

How To Train A Horse Without Force Part 2

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Introducing The Training Concept

Training a horse is an attractive idea for many horse guardians because it is a **process**. It is a journey where each day provides another turn in the road, and you don't know what you might find around the corner. All of your dreams with your horse might come true at some point down that road. What an opportunity it is! Much of the beauty of training a horse is in the way the process can influence your own development. It is not only that you are training your horse, but that your horse is also training you. *If we allow this to be.*

Learning how to encourage and support the process is the key to deepening the connection between you and your horse. It requires the belief to trust your own intuitions, and the courage to make mistakes because you are still developing your ability to perceive and understand those intuitions. The most significant developments I have made have been the changes I have made in myself. Letting go of some of the fears and limitations which were blinding me to the true nature of horses and the possibilities that exist in connecting with them. Nowadays, I find myself hesitating to use the word 'training' in relation to horses. It seems irreverent! On the other hand, there is a profound rightness in the therapeutic connection that can be made with a horse through the matrix of training.



Horses may be shaped by difficult times in their past. Their central nervous systems will store up and reflect the patterns of traumatic experiences. When confronted with stressful circumstances again, the stress response takes over and the horse may dissociate from the present situation or panic. However, there is always the potential for the patterning of the past to be released, and the present moment experienced as it is. **If the space to allow it opens, horses are ready to step back into this moment at any time.** The same is true of ourselves, when we can go down deeper than our thoughts. The potential for mutual healing is vast. How to create this space is all there is to remember. This book focuses largely on creating this space physically in terms of training. This is not all there is, but it is a good place to start.

Training a horse is like walking along a path and seeing the trees and the sky, as well as smelling the flowers and the earth, and feeling the leaves and stones under your feet. There are many different parts and they all have a place. The better you can perceive them all and integrate them all in each moment, the clearer your next step on the path will be. I have come to realise that my fundamental intention in training any horse is to enhance their life to the greatest extent possible. And to do this in alignment with their own wishes. This may seem like an obvious point, but it is easy to justify actions which go against a horse's will by telling yourself that they are 'for the horse's own good'. Although there may be some exceptions, the vast majority of the time horses are very well aware of what is in their own best interests. Both in the short and the long term. Learning to listen to their opinion and, indeed, understand their perspective, is a fascinating spiritual journey.

I would have said early on in my associations with horses that my intention was to become the best rider I could be, or to train the horses to the highest level possible or to learn as much about training horses as I could. Yet even starting out with those ambition-orientated intentions, whenever things were not working out well in the arena, my search for a solution would extend into other areas of horse management and health. The physical training was always the barometer. For example if there was tension and resistance in a horse I was working with, I realised that I had to look further and wider to find the solutions. This was a necessary awakening for me as my early influences were all traditional. Now that my horses live as naturally as possible, there are rarely training issues stemming from their lifestyle. This balance has created a safe place where it is easier to focus entirely in the present moment. So when we are together we focus on how we are Being with each other right now. Of course this is always relevant, and the ultimate goal.

This is because it is the relationship itself which matters most of all. The significance of the physical training is that it can be one of the greatest tools in supporting the relationship. It allows both horse and human to transcend their individual selves in the following ways:

- Developing the physical connection between horse and rider through bio-mechanical and spiritual engagement.
- Therapeutic unwinding of the energetic restriction pattern between horse and human, a process which continues throughout the relationship.
- Creating a channel for mutual trust and flow of love.

What I did not understand at the beginning was that the process was happening in myself as much as it was in the horses. They were exposing my weaknesses and limitations, and ultimately *they* were *my* healers. This mutual healing is in fact 'the partnership' between horse and human. It is only concerned with one goal; being **present** with each other.

Choosing to seek presence alters your perspective in that your thoughts are less entrenched in the future. For example there is no drive towards a particular dressage accomplishment if it doesn't improve the consciousness we have together in this moment. It is about looking at the road you are travelling over and not trying to see around the corner. It may seem like a bland or unambitious pastime, **but in fact it is bringing yourself into reality, because the only bit of road you can truly know is what is underneath your feet.** Instead of perpetually seeking what does not exist, you are engaging in the truth. It feels good to accomplish even a moment's awareness of the truth.

When this pure state of energy becomes the goal, the motivation is of a particularly intense quality because it is not originating from ego. Ego motivation is certainly strong, for example, the desire to be recognised as the best in competition or the wish to be accepted within a certain set of riders. These kind of incentives to work with horses are very powerful, but they are never fulfilling. They are never *enough*. Competitors can never win enough competitions and those who dream of acceptance never feel they really have been accepted. Like a drug, the pleasure reduces every time it is apparently achieved and the 'wanting' grows.

Inspiration which comes from your authentic Self, the part of you which is love, is fulfilled in the deepest and purest way by each moment of true presence experienced with a horse. When you connect in this way, you are connecting with all of life. It is the same as plugging your battery into the mains. You feel part of all that exists. You will become less and less interested in achieving something outside of yourself, because you realise that everything you need is already within you. You want less and have more, and you become more and more aware of how the 'subtleties' are actually the substance of your partnership.

When you can appreciate what you can have from a horse that will actually fulfil you, you cease to worry about how long things are taking. In fact you cease to have an agenda or even a future goal because every day has a limitless potential in itself. Your expectations no longer spoil your enjoyment in what you do accomplish because you don't have any, except to experience what happens.

Human society places great value on visible achievement, simply because it *is* visible, and can therefore be judged. The value which comes from choosing to connect with your real Self is not always on show. That doesn't mean that it is just for you however. Any connection with the source of all things is of infinite value to everyone. Often in ways we cannot see from our limited individual perspective.

Xas and
me



Understanding The Relationship In Terms Of Boundaries

Working as a Craniosacral Therapist was of great value to me in learning about the partnership humans have with horses. One of the most powerful things I became aware of were boundaries, the place where two structures meet. Two structures, or two beings. Translating the relationship we have with horses into the meeting of our two boundaries gave me a new dimension of understanding. Learning how to sense energetic patterns showed me the energetic expression of the world, and therefore that everything is energy. This was very much a practical realisation. The world of energy is a vast web of interconnected shapes, which seem to shift and change when they are acknowledged by consciousness.

It seems that the boundaries in this world exist between different sources of consciousness, such as individual animals and plants and even minerals and weather systems etc. The landscape of shapes and textures seems to be defined by the different levels of energetic resonance and the energetic flow or lack of it. The clearer and healthier a being is, the the simpler and more powerful their system will seem. Maybe the boundaries are only visible to us because we believe we exist as individual energetic sources.

Ultimately there are no boundaries in the energetic dimension, as all energy is one. Although acknowledgement of these boundaries does seem to be crucial in releasing our fears, which form our limitations in life. The boundaries we believe exist between different beings are the ultimate expression of fear, which comes from the ego. All other boundaries we make are extensions of that. In truth there is only light or the lack of light. The light is our authentic self and the ego is the lack of light. Acknowledging the boundaries in any way is important, because it brings them into the light. And in the light they don't exist, so they will shift and change and be released.

Releasing boundaries is another phrase for healing. All healing, whether it is physical or emotional, is letting go of that which is holding, blocking or restricting the flow of energy. **Releasing boundaries is another way of giving and receiving love.** It is forgiving the apparent separation and seeing past it to the truth. Releasing boundaries is the pinnacle of success in our relationships. It is the realisation that we are not separate, that we are one being. Surely that it is the greatest achievement possible with any horse. Every moment has the potential to strengthen or weaken a boundary. There is a choice in every moment to follow the path of fear or of love.

Letting go of boundaries can only happen when they are respected for the purpose they are there to fulfil. This makes them healthy and functional. It would seem not to make sense that something has to be strong in order for it to disappear, but that is only when a boundary is seen as a separate dynamic. Boundaries are made of *two sides*, and when the two sides are healthy and functional, they reach a harmony which acts like two waves which meet in perfect opposition and cancel each other out.

The physical boundary is that which is formed by our physical body, the structures which are apparently solid to our senses. The physical boundary is the lowest frequency energy boundary, and beyond it there is the **energy boundary**. Most of us are aware of our own personal space, and we can feel it if someone enters into that space. That is the space within our energy boundary, and it exists for all living beings. Horses are usually highly aware of energy boundaries, unless they have become shut down to them as a result of an artificial environment. The hierarchy of a herd functions within this energy landscape, like fish in the currents of the sea. Horses read the forms of the energy, which are reflected by body language and other physical signals, not the physical signals themselves. In a way horses understand us better than we understand ourselves, this is why we suspect that they are so wise. They can read our energy.

The nature of the energetic boundary of a being is a result of their innate resonance, their character and the way this has interacted with the world in terms of experience. Energetic boundaries can become damaged when their integrity is forced. This can happen because of a traumatic experience or a traumatic relationship. It is of concern to horse guardians because it is rare to find a horse whose boundaries have *not* been forced to some degree during the process of their experiences with humans.



A Boundary Has Two Sides

Often in human/horse relationships, the two sides of the boundary are not evenly balanced. In practice that means that either the human or the horse is making the choices rather than a considered exchange between the two. This imbalance in the energy, and therefore the physical boundary between horses and humans is a common source of problems in the training relationship. **Sometimes it is the human boundary which is 'over-defined' encroaching into the horse's space and forcing the horse into a perpetual insecurity.** 'Forcing' a horse's boundary is the traditional way to train horses. If they lose their individual personality, they will become accepting and obedient, but the relationship is one of master and slave and there will be physical and emotional consequences.

