads in a "proper" position can be braced. A horse can be so braced that he cannot move his feet, and conversely, he can be so braced that he cannot stop his feet.

The goal, as Rashid sees it, is to allow the horse to do his job using the least amount of muscles possible. Horses, Rashid states, already do all the things we ask them to do, on their own, out in the field. They canter, trot, piaffe, jump, do flying lead changes, spins and sliding stops. What Rashid would like to see is that those movements are as easy for the horse under saddle as they are for him in the field.

Just as a horse can brace, so can a rider. If a rider is bracing, that brace can cause joints to not move, or can block the flow of energy from the horse. If a rider is braced in the saddle, it will be difficult for the horse to move the rider, and it will be difficult for the rider to feel the movement of the horse. A rider who is braced is using more muscles than is necessary to ride their horse.

At his clinics, Rashid will sometimes walk up to a rider and wiggle their heel. When he does this, he is testing to see how far up the rider's body that wiggle goes. In a rider who is not braced, that wiggle will go up to the shoulder and head. In a rider who is braced, the wiggle will stop wherever the brace is.

If a rider is bracing, Rashid will often start with having the rider breathe deliberately while they ride, as proper breathing not only oxygenates muscles but also engages the abdominal muscles and articulates the spine. Breathing introduces movement into parts of the body that were formerly braced. Rashid may also have a rider consciously relax a body part or a body part adjoining the braced area.

Horses and people can also be mentally braced. If, for instance, a horse has inadvertently been taught that he is to jump up when he transitions to the canter, he will believe that to be “right” behavior. If asked to change it, he may brace mentally and fight to do it the way he’s been taught. A rider may brace mentally if they adhere to one way of doing things with a myriad of different horses, or if they have fear concerns, or if they bring their emotions into their horse work. Mental braces, like physical braces, restrict movement.

BREATHING

Everyone breathes while they’re riding, of course, because we don’t pass out or asphyxiate. But most often, we do not breathe deliberately or consciously. Many riders hold their breath while they ride, taking gulps or tiny sips of air, rarely taking good, deep rhythmic breaths. A rider who is not breathing rhythmically, according to Rashid, can cause her horse to have a short stride, lack rhythm in his gaits, lack impulsion, or even spook or buck.

The type of breathing that Rashid refers to in his clinics is a breath that is designed to get oxygen in and out efficiently. The rider is encouraged to breathe into the bottom of their ribcage, actually expanding the ribcage and articulating the spine with each breath. The rider can then be asked to count how many strides of walk, trot or canter they get to each of their inhales. In the clinic setting, riders often start with two or three strides to an inhale and three or four strides to an exhale. While this breathing pattern does get air in and out, these are not deep enough breaths to engage the abdominal muscles, expand the ribcage and articulate the spine. With practice, riders can often achieve six to nine strides per inhale and seven to 10 steps per exhale.

Horses exhale on any exertion, Rashid notes, and we’d do well to copy them. Next time you’re struggling with a jam jar lid, rather than holding your breath and straining to open it, exhale and twist the lid off. Often, we can hear horses exhaling at the canter, on every stride. They are exhaling when the non-leading hind foot, the power foot, is leaving the ground. Horses exhale when they jump, when they do a lead change, when they stop or do a transition. All those movements represent an exertion.

Rashid will work with a student to breathe deliberately, and then he will add exhaling on any exertion. In this way, the breath can actually be used in place of the seat to help the horse stop. In order to cue a stop beginning with the breath, the rider would breathe and cue in time with the horse’s hind feet: one, two, one, two, breath, hands. For the stop, the rider would exhale a full breath on that one step, then she’d finish the stop by cueing with her hands. Stopping in this way enables the rider to actually stop the hind feet themselves, which helps the horse engage the hind end, and also helps clean up “messy” or “leaky” stops.

For those who like to jump, breathing is of paramount importance. On Rashid’s last visit to the U.K. in July of 2005, his assistant, Kathleen Lindley, who has a background jumping show horses in the U.S., helped students with their jumping.

In one case, a student and her mare had developed a habit of getting in very deep to the jumps, which caused the mare to have to jump straight up, with little to no bascule over the top of the jump. This, Lindley suggested, was a good example of a horse and rider using more energy to do a task than was necessary, as the mare was expending a lot of energy to clear the jump from such a close distance.