On the other hand, if the human boundary is 'under-defined' and the horse is put in the position of having to take up the leadership role, the relationship is just as unbalanced, because the human being is the responsible party, having chosen to become the trainer of the horse. Remember this applies only in the 'training' context when you wish to make physical demands. Many horse guardians now are content to remain in the listening and receiving side of the partnership and in the context of the horse herd this is a perfect opportunity for spiritual awakening. There can be friction however when a horse is asked to leave the herd structure or comply with human demands if their guardian is not able to reciprocate authentic leadership (as the horse has in the herd) and help them feel safe.

Horses in this position will force the human boundary, but they will be insecure and unhappy, because the human brings them into situations where they don't know how to be the leader, yet the human is failing to take the leadership role. Neither perpetual assertiveness or perpetual acceptance will result in the balancing of the boundaries, which is the essence of true partnership. Being aware of *our own* tendencies is most important, because we can only change a horse by changing ourselves. Becoming aware of how horses are behaving is the next step.

You will always attract a horse who expands your personal horizons, and helps you to become aware of, and ultimately release, your own limitations. Sometimes a person who doesn't give ground easily will be working with a horse with the same tendency. The two dominant boundaries will clash, and the flow of energy between will be blocked. Sometimes the listening human will attract a listening horse, and there will be a lack of direction which results in a lack of energy flow.

These possibilities are examples of basic principles only, each horse is an individual, who will behave differently in different circumstances. Behaviour is a result of innate personality and life experiences. It is helpful to analyse to a certain extent, to stimulate ideas and educate your perspective, but in the end what counts is to treat each moment with your horse as the first time you have been together. This approach can free up your intuition, and clarify your perception of what is happening. Working from pre-determined rules about how horses should behave, or what category your horse is in, or yourself for that matter, will only stifle your potential to make unattached choices in each moment.

True Leadership and Force

What is true leadership? How can it be possible to control a horse *without* force, and if we can accomplish that, how do we know when to listen?

The secret of the true partnership is of course that it is based on love and not fear. Think about how you feel about a person or an animal that you love, that energy has a lot of power, and it is that power which gives you control over them. Words can be difficult because they carry so many connotations which are different for different people. Many people perceive 'power' and 'control' as negative, but that can also be recognised as the voice of the ego. True power and control *which are based on love*, are not at all negative. They are the way a mother can keep her baby safe, and what maintains peace in a society. It is also the way you can form a partnership with you horse which feeds both of your needs and allows you both to become more than your separate parts.

Love is the only way to train a horse without force.

If, on the other hand, there is no flow of love in a relationship, then there will be no *leverage* between the two beings, and that is when other means must be employed to induce one to obey the other. In this scenario, fear is the only leverage available to a human being, because humans are physically weaker than horses. This relationship is not a partnership, because fear is not a moving, creative energy, it is energy which is frozen and blocked. One being frightening another causes the potential of growth and development to freeze and shrink. It may seem to be effective for a certain time or in accomplishing certain goals, but the results are not fulfilling for human or horse. They may look attractive to an outside eye which is searching for a specific appearance, but if the love connection is not there, then neither party will feel good or inspired by the other, and in the end this kind of relationship only inspires the ego in others.

Consider the different forms of fear-based motivation:

- **The threat of pain or discomfort.**
- **Using loud noises or scary objects.**
- **Food control** (using the horse's natural desire for food as a form of control may not seem fear-based, nevertheless it is a manipulation of a basic need. It is used very commonly in many different ways as horses are highly sensitive to the absence of food because of their almost perpetual need for it).

Love is your paint and if you want a beautiful painting you have to let go of all the ways you stop it from flowing. The two principle obstacles are expectations and limitations.

Expectations

Expectations are having goals or values which come from sources other than each moment you are in with your horse. They might take the form of preconceptions about how a horse should be progressing, for example which dressage movements they should be performing at a certain age. Expectations can come from convictions about how a horse should behave towards a person. They might even form themselves on a day to day basis, depending on what came before; because he did a trot like that last time, there is an expectation he can and should repeat it today. All of these expectations limit your energetic connection, because they are not based on **the truth of each moment**. They are theoretical ideas which are being overlaid on to reality, like pasting posters over a window, and as a result they prevent you from being able to see what is actually there. Having expectations is not the same as having knowledge and understanding.

To know the difference between knowledge and understanding, and expectations, you have to be able to relate them back to their source. Whether the thoughts are coming from love or from fear. **Expectations only ever arise as a result of fear-based thinking:** Fear that this should be happening now, or by this time, or this behaviour is not how it should be etc. Knowledge and understanding on the other hand are born out of love, and they are therefore applied to a situation as a result of love. You love your horse so you learn the best posture to ride her with, you love you horse so you see when he is moving stiffly and something needs to be addressed. The love for your horse was what inspired you to learn to recognise stiff movement in the first place.



Limitations

Expectations tend to come from benchmarks or norms created by the society we live in, which we project onto ourselves and our horses. Limitations seem to be more personal, coming from internal conditioning. They are the hardest ones to become aware of because they form our perception of the world, and if they change, our perception has to change. Acknowledging them allows them to release and there is greater space for knowledge and understanding. One of the limitations I have worked through personally has been *acting on my fears about the needs of my animals* and making management decisions which were to soothe those fears rather than for the good of the animals. See the list p13. Other limitations could have been described as coming from loving intentions, for example feeling great sadness about losing an animal. Of course sadness is a normal and healthy reaction to loss, but holding on to it is a limitation, and part of listening to fear, not love. Acknowledging this allows greater understanding that souls do not die and life has perfect purpose.

The following are some more practical examples of fear-based limitations and the greater awareness which comes from letting them go:

- Fear of your horse losing a shoe releases to allow greater understanding of hoof function, then discovering barefoot and hoof boots.
- Fear of the horses hurting each other in the field gives way to appreciating the power of the herd and awareness of the invaluable security it gives each member.
- Using rugs because of fear of a horse being unprotected in bad weather transforms into being able to trust the horse's natural defences and value the advantages of them.

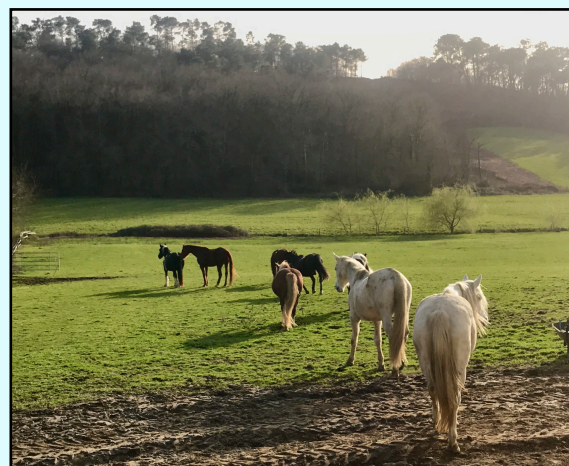
There are other fears which arise when riding and handling horses, which must eventually be acknowledged and let go. **Fear is always a lot more powerful when its presence is denied, because then it can grow.** Like fungus which only grows in the dark, it will survive less easily when it comes out into the light. There is nothing 'wrong' with fear, it is only trapped energy. In fact the most insidious fear is fear of fear itself, and realising that can be a big release.

It is clear that the relationship we make with any horse relies upon our personal development. It is deeply powerful to truly shift the emphasis from the horse on to ourselves. Everything we perceive in each moment in our horse is coloured by our own energy, because our own energy is what filters our perception. If we see a horse misbehaving, that judgement comes from our own concept of 'behaviour' good and bad. Therefore, the fewer limitations we have in our minds, the closer we can get to the truth. The simplest way to approach this is to work on having fewer thoughts and more perceptions. Which is why re-developing the ability to perceive energetically is so powerful.

How can I fulfil my horse's agenda, without becoming upset myself?

Boundary Awareness In Practice

Starting with the horse's point of view, because it is the more passive approach, it should go without saying that we are attempting to give our horse a lifestyle as close to natural as we possibly can. This is our foundation. Keeping horses in stables, where they are fed on high cereal diets and wear metal shoes, initiates anxiety and conditioning resulting in a separation between horse and human. The ideal is to start with a horse who is already as balanced as possible in mind and body.



Everyone is on their unique journey and whether these holistic principles are in place yet or not **progression on any level will be making shifts in the whole.** For example if you are in a difficult situation and your horse has to live in traditional circumstances for the moment, making a change in your own perception about it will bring about opportunities that could be just around the corner. Start by accepting and acknowledging how things are.

Listening to your horses is the same as listening to a person. **Truly listening to anyone is not just translating their words, it is feeling their energy.** When you sophisticate this enough you will be able to perceive states of mind, as well as ideas and images from a horse. The important point is that you are opening a space in your awareness for the horse to fill. For most people, It is much easier to present *their* energy (expectations, ideas and feelings) to a horse than it is to be truly open to the horse's. Even when we are giving our horses our love, we are still filling the space with *our* noise. The true partnership relies on a balance of both.



Unless they have been inhibited as a result of artificial lives with humans, 'listening' is the way horses navigate their way naturally through their lives. They are perpetually sensing the energy of the other horses around them and adjusting their own behaviour accordingly. Their place in the hierarchy does not change their ability to do this, only the way they respond, which is dictated by who they are energetically.

Marie's Story

Marie is a mare who had a history of being asked for more than she was capable of giving and had resorted to bucking people off when they got on her. She had found a new home and a new chance with a lady called Janet. Although Janet had the right instincts, she allowed herself to be advised by a trainer to intimidate Marie into behaving in an 'acceptable' way. For example when Marie started to panic she was threatened with a whip and not allowed to move. This seemed to 'work' when the trainer was present, but if she wasn't, Janet couldn't impose the same limitations on her because she did not believe deep down that it was the right approach. When Marie felt pressured she would begin to panic, and Janet then became panicky too. When the trainer had insisted she was ready to sit on Marie before she had done any physical preparation for carrying a rider, Janet felt Marie's explosive energy clearly, and she knew that a dangerous reaction could be triggered very easily. Janet began to feel unsafe around Marie, she felt that she wanted to barge into her or even over her and she would feel anxiety before she even went to put her head-collar on. Marie began to associate Janet with all the frightening experiences she had already had with people. As time went on they were growing further apart despite the apparent results being achieved in the training. Janet eventually realised that she had to start insisting on following her own intuition. There were parallels in other areas of her life which reflected the same lack of self belief and inability to value her own feelings. She could see that Marie was in a similar place and that neither of them had been expressing a healthy personal boundary. Maybe Marie had been attracted into Janet's life to help her to start doing that and in doing so allowing Marie to be healing herself.

So Janet took all the pressure away and stopped forcing Marie to stand tied up on her own and to wear equipment she was afraid of and to work in ways she wasn't ready for. She started over again, only doing things Marie felt comfortable with until she felt safe handling her again. Marie started to look forward to Janet's company and the trust bond began to form and strengthen. It was with this trust that Janet could then re-introduce the scenarios and equipment but this time the focus was always on Marie's comfort and acceptance, not on a theoretical result. This time the training also included a comprehensive strengthening of Marie's body so that when Janet sat on her again she no longer felt totally overwhelmed by the demands of carrying a rider. When Janet did eventually get back in the saddle, the calm state of mind they were used to working in together manifested in Marie's relaxed body, and the feeling of explosiveness was gone.



What is there to gain from listening to a horse?

The unique sense of fulfilment you feel from connecting with another being. Really connecting. It is indescribable to communicate at that level with a horse.

Another very important thing to gain from listening to horses is **safety**. Horses can feel, and be, dangerous if you can't hear their language. Staying safe around horses does not depend on rules and limitations about where you should stand or how you should behave. It depends on reading a horse's energy, and understanding where their personal space is. Understanding whether they are accepting you in, and how your energy is being perceived. If you learn to read a horse's energy you will *sense* when there is tension or aggression which could lead to a defensive action, such as a kicking or biting.

It is through sensing your horse's energy in this way that you build up the trust necessary to be safe and accepted around them. When you read a horse's boundary and how they are feeling, you are *communicating* with your horse, you are listening to who they are, and they will feel more comfortable when they know you are capable of doing that. How do you do this? Start with getting to know *your own* energy. Every time you approach a horse, first of all, tune into yourself. On a scale of 1-10 rate your mood in terms of tension. The more relaxed you are, the more easily you will feel your horse's energy. It is as if tension closes up your 'energy awareness' receptors. Every time you become aware of your own tension, you are releasing it a bit more, so awareness is always the key. Now you are ready to listen to the signals that the horse is presenting to you.

Sensing a horse's energy is about tuning in with a particular awareness which does have to be developed. The only way to develop it is to practice being aware. At first it may feel like you are imagining what comes to you, because the information is not fully available to your perception, but believe it anyway! Quite often you simply won't feel anything, but don't give up, it will come if you practice every day. Remember you have to actually grow new connections in your brain.

Aimée was inviting me to cradle her muzzle in my hand. We had taken some time in presence together which created a space of mutual connection, and she indicated that she had something to share through the physical touch. There is no need to seek anything more than awareness of the present moment. This is where everything arrives.



Energetic patterns you might feel cover a very broad spectrum of possibilities, including:

- **Presence of tension or relaxation in the horse.**
- **Different emotions from the horse.**
- **The space around the horse like a bubble of energy.**
- **Specific places in the horse's body you are drawn too.**
- **Places where the horse is sensitive or neutral in their body and/or skin.**

The more you practice, the more you will feel, and the better an idea you will get of how your horse is feeling in themselves. This awareness is what allows you to:

- **Know where you can touch a horse and not provoke a negative reaction.**
- **Approach a particular horse in an unthreatening manner.**
- **Feel whether it is safe to handle a horse's legs and pick up their feet.**
- **Sense what is the best area of a horse to groom or approach first.**

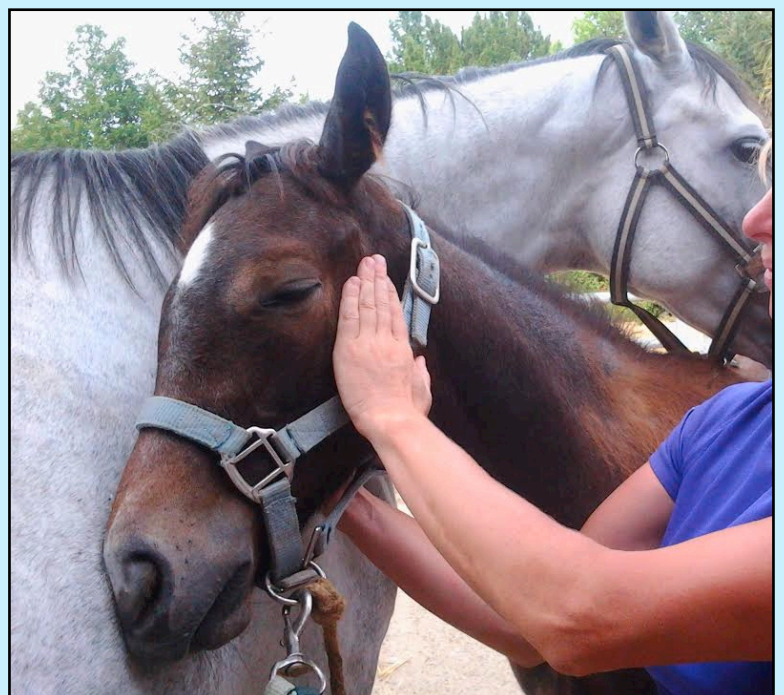
There is no limit to the feelings you will enjoy around horses once you can read their energy. It is not restricted to certain special or gifted people, only to those who are prepared to take the time to sensitise themselves. Developing it is tiring in the same way as any new skill, because it is increasing the plasticity of your brain. It is also the first, and most important stage of learning how to heal others, as well as yourself. When you become more sensitive, as well as avoiding trouble, you will also be able to improve your horse's well-being.

A high vibration energetic connection during a Craniosacral Therapy session with Lady Great, a Thoroughbred foal.

She was labelled aggressive as she was impossible to approach and kicking at her breeder.

After a single session which addressed a profound Temporomandibular imbalance, her temperament seemed to transform.

In truth she was never aggressive, she was just establishing her boundary (pushing people away) because she didn't feel well.



The last, and probably the most accomplished gift you can enjoy when learning how to listen to horses, is **the ability to support their healing**. Healing isn't a special gift exclusive to some, it is a natural process when energy is flowing. When you can listen to that flow you will become a healer, even at the simplest level. Awareness of energy has no limit, because energy is everything. Once you can feel your horse's energy in an unspecified way, you can develop your ability more towards being able to feel emotions and/or images, or more towards feeling the physical realm, i.e body tissues, and their integrity.

It is possible to sense the system of another being by feeling through their nervous system, in the same way as you can develop the ability to feel your own body through your nerves. Most of us are only aware of very limited types and locations of sensations from our own bodies, let alone what might be going on in others, so we are unaware of the existence of this entire realm and sometimes deny that it even exists. This is a great pity because it is one of the most exciting and fulfilling worlds to explore.

Imposing Your Agenda

How can you impose your agenda on a horse without upsetting them?

Listening to a horse allows them to define *their* boundary, which is essential for their well-being. Like the in-breath and the out-breath however, there has to be a flow both ways. What we think of as controlling the horse, can also be understood as us defining *our* boundary with the horse.

When you are able to perceive the boundary between you and your horse, you can understand the difference between **forcing** and **supporting** that boundary. Think of it as the difference between pulling a stamp off an envelope or steaming it off. Pulling it causes damage to the integrity of the stamp, and using steam changes the glue which is attaching it, so it can come free with its structure intact.

Of course it is possible to force horses to do things. It is ignorant to assume that we can't, but when we do, we damage who they are. This damage actually becomes evident in their energy boundary. Abused animals and people have a weaker boundary, and they may therefore have difficulty imposing their personal space on others, who will often take further advantage. They might *under* defend their boundary. Such horses are timid, fearful or shut down. In other cases they may *over* defend their personal space after abuse, these horses are aggressive and hostile. Either way, the 'boundary fabric' is dysfunctional.

I define 'force' as **that which creates a fearful reaction in the horse**. It is important to repeat this often and to think about it. The word force will have different connotations for different people, but it can only be gauged in the training context by the reaction it inspires. Otherwise you will not be able to apply your energy in the present moment in the way required. For some horses 'force' can be merely the thought of something, and for others you might struggle to have the physical strength necessary to force them. These are extremes, but they do exist, so arbitrary rules and judgments have no practical purpose in finding the right response, *in that moment for that horse*. For example to define kicking a horse in any circumstances as forceful, or grooming a horse as never forceful is meaningless. The two things to bring to the forefront of your mind when gauging the line you must not cross with a horse are:

What is my motivation in this moment? Am I reacting to fear or responding with love. Be open to acknowledging that what you assumed was love is in fact fear. Love is unconditional and feels good. Fear feels disagreeable in some way, from doubtful to desperate. Your horse will always know the source of your actions.

Can I sense fear in a horse? This is more difficult than it seems because many of us have been conditioned to accept and ignore fearful reactions in horses. If you have some degree of empathy, causing fear in a horse feels uncomfortable.

Once you are more in the habit of understanding the source of your actions, and able to sense when fear comes between you, you will be ready to explore what it means to support a boundary as opposed to forcing it. **Supporting a boundary means meeting it with the same amplitude of energy as it meets you and persisting with this level of energy until the dynamic changes and shifts**. Like two cogs meeting, engaging with each other and being able to turn. In terms of controlling a horse, supporting the boundary between you means acknowledging the horse's energetic state, meeting it with your own, and therefore allowing a shift. Perhaps a visible shift will not happen because the horse is not ready, but changes will certainly be underway. Supporting boundaries is applicable to most situations with horses and may involve more or less physical contact, for example:

- **Sensing if you are welcome to approach a horse.**
- **Suggesting putting on some form of equipment.**
- **Asking a horse to give up their foot for trimming.**
- **Controlling a horse with a lead-rope.**
- **Asking a horse to yield.**

Yielding is the foundation of physical control. Yielding means physically displacing the horse with yourself. Body to body is the clearest communication although sometimes you might use a tool, like a lunge whip handle. The important point from an energy point of view is that the contact is *direct*. This is because in herd language, apart from a direct aggression, physical contact is unthreatening. Herd members will use contact to communicate friendship and benevolence, such as when grooming, sharing body heat, swishing flies or enjoying food closely together.

Physical contact from you when you are in a relaxed and confident mood and your touch is assured yet sensitive will communicate that you trust your horse and that you harbour no threat. Supporting a horse's boundary in order to yield them away from you is as simple as touching their body with yours and maintaining contact but *not* increasing the pressure, until they accept to yield away. This is a skill which takes some practice in sensing the matching energy level and the touch required in each different situation.

Contact yielding with Honey to supple her before riding. Maintain balance and uprightness in your own posture to direct the supporting pressure into straightening the horse so they become relaxed from the yield and from the balance they feel when they are moving straight. You can think of your energy moving upwards to maintain your own balance and straightness, rather than out via your hand to the horse.



Finding the matching energetic amplitude acts as a lock and key and will connect you into the horse's boundary. You generate the energy in your body by concentrating your mind. It is held within your system as potential. This is the power source as it is not forcing out and insisting on a result or a reaction, it stays within and internalises the energy so that the horse becomes unlocked from within. It is quite different from the 'yielding to pressure' approach many of us have been taught, where you increase pressure until the horse has to act out of discomfort and fear. That is very much a 'ripping the stamp off' approach and will introduce separation rather than fusion to your relationship.

Patience is the key to learning how to support and ultimately merge the boundaries between you and your horse. Activated patience where you are listening and feeling and maintaining the energy.

You must be prepared to wait, and maintain the connection until the changes that are happening physiologically and energetically between you are completed, and the horse can respond. This might take seconds or minutes. If you keep supporting and wait until the shift happens you will both enter a different state of awareness. For horses this interaction is profoundly calming. For you there will be a deeper sense of security and connection. Over time, as you persist in practicing in this awakened way you will find the time it takes to connect and for your horse to communicate with you reduces significantly.

Say you are learning to ask a horse to walk with you. At first it might take half an hour to make a circuit of the arena. Yet there is a process happening, harmonising and aligning your energies. Gradually you both begin to move as one being, and it would be difficult for anyone to see the seams of your relationship because they have dissolved. The movement, the direction, the pace, the expression are all felt in the mutual connection. This comes from within, neither from handing out treats or insisting with threats. The power in supporting a boundary in this way is that you are facilitating a space for acknowledgement. Whatever resistance or defence there may be is being addressed by being engaged with, and this *in itself* initiates a shift. In this way you are not only creating a partnership where you can do things together in harmony, you are also resolving any issues which may weaken your bond. It is training which is essentially therapy.

The nature of the energy you wish to cultivate around horses is balanced and centred. Like a flow which is smooth and streamlined as opposed to turbulent and chaotic. High frequency energy can be just as smooth and balanced as low frequency energy. If a horse is sluggish and irascible, you must be patient, slow and sensitive. Matching the slowness of the flow of energy, but not the restrictedness. Likewise when a horse has high energy which is chaotic because of stress or excitement, you wish to match that energy with strength and presence. Strength to secure and gentle the horse, and alert reactions to provide the right direction at the right time yet without bringing more tension. Be willing to recognise your weaknesses and allow them to process and release. Two of the most common weaknesses in this area are impatience and nervousness.

See each encounter with a horse as a unique opportunity without any preconceptions or goals, other than to strengthen your partnership. Without some kind of structure, this open agenda might prove structureless. This training plan offers a structure based on the bio-mechanical basics of balance and straightness. It is founded on developing a horse's physical capacity to carry a human, and in doing so to continue to improve their strength and suppleness and therefore the quality of their movement. It could be said that listening to a horse is when *we* are yielding to *them*, we open ourselves up to their wishes and give ground. Supporting *their* boundary however is the other way around, it means we are asking them to yield to us. Asking them to move away and to yield ground.

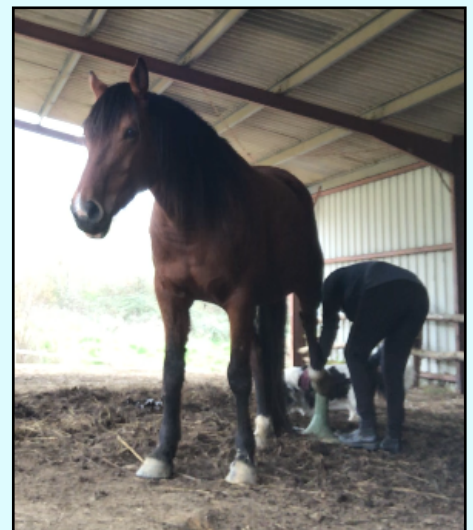
We might ask a horse to yield because they are pushing into our space, or because we are working close to them and need them to move over, or during training we would like them to move their body in a particular way. The successful relationship is when the yielding of both parties becomes the conversation, an energy flow like waves or breathing which come in and out. Fixating on one direction of this flow, whether it is listening or speaking weakens the experience significantly.

Some examples of the two way energy flow in a horse:human relationship are:

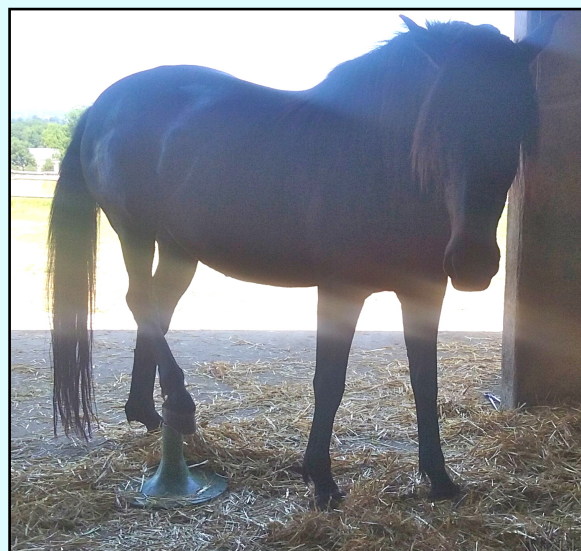
- Grooming a horse and they groom you back. Allowing this connection from them is an opportunity to trust them not to hurt you.
- Going on a ride out and sharing the responsibility for which direction you take. You might get off and walk at some point out on a ride, or turn back when your horse wants to. So you are taking the responsibility for going out riding, and the horse chooses the form of the ride.
- Listening to how your horse feels at the beginning of a schooling session, and warming up with respect to that, i.e. slow work or more forward exercises, as opposed to sticking to a rigid warm up plan.

You will find that the more open you are to the flow, the more flow there is, and the less of a rigid pattern you will be following each day. Every moment spent with a horse is a yield one way or the other and there are infinite possibilities to deepen your mutual trust in each direction. As you break down the relationship into a two-way organisation, your energy flow will become stronger, and you will become more aware of the energy spiral.

One of the areas I have explored in this way is trimming the horses feet at liberty. I might approach them at times when they are resting and we can work away without any fuss. Doing it this way leaves a lot of room for expression of opinions in that I am not attempting to control how things happen. If the horses leave, that is okay. If they stay I can do their feet in an atmosphere freer of expectations. It is interesting to explore the effect that having expectations and agendas can have on the horses' willingness to participate. In essence expectations are like energetic ties which restrict the relationship, and horses feel them straight away. Letting go requires self acceptance and readiness to acknowledge the expectations as they appear.



Twiggy is a sweet mare who first introduced me to trimming at liberty.



Twiggy had begun to fight with people over the possession of her feet. At first she wouldn't even lift her foot up, let alone *hold* it up and allow it to be attended to. Over time I found that removing more and more physical restrictions, and giving her more and more space and choice helped her to relax. In the end Twiggy was letting me put her foot on the stand long enough to take this photograph, and I could keep her feet nice. Of course the 'happy ever after' is something you have to keep working at, as its very nature requires presence! Progress is often remarkable though.

Although awareness is growing, and more and more people are seeking an authentic relationship with their horse, it is still not at all unusual for the partnership to be constructed entirely one way. For example if you have the goal to compete at as high a level as possible, then *everything* about your relationship is arranged in that direction. Even if you give your competition horse all the affection in the world, and the most expensive treatment and supplements and food, *if* it is all under the guise of improving the next performance, then you are still limited by an agenda.

This means that you will not experience the two-way flow and you will continue to seek a better, more fulfilling experience in a place it cannot exist. Whether it is through a better horse or a bigger competition, you are still only going in one direction. Often the day when someone who had been doing this finally turns around and gives back, even a little bit, is a moment of such profound emotion that they abandon their original direction completely. This is the balancing out of the Universe.

When To Listen And When To Speak

Although the two approaches to take with a horse described above are different, the difference is only in terms of the direction of the flow of the consciousness. When you listen to a horse, the flow is coming into yourself, and when you ask a horse, the flow is going back into them. In reality, the flow is always circling between us, and that is healthy and right, like a genuine conversation where each person is both able to speak and willing to listen. The most productive conversations are a meeting of minds, where each one is stimulated and encouraged, as well as re-directed and channeled, by the other.

Imagine a very steady, low energy kind of horse. To match a horse like this you have to be extremely calm. Many handlers will shoot to the opposite extreme and get aggressive or impatient to try to raise the energy of the situation. Unfortunately that approach fails to respect the horse's boundary. All horses have very good reasons for being the way they are, and if we rush in and try to change their behaviour without respecting those reasons, they will be forced into defensiveness.

Staying very slow and very calm, and 'supporting' the horse physically in a sensitive way, *will* illicit a response. That response will lead to another, and gradually the frequency will rise and a horse like this may transform. If you have ever taken some time to be close to a snail you will understand how their particular animation can only be appreciated from a considerate and gentle perspective. They are such delicate and beautiful beings, but if their world is intruded upon with threatening energy, the only result will be to see the outside of their shell. The same awareness is necessary for 'shut-down' or switched off horses. When you meet them at their level you can communicate with them, because they will let you in to their space.

Zouzou had lived the traditional life of a competition horse, although his owner tried to improve it whenever she could. He had lived on his own, mostly in a stable when he wasn't competing and his personality was hidden away at first. There can be something frustrating about that and there is a danger of being sucked back into treating him forcefully as he was treated in the past. Focusing on staying balanced but as soft and minimal with the aids as possible helped him to relax physically and mentally. His sides would soften and release, and he would begin to breathe. Often then a powerful movement would surge from within him.



Xas' Story

Some years ago my sister and I had a working student who had previously been studying Natural Horsemanship. He was interested in learning more about dressage. He was a very relaxed person by nature, but had learned to approach horses with some 'charge' in his manner, so he came across as a little aggressive. It seemed like he had been taught to use this dominant energy instead of the physical aids to ask a horse to go forward.

The mare he was working with this day was one of the passive leaders of the herd, and she was particularly sensitive to the way humans address her. For various physical reasons she took time to loosen up on the lunge, and she knew she had to protect her body. From the beginning of the session she was tense because she felt James' energy as a threat and her defences were already coming up. She defended herself physically by holding herself even tighter, especially her diaphragm and her muscles in general. Psychologically she was suspicious and even more defensive than usual. A change in energy from James at any point would have redressed the balance, and calmed her down again, encouraging her to lower her defences again, but James didn't realise and he began to ask her to move forward *more* briskly. When she responded by stopping completely, James took it as a refusal to submit and raised his level of aggression even further. This was the point when Xas thought enough was enough, and she felt that her boundary needed to be defined straight away.

From an energetic point of view, this was a straightforward series of events, James pushed *against* her space and she became alert, then he pushed *into* her space and she pushed him right back out. The energetic charge generating her reaction was only a reflection of his own. What she did physically was to kick out and strike his hand which held the whip. It was highly accurate, and although it was painful it caused no injury. The main thing it did was to change James' energy instantly. Her swift action brought him back to his true nature, snapping him out of the aggressive act he had learned to use with horses and when he began again, he was much more willing to listen to her needs, and accept the partnership. He was a little nervous for a while, but that was an opportunity for him, because it gave him more perspective, and willingness to hear, rather than just filling that space with demands. James went on to be able to match Xas' energy, and support her boundary by maintaining his posture and physical connection until she softened. Each step she took in this way suppld her body more and made the work easier for her to accept, and she became more and more responsive to his requests. **The main difference in James' approach was to seek out how to improve Xas' wellbeing and create a therapeutic interaction, as opposed to focusing on pushing her to move in a prescribed (correct) way.**

What happened with Xas is an example of when a horse defines their boundary in relation to a human. Often horses are not given the freedom of expression to define their boundary, because people fear that it will only ever go one way. A horse given freedom of expression will simply take control, and will become untrainable and un-handleable. In fact, when the relationship can be seen as the art of *balancing* the boundaries, there is no such concern. We both have freedom of expression, and that is the beauty of it.

At the other extreme there are the high energy horses who are easily frightened and upset. Matching their energy is essential to bring them down from the high tension, but it must be done with controlled energy from loving intention. Think of the 'squeeze' therapy technique for a situation like this. You are essentially providing an 'earth' for the horse, which drains away their excess 'electricity'. To be able to reach them and connect you need to match the pressure of the energy in their body at that time.

A horse with a lot of tension in their body will be less sensitive to those entering into their space, because they are processing so much information already. This is why when a horse is having a panic attack, they don't 'see' you or listen to you. If this was a small child you could pick them up and hold them until they connect and let go of the tension, but with a horse it is a bit less straightforward, just from the point of view of the size difference. However, your energy is more important than the surface area of the physical connection. You need a connection which keeps you in a safe place, and keeps your contact consistent, until you can 'match' and merge energies.

Marie had panic attacks when she first came for schooling. She would panic about being alone, and when she was in the arena sometimes she would bolt and behave as if she no longer knew where she was. I spent a lot of time with her listening to her boundaries, and often we would only go a short way out of the field before returning, or the tack would be introduced and taken away again when she indicated anxiety about it. On the other hand there were times when it felt more appropriate to support her boundary, and define my own by restraining her with non-threatening physical pressure, similar to hugging an autistic child, leaning into her body. This would help her to come out of the panic and make a new association with a situation. It is very important to stay calm and unperturbed when doing that. It is necessary to use the same level of pressure to restrain the horse that they are expressing in their panic, but if there is any anxiety coming from you, or if you are causing pain or discomfort with the restraint itself e.g by using a bit in the horse's mouth, or heavy pressure on a noseband/head-collar then re-traumatisation will result rather than release.



Rayo's Story

Rayo was a Spanish gelding who had been taken on by his present owners a year or so previously. At that time he was in an extreme state of anxiety. Since then he had been living a holistic lifestyle. He had gone barefoot and was ridden bit-less. He had a recurrent lameness in one of his front feet. Although he was no doubt a much calmer horse than he had been a year ago, he still became unduly stressed when he was around humans. His two main triggers were trimming his hooves and putting riding equipment on. Rayo is a good example of how both sides of the boundaries must be addressed in order for the human-horse relationship to function well. His boundary had been damaged when he was forced by people at several stages of his earlier life. This was clear because of the anxiety he displayed. Horses with healthy boundaries who have been respected and who also respect humans, do not display habitual tension in relation to certain practices. On the other hand horses are herd animals and when they are separated from their herd and not in the presence of a suitable leader they will often display generalised tension.

The way to tell the difference between damaged boundaries (traumatisation) and healthy boundaries in a horse temporarily separated from the herd and feeling insecure, is whether they are 'present' or not. Unlike humans, who can spend much of their time not being present, horses are not thought-orientated animals. They live in the present moment. If they have been traumatised, however, as soon as they experience a 'trigger' signal, they will 'return to the past'. They are no longer in the 'now', but re-living the episode which traumatised them. In Rayo's case, the bridle or the saddle were triggers... even being tied up on the yard was a trigger. How to approach this does not change whether you are working with healthy or damaged boundaries, the two sides of the boundary still require attention in both cases. It is just that when you work with horses with damaged boundaries, the process seems different because it takes much longer to connect with the horse.

At first I focused on fully respecting Rayo's boundary. When I approached him initially with the grooming tools, as soon as he expressed tension and started to disassociate from the situation, I backed off and removed the threat. Gradually, carefully following the path of his acceptance, I was able to groom him in relaxation, introduce the tack, and eventually tack him up in a relaxed state. Some sessions lasted several hours until a state of relaxation was reached. This had nothing to do with tiring him out or boring him in any way. It is a process of waiting for him to process the fact that he is not being forced or threatened, even though he associated that situation with threat. It was necessary in Rayo's case to re-pattern deeply entrenched traumatisation patterns.

[\[More information about this process is described in my book *How To Heal Trauma With Your Horse*\].](#)

When you are working with a young horse with healthy boundaries you will go through the same process. The difference is that your horse (in general) will be interested and curious about the objects you are producing, and as long as you are open and honest, and give enough time for the natural acceptance to be digested and consolidated, no tension will arise. Some young horses at this stage are timid and nervous, although not damaged, so they will stay present, and you can make sure, with patience and sensitivity, that they do not develop negative associations or trauma.

The other side of the boundary was just as important for Rayo's progress. Often horses with damaged (forced) boundaries, will have no respect for the human boundary. The health of a boundary gives it integrity for both sides. Those who love and respect themselves will have the same love and respect for others. Rayo was constantly barging and pushing into people's space, he would nip and threaten to kick, and actually kick if stressed enough. He wasn't careful about where he walked either, and would stand on tools without seeming to notice them. Matching his energy required having the same amplitude of energy, but in the form of patience and consistent pressure.

One way to address this with him was in handling his legs for trimming. He was in the habit of snatching his legs away when they were lifted up to be trimmed. He would put a lot of strength into this and swing round at the same time into whoever was there. I started by maintaining a gentle pressure on his body until he accepted it and stood still. I then did the same thing with his legs. Then I worked with a helper. One of us held the lead-rope and encouraged him gently to bend his body around us. This put him in a cooperative balance so he would yield his body away and therefore stay in balance. This was also safer for me when I was handling his legs. I would then touch his legs and maintain the pressure until he sensed there was no threat coming and accepted it. The pressure had to be the same level of energy as his evasive energy and no more. It had to be maintained without distraction or emotional disruption until Rayo's tension shifted into calm.

In describing this scenario it could be mistaken for de-sensitisation techniques, which are often traumatising in themselves. The difference on an energetic level is that the focus was on maintaining the energetic connection, in this case through physical contact, *without* heightening the pressure, until Rayo's tension released and he accessed an inner calm. The approach would be forceful if *submissive behaviour* in the horse is the aim, *rather than their authentic release of tension*. A horse can seem to be accepting all kinds of interventions, including being ridden for the first time, and yet be extremely stressed about it. They will reach this state when they feel hopeless and that there is no other option but to give in. Genuine acceptance is the polar opposite of this, and is about facilitating new possibilities for a horse where they can feel safe.

Again your underlying intention will dictate the external process. If you are truly acting from a source of love where your purest wish is to help the horse, then you will be guided in each case. If your intention is fear-based because you wish to insist on some kind of outcome other than well-being, then it will be easy to slip into forceful methods.

After Rayo had relaxed and stopped reacting so brusquely to having his legs handled, the next step was lifting his legs. Often the success of work like this is to put the horse again and again into a balanced physical state in which they feel safe and secure. Usually frightened horses will try to resist being controlled by bracing themselves against the human being (bending themselves away rather than around) and this puts them into their natural balance, ready for flight. **How to influence the horse's balance is at the core of successful horse training, because the way a horse must balance themselves to cooperate with a human is actually quite different from their natural way of balancing.** Although this may become more obvious when the rider is in the saddle, it is important at every level of handling. To be an effective human leader to your horse, you must understand how they are balancing themselves in every moment, and above all be able to change it from the natural balance which leads to the flight reaction of the horse. **One little yield or indication on your part can alter a horse's state of mind almost instantaneously. This is because you alter their body balance, which in turn alters their sense of security.** In general it is far more effective to *appeal to a horse's mind through their body*. This avenue introduces calm because horses are not intellectual, and anticipating anything is stressful for them.

Because horses are prey animals and asking them to give up control of their legs willingly requires such profound trust, most often the appropriate approach seems to be listening to *their* boundary. Starting in a place of co-operative balance (described in more detail below) you can ask very sensitively for them to lift up their foot and at any sign of them lifting the leg, you stop asking, give enough time to acknowledge and appreciate the response, and then when it feels right ask again. When the horse does lift up their leg for you, do your best to give it back *before* the horse wants to take it back. In this way you build trust because the horse knows they have the choice. If you aren't quick enough, give it back anyway. Attempting to hang on will only raise defences.

In Rayo's case he already had such a negative association with his legs being held and even touched that every time he snatched his leg away, he reinforced a shock reaction in his central nervous system. It was as if there was no space for change, because he was using so much energy to defend himself. We needed to find a way to short-circuit the hyper-reactivity so instead of following my usual approach of accepting the horse's boundary, I started to focus on supporting his resistance in order to impose my own boundary.

We had already started this process by keeping the touch connection with his leg until he relaxed, and we did the same thing while asking him to lift the leg at the same time. Holding it up was not the goal as much as **staying with him** when he snatched it away. Keeping the touch with him whatever he did to repel it was the only way to alter his perception of the touch. A few times he made a serious effort to reject the contact, but bit by bit he was letting his guard down and finding out that he could indeed tolerate and ultimately relax into the connection. It was essential to give him enough time to process what we were doing and allow his natural sense of well-being to expand through his whole system.

The combination of these two diametrically opposing ways of working with the boundary (listening and supporting) really helped Rayo to heal. As well as straightening work on the ground and riding, trimming his feet in balance with his physiological pattern, and Craniosacral Therapy sessions, he became physically sound and psychologically much better balanced.

Riding Rayo bit-less in
engagement

Working in engagement with
horses like Rayo is
particularly beneficial
because they will gain trust
in people more when they
experience mutual physical
balance.

Nothing speaks more
persuasively to a horse than
feeling safe and contained in
their body through balance
and comfort.



How To Place A Horse In Co-Operative Balance

Horses have a natural tendency to put themselves in what could be called an 'uncooperative balance' relative to people when they are defending themselves. We may feel that they don't have any need to defend themselves in their interactions with us, but often our demands are threatening to them. For example putting them in a situation where they are separated from other horses or insisting that they hold their legs up to have their feet trimmed are both common ways of making horses feel vulnerable enough to defend themselves.

The 'uncooperative' balance expresses the horse's wish to escape, so they will push their shoulder into the handler while turning their head away which bends their body to the outside. They may then use the strength in their neck to liberate their head and side-line the handler. It is very difficult to communicate with a horse who takes up this defensive posture because they are channeling their movement away from the handlers influence and making themselves unavailable. The horse cannot then yield from the handler because they are facing the wrong way to be able to move across.

To correct the balance and bring the horse into a cooperative posture is relatively simple. Think about asking the horse to bend themselves around you, as if they were giving you a big hug. If you have a physical attachment to their head (a cavesson or a head-collar) you can gently and patiently ask them to turn their nose towards you, thus bending their neck around you. If they are not attached then you can still ask them to soften their neck and even bring their nose around gently with your hands (see photo below). You can also ask the horse to yield at their girth and turn the bend around so the curvature of their body includes you rather than excludes you.

This sweet mare was in a deep state of dissociation so we were focusing on physical contact to help her come back into her body in balance, without using equipment which was a strong trigger.

The process is individual in each case, and each step must be appropriate for the partnership.





Aimee is starting out in a non-cooperative balance here, she is bending her body away from where I am standing and her shoulder becomes a defensive tool.

Interestingly the human posture will tend to reflect the horse, and I am coming out of my centre of balance here to match her.

Becoming aware of this and correcting my own balance will help to draw Aimee back around.



Here we are beginning to correct our mutual balance. I am asking Aimee to flatten out her bend and align her inside shoulder with her ribcage.

Standing a bit taller and tucking *my* pelvis also invites Aimée energetically to carry herself more elegantly.

I am also using friendly touch to connect with her body so I can alter her carriage through direct contact yielding and bring our energy into alignment.



Here Aimée is beginning to bring herself into the left bend which will embrace my personal space rather than reject it. She is relaxing and stretching her neck deeper.

I have chosen to let my upper body follow her a little in order to give her a greater feeling of freedom in her neck. She is very sensitive to being restrained and in this moment I wanted to give her confidence by following *her* boundary rather than imposing my own.



The 'follow' was successful and Aimée was able to gather herself and soften around me, so I could lift myself back upright and draw her into my space.

At the beginning of this exercise she was quite tense because a lightning storm was coming in and the flies had intensified their activity. This made her quite unreceptive at first, but the process of asking her to straighten and improve her balance calmed her and slowed her right down.



Aimée has come into a lovely, accepting halt where she is in a fully cooperative balance. She is ready here to yield sideways, to step backwards or lift her inside legs up easily.

This posture is ideal for:

- Mounting.
- Waiting calmly.
- Picking out or trimming feet.
- Opening & shutting gates.
- Putting on a head-collar/bridle.
- Grooming.

In all situations with horses, when you are imposing your energy, you are an *energy transformer*. You learn how to engage with what is there already, and in allowing the frequencies to match, you support a shift. The shift can only be *invited* by creating a favourable space for it. This is because it happens within the energetic connection, *between* horse and human, therefore beyond the control of either one. Once the shift has happened and your energies are merged, a conduit opens up. Now the influence from you on the horse, or *to* you by the horse, become one. The flow can move either way, yet it is one essence, one source.

Raising energy within yourself which can motivate without tension is just as demanding as lowering it. It might help you to consider the process as becoming energy-flexible. Every individual expresses a different natural resonance and the first step is to become familiar with feeling it. Then from there to learn how to raise and lower the amplitude of it without losing balance or calm, like a river which can run fast or slow, yet without turbulence.

How can you channel a horse without challenging them? How do you define your boundary without threatening a horse and losing their trust?

Dechie's Story

Jane wanted to improve her lunging technique with Ardeche, a pony who was very experienced on the lunge. Dechie was very sensitive to how she was approached by people. She was the most dominant member of her herd, but in her younger life it was not because she was confident, but rather because she was insecure. She could only feel secure when she felt in control of every situation. This meant that in order to be controlled herself, she had to be handled in a way that allowed her to trust. Aggression toward her frightened her, and she would fight back. This story is interesting because although Jane was the exact opposite of aggressive, she wasn't assertive either, and when Dechie and she came together, nothing happened at all! When Jane asked Dechie to work, she didn't have the assurance in her manner that would allow Dechie to trust her as a leader, so she didn't respond, and as Jane (fortunately!) would not resort to aggression to frighten her into action, they stayed in a neutral place of inactivity.

Jane's first step was to perceive the amplitude of energy Dechie was expressing in those moments. Because of her insecurity in the situation, she was presenting an energy which could be seen as 'stubborn', but is more accurately described as defensive, like a shell she was hiding behind. When working with any horse it is important to engage with **the first perceivable layer** so Jane had to match up to this shell, and she had to find a confidence in herself to do this. The way she put that energy into practice was to gently and persistently ask Dechie to move forward. It was her *ability to sustain her belief in herself* which changed the shell of energy. This belief allowed her to sustain the request, matching the energy of the shell, without increasing it. Increasing it might have forced Dechie to move, but in a tense, defensive way. Ripping the stamp, not steaming it. As the shell gradually melted, Dechie moved forward and softened. Her sensitivity revealed itself a bit more as she felt each moment that Jane was there for her and helping her, but not challenging or attacking her. By the end of the session there was such a strong flow between them that Jane only needed to 'think' a trot or canter transition and Dechie would respond beautifully.



Mentally and Physically Ready To Ride

[Training a Horse Without Force Part 1](#) is about preparing a horse to be ridden. Without adequate preparation horses are not naturally endowed with the physical structure to carry a person without suffering physical and/or psychological damage. This preparation is both physical and psychological. The physical preparation is similar to becoming fit enough to run a race, although the muscles to prepare in the horse are postural as opposed to the phasic muscles, like those used for running. The preparation of a horse's mind comes about in synchrony with the preparation of their body. If horses feel comfortable and safe with us, then they will allow us to work with their body. If your preparation is careful and consistent, and follows any difficulties through, then you should have formed the necessary trust bond to begin the ridden phase of your training.

Attempting to make horses *think* about what they are doing, or respond as a result of thought processes is not beneficial, simply because it is not natural for them. Although being ridden is not natural for them either, using their body is. They relate easily and instinctively to moving and developing their body, that is their strength. Although horses are emotionally sophisticated, trying to impose and develop the ability for intellectual thought is quite stressful for them.

Conditioning the horse's mind is common in certain areas of horsemanship. Whether this is through pressure-based training or treat-based, ultimately it introduces a separation between human and horse. So if you, as horse guardian, desire the horse to perform a behaviour, your ultimate aim through this conditioning is that the horse will act from a signal alone. For example: if you shake a rope the horse will move sideways, or if you make a clicking sound the horse will stop.

Such conditioning is powerful, yet it is removing the horse and yourself from the present moment. In the present moment there is limitless potential. Any response can be elicited from any contact. There is such opportunity for profound sensitivity between you and your horse which is related only to that moment. In this rapport there is no separation: your unique vibration embraces your horse, and their unique vibration acknowledges you, and in the merging between, magic can arise. This is only possible when the interaction is new and independent in each moment. As soon as you begin to lay down pathways of set behaviour because of a specific signal, you are closing down that relationship and making it into the narrow pathway of interaction between circus trainer and circus animal. Circus trainers train in this way because they wish to perform specific tricks consistently. This is the root of the difference. Developing a relationship solely for the wellbeing of the horse in each moment invites a fluid, spontaneous, creative engagement that is quite different from the one dimensional performance of tricks, games or movements for their own sake. This is not a value judgement, simply an observation of the nature of the two processes.

All horses are unique individuals, and even though we may do our best sometimes apparent difficulties simply can't be avoided or effectively prepared for. In those times, all the work done previously is certainly not lost! The important thing to remember is not to follow outside expectations or be negatively affected by internal limitations. Do not be afraid to go with your horse, and accept their boundary if that feels right. Much more damage is done by forcing on through than by backing off and so called 'giving in'. Horses have no concept of getting us to give in, they do not fight with us. They only resist and defend themselves when they are struggling, for whatever reason, to comply with our demands. Whatever work you do with your horse which is done with the right intention, and in partnership with the horse will always be integrated into their world view. This will develop them in a positive way which embraces your wishes and your choices, as well of course as their own wishes and choices, because one allows the other.

On the other hand the work done through making the result happen, by whatever means - whips, spurs, ropes, bits, shouting, yard brooms and even just using the stables and arena themselves to enforce an agenda (such as weaning, inappropriate loose jumping or even separating a horse against their will) will be work which introduces tension into the horse's central nervous system. This will change the horse's world view in a negative way, forming defensiveness and reluctance to follow your wishes and accept your choices. Such reluctance to perform becomes a loss of the 'present moment' perspective, so that what you are asking is not even considered by the horse on its own merits, but is *automatically* evaded, ignored or blanked. Some horses get to the point where *whatever* you may ask, the first answer is no, and any compliance can only be reached with force. This is an unfortunate stage. It is the lowest possible point in a relationship. The lowest point can only get better however, and it is never too late to change things. Although it may require much time given over to respecting that horse's boundary. Recentering your intention on to the wellbeing process may require a radical change in your visualisation of the future. Horses *will* come back to the crossroads again, where they will make choices in each moment rather than closing the shutters instantly.

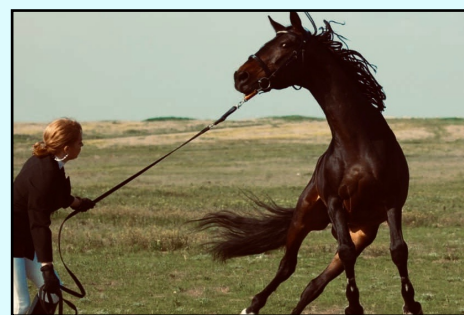
Progress in the positive direction:

- **When the horse seems overall happier, calmer and more confident.**
- **The work is encouraging the horse's personality to blossom.**
- **The horse is more supple overall, and/or the best work is more supple.**
- **Gradual strengthening of the postural ring is underway.**



Descent in the negative direction:

- If the horse seems more nervous, aggressive or distrustful.
- If the horse is shutting down and seems less 'themselves'.
- If their movement seems stiffer or tighter overall.
- If they accomplish more 'results' but with less spontaneity and joy.



Is Your Horse Ready to Ride?

Knowing that your horse is becoming strong enough in mind and body to be mounted is primarily an intuitive feeling, but the external signs will be there. When a horse moves on the lunge, they will move through a range of different postures. Sometimes more extended, with a longer parabola, and sometimes more collected with a shorter parabola. No one posture is the ideal, because each part of the collection-extension spectrum is as valuable as any other. What you are concerned with is the inherent quality of the parabola in terms of suppleness and therefore constancy. If the horse can maintain their connection over a more irregular surface, around a full circle and throughout external distractions you have certainly achieved an impressive postural strength from the ground.

A high quality parabola indicates a well developed postural ring, strong postural muscles and tone in the ligaments which support it. Before you get on your horse, ideally you want your horse to be able to **maintain the longitudinal stretch** for a period of time. This period will depend on the horse, but considering many horses cannot manage to maintain the stretch from one stride to the next, even one circle is an achievement for them. In reality the number of circles is not a sensible guide because there is always a 'sweet' spot and a difficult patch in any circle, which relates both to the horse's proximity to the exit, and/or their innate crookedness. You are not looking for consistent perfection as much as a high enough level of overall strength in the work. You will have seen the development over time of the paces and possibly periods of hollowness, or inconsistency in the posture. To be ready for a rider, you want to feel that the horse can hold themselves on their postural muscles without too much struggle.

There is therefore a window you must find, when the horse is physically strong enough in their postural muscles and developed enough in their straightness, that when you introduce yourself into the dynamic as a rider, you can gently continue the development in the right direction without over-challenging the horse's mind. Although your weight will add to the horse's task of lifting themselves on to their ring of muscles, an experienced rider can facilitate postural engagement and balance in a young horse.

You are looking for the horse to have enough postural strength to manage your weight and carry on the strengthening process without causing a reversal of their development. This is important because hollowing and crookedness will take you further from postural engagement. Although there will be a period of familiarisation before achieving engagement under saddle, there is not much middle ground in the way you balance the horse from the start; you are either straightening them or encouraging their crookedness.

If you go on *too* long on the ground, you may risk losing some of the plasticity a young horse has for adapting and growing and accepting change. This is less of a danger, however, than acting prematurely in advance of the physical and mental readiness you require. Simply pushing on when a horse isn't ready in the hope that the change will achieve something is not likely to work out in the long run. At one time spending three or four months would have seemed like enough to me, and a rehabilitation or just a more complicated horse for whatever reason might take up to a year. Now I am finding that it is not beneficial to start riding a youngster before they are at least five years old. So working gently on the ground from the age of three and a half at the earliest, means a year and a half of preparation on the ground. The latest youngster I have been working, Quaramba, is a tall Oldenburg mare and she was seven years old before she felt ready for a rider. In her case she also seemed to take longer to mature psychologically, but perhaps I simply listened more!

Putting a time limit on the backing process is only applicable if your agenda is purely business orientated. If you care about your entire life journey with a horse then 6% of their life spent preparing properly for the next 94% (assuming the horse can be ridden for 25 years, which is quite possible) is hardly outrageous. Most horses who have been backed and brought on with little or no attention to their preparatory training are washed up well before the age of fifteen.

There is the question of being able to afford to send a horse to be backed by a professional trainer because you might not feel that you have the experience. In this case there is no reason at all why you can't do the preparatory lunging yourself and send the horse to a professional for the final backing process. If you aren't capable of lunging a young horse then you won't be capable of riding one either, professionally started or not. The value of spending all that time bonding and developing your skills with your youngster will improve your partnership to such a degree you will always appreciate it.



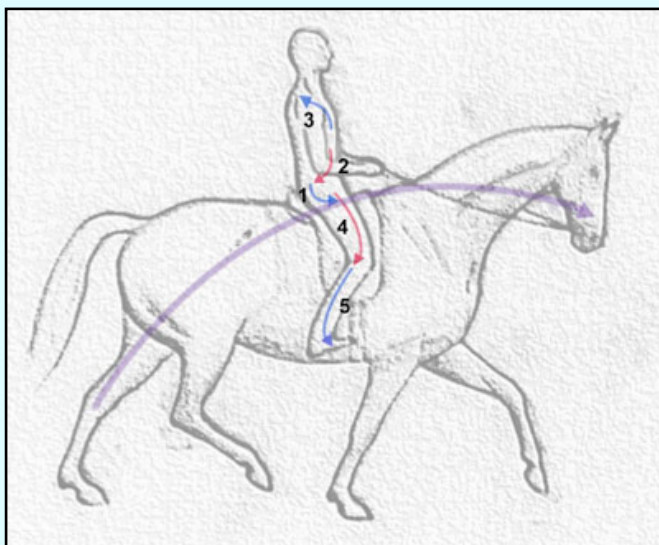
Are You Ready to Ride Your Horse?

Riding a horse correctly is such a demanding exercise that it is safe to say we never master it fully, except perhaps for some precious and well remembered occasions with a particular horse. You can, however, accelerate your learning by focusing on certain postural dynamics which are counter-intuitive to the way most human beings react to being on a horse. Once you are more aware of your own body you can then become aware of the way horses move naturally crookedly, and learn how to reprogram that with your own acquired straightness. Such postural control requires effective core strength to avoid the push-pull vicious circle.

The *Rider's* Postural Ring

Rider straightness is not an important part of riding, it IS riding. Imagine you try to use a kinked hose to water the garden, the water would not flow through properly. A crooked rider inhibits the horses movement in the same way. Your **straightness** and the **postural leverage** which enables you to *present that straightness to the horse in a dynamic way* is the greatest influence you have. You can ride with the strength of your arms and the sharpness of your spurs, and whichever bit might be in fashion, but you will only ever be a passenger. Real riders influence the inside of the horse from the inside of themselves. This gives you a wonderful feeling of accomplishment and validity.

The simplest way to describe the rider's desired position on a horse is to think of it as the **postural ring of the rider**. When you get it right, all of the different aspects of it, straightness, weight and arrangement of the physical parts, all come together in harmony. The coordination of the whole will convince you that it is correct, because it feels so effective in a force-free way.



1. Pelvic Tuck
2. Abdominal Engagement
3. Chest Lift
4. Thigh Stretch
5. Lower Leg Leverage

Drawing by Gabrielle Dareau

The Postural Ring is the shape you form your body into when you ride. It is not static because the horse is not static. It is dynamic in that first you connect with the horse's movement, and second, you allow it to flow through your body. **It must also have the integrity to hold its form**, otherwise the horse's movement will distort it into whatever crooked shape corresponds to their own natural crookedness. This is a key point to understand, **you are not seeking to be channeled by the horse. If you ride in that way you are merely an encumbrance. You are seeking to channel the horse's movement, because it is only by channeling it that you can create the dynamic which enables the horse to balance your weight.** In doing this you also help the horse to find new harmony in themselves because you develop their own straightness and strength. So it is an exchange, and you are an 'enabler' not a hindrance. There is no neutrality, as in any dynamic in nature, you cannot take yourself out of the equation. You must be the catalyst.

Rider's Postural Ring Engaged

Although this horse is working in a novice outline compared to the apparently advanced horse below, this photograph shows how the rider is able to both balance themselves independently (authentically perpendicular) on the horse creating a postural leverage which encourages the horse to go forward and engage their own postural ring. It is easier to see the difference if you imagine yourself as the rider in either photograph and sense how it might feel to be riding in either position. In this way the dynamic can be better understood.



This rider has the lower leg so far forward that there can be no leverage at all created between the lower leg and upper body. The balance is entirely on seat and reins. Rather than finding balance with their whole body, the rider is only prevented from falling backwards by hanging onto the reins. Being unable to create forward channeling because the lower leg is not engaged, they are using spurs to threaten the horse into forward movement. The lack of autonomous balance in their posture, as well as the desire to force the horse's neck up and round, means that there is a perpetual weight in the reins.



Without Postural Ring Engagement

Balancing The Whole Body

There are innumerable possible angles of seat and leg which are balanced. The idea that the rider's torso, seat and lower leg must stay in one fixed position makes no sense when you think of the differences in the level of collection and consequent carriage of the horse. Maintaining the essential balance between the upper body and lower leg at all times is crucial however. Think of it as *supporting* the upper body with the lower leg. In a nutshell, you must **balance the upper body with the lower leg, coordinate your seat in the middle to support that balance, adhere to the horse and allow their movement to flow through.**

Developing the flexibility in the various joints which allows this is the key and does take practice. The ankles, knees and hip-joints must be supplanted to the point where they not only allow your leg to be sculpted around the horse's sides, but they allow you to keep your leg underneath you sufficiently to find the balance. Most of us spend a lot of time sitting in chairs rather than cross-legged, so our hip-joints tend to be quite stiff and they often become the limiting factor for a rider.

This postural balance is the fundamental goal, it is the root of riding in balance. There is no real independence of the reins without this postural accomplishment. If, when you stand upright in rising trot, you cannot keep your legs under your body, you will have to hold on to something with your hands. Likewise, you can sit on a horse without supporting yourself until the horse loses balance and then you will be forced to grab on with your hands. Having supple hip joints will allow you to keep your lower leg 'under' the rest of your body, as when you are standing upright on the ground. To find your optimum balance point there are two exercises which address your upper body and your lower body in turn. Putting them both together will result in postural balance so you can align yourself fully, and therefore fully feel the wave of the horse's movement. As long as a rider needs to balance on the reins, whether directly or indirectly, they won't be able to feel beyond that reliance. **Only when your lower leg effectively supports your upper body, can your hands TRULY be free.**



Exercise 1: Finding The Wave

Many riders tip forward when riding. This is partly because the strength *not* to be pushed forward by the horse's movement has to be developed, and partly because it feels more natural to protect our internal organs by folding them inside a bit. Tipping forward shifts the back of the rider's seat off the horse's back and puts more weight on to the horse's shoulders, both of those things block forward movement and cause imbalance in the horse.

Some horses become more reluctant to go forward when they feel unbalanced by the rider, and others will rush as a result. Either way it is impossible for a rider to balance themselves or the horse if they are persistently in front of the wave of the movement or even intermittently so during transitions for example. The only true way to train yourself not to do this is to learn what the wave of movement feels like, and how to stay with it.

Often a rider will sit just in front of the movement because they sense the extent of the effort of engaging with the full movement if they went there. Although the feeling of stretching your whole posture and flowing the movement through it is wonderful once you have developed the suppleness and strength to welcome it, before then it is more of a threat, so there is a possibility you will feel very strange when you first go with the wave.

How to find the wave:

- Walk your horse (preferably a reasonably experienced horse) round on a loose rein and gradually start leaning your upper body back towards the horse's back. If your horse is not relaxed on a loose rein arrange for a friend to lead or lunge them calmly.
- Think about staying flat in your back, keeping each vertebra in your spine aligned as you tilt backwards, and keep your seat-bones stuck on the saddle.
- Gradually lean backwards, slowly enough that you can process the feeling of the movement at each gradient.
- See if you can identify when you feel 'with' the wave of the movement and when you feel 'behind' it.
- Go back as far as you can go, it is unlikely that you will actually touch the horse's back, but be careful that if you do they will be okay with that!

- When you reach the furthest point you can, start to lift back up again, and make sure you use **your abdominal muscles** to do it, keeping your shoulders fully relaxed.
- Go as slowly as you can, and again feel for the moment in the horse's stride when you go from being *behind* the wave of the movement to feeling like you are *with* it.
- Ideally have a friend take a photo or observe the angle of your back when you reach that moment.

When your seat is in the saddle, the angle of your upper body when the wave of the movement can be engaged *starts* from 90° (if you were to draw a vertical line from the hip-joints up to the shoulders) and continues back until about 10° from the vertical.

There is a common myth in horse-riding circles that the rider should never lean back behind the vertical. Maybe that idea originates from wanting to avoid leaning back on the horse's mouth, which would happen if most riders were to bring their upper body behind the vertical, since they maintain their balance with the reins and that is much harder to hide if you lean back. Maybe it comes from riding with a fork seat, and the awkwardness of having any mobility in your torso from that position. Either way, **bringing your upper body back behind the vertical is an important part of the process of engaging a horse.**

It is necessary for work in extension and some other particular circumstances, such as reaching horses who have habitually moved in a very hollow way. There is no question that the *reins* ever come into a backward direction, the contact must always be created by the horse when they engage their postural ring and telescope their necks forward, softening their jaw and giving the riders hand a gentle connection.

On the other hand if the rider moves their shoulders in front of the vertical, and reduces the angle below 90° to any extent at all, then it becomes very difficult to maintain the postural engagement. It is possible when rising to the trot because in the rising trot the rider's seat is not restricted by the angle of the horse's back, and the pelvis can still be tucked to align with the forward angle of the upper body. Also the leg becomes the main fulcrum for creating postural leverage instead of the seat as in sitting trot, so the whole postural dynamic changes.

At first you may find that your perception of zero is off in terms of what feels upright. Most riders feel that they are sitting more upright than they actually are, and a lot of the time they are in the 'disengaged' posture, so they aren't truly feeling the wave of the movement.

Coming into the back of the seat-bones and bringing yourself back behind the vertical therefore helps to re-calibrate your perception. A witness or photographs are a great way to convince you too. Gradually you will become aware of the feeling of traction between your postural ring and the horse's postural ring. That connection will reveal the wave of the movement. **Take the horse as your guide because they will very likely stretch forward and down and lift their back when you engage with the wave of their movement. Their responses are the ultimate teacher because they are the reason you are developing your posture in the first place.**

The red line shows the angle less than 90° (in front of the vertical) which would put weight on the horse's shoulders and lift the rider out of the wave of the horse's movement.



The blue line is vertical and the green line shows the approximate limit of how far back a rider can engage with the wave. between these two lines will be your ideal.

Exercise 2: Standing In the Stirrups at Trot

The second exercise addresses the balance of your lower body by helping you to feel how it can support you. The aim when riding, in terms of the balance in your posture, is to be 'standing' not 'sitting'. 'Sitting' on a horse, meaning that you are balancing on the horse's back rather than balancing within yourself. This becomes most obvious during transitions from rising to sitting trot or from one gait to another, and more obvious yet when the support of the reins is taken away.

- You need to practice this exercise without reins, and ideally in trot, so it is best to do it on the lunge. If your horse is experienced and you are in an enclosed arena, you may practice without a helper, but remember that using the reins for control negates the purpose