Lindley suggested that the rider breathe rhythmically, striving for a maximum amount of strides on each inhale and exhale. She also had the rider exhale over the top of the jump. Within two or three jumps, the horse and rider were taking off from normal, and occasionally “big”, distances to all their fences.

In another case, Lindley worked with a part-bred eventing horse who, though on the green side, had no clear jumping “problems.” When this rider breathed deliberately and exhaled upon take-off, she noticed that her horse jumped up better through his withers and carried a much more even cadence to his fences.

If a rider can do nothing else but breathe properly, Rashid suggests, many riding issues can be solved or reduced. Riders who wish to progress their riding to more sophisticated levels find that they can achieve more with their horses by using less cues and more breathing. The rider’s breath can *be* the cue in many instances, which is not hard to believe if we accept the horse as the sensitive and intelligent creature he is.

SOFTNESS

Softness, Rashid states, is on the inside of the horse, while lightness, in his opinion, is on the outside of the horse. A horse can, therefore, according to Rashid, be light without being soft. A light horse may be “reactive” rather than “responsive”. People too can be soft or light. Softness is not simply the absence of a brace, it is an internal quality, a way to live and a way to be.

If a horse is soft, he is physically able to access power and movement and he is mentally able to offer much of himself. If a person is soft, they will be emotionally consistent, willing to change and be able to offer much of themselves to their horse.

Rashid often uses the reinback as a vehicle to teach the horse and rider the beginnings of softness. In the reinback, Rashid looks for the horse to drop his head, bring his nose in, relax the muscles along his topline and move himself backwards from the hindquarter. The rider’s job is to use a sliding scale of pressure with their hands, with the least amount of pressure occurring when the horse is soft.

Once the reinback has been mastered, then the horse and rider work on softness going forward. Rashid looks for not a specific head position, but for a quality, for softness. Head position is part of the goal, but not the only goal. A horse who holds his head vertical through braces is not soft. A horse who holds his head vertical as a byproduct softness has available to him all the movement and power he can access.

When a horse and rider become soft together, the rider’s thought becomes the horse’s cue. Dressage riders, for instance, can think a horse’s hind foot over to initiate a half-pass, rather than using a physical cue. Jumpers can think their horse into landing on a particular lead after a jump. Other riders can think their horses into transitions and stops.

In Aikido, softness is what allows a smaller partner to overpower a larger one. Softness is a lack of brace, to be sure. The Aikidoist can only blend with and then direct his partner’s movement if he is soft. But that softness also comes from a genuine desire to do no harm and to help the partner, so that softness comes from inside the Aikidoist as well. It is no different for us horsemen. We not only need soft hands, but also a soft heart and a desire to do no harm.

HORSEMANSHIP THROUGH LIFE

Horsemanship, for Rashid, is not just something he turns on and off when he needs it. For Rashid, horsemanship is a way of life and a way to be. The best place to practice horsemanship, he says, is outside the arena, while driving or at work or with one’s children. We can practice being soft, breathing, awareness and patience anywhere, and then simply bring them to our horsemanship instead of trying to summon those things when we’re with our horse without practice.

The best tool in the world for working with horses is *us*, our body and mind, and we have it with us 24 hours a day to practice with. Most of us spend a relatively short period of time every day with our horses, but we still have hours and hours in which to practice our horsemanship. How we live our life is how we’ll work with our horse. If we live our lives in turmoil, hurry and frustration, then we’re likely to find those things present when we work with our horses. If, rather, we live our lives deliberately, consciously and in a centered way, we’ll find our horse work reflects that as well.

Horsemanship can, in the end, be more about a way to *be* than a set of things to *do*. While technique is absolutely necessary to work with horses, every technique will have something extra behind it, a feel. That feel behind the technique reflects the attitude and heart of the person doing the technique. A technique can have a “Here, horse, let me help you,” feel behind it. Or it can have a, “You better do this or else,” feel behind it. The feel behind the technique can be the factor that decides whether the technique is effective or not.

We become best at what we practice most in our lives. If we choose to, we can practice our horsemanship in our life. We can truly become the person the horse needs us to be, not just when we’re working with him, but all the time. Then we can bring to the horse not just what we can do, but who we are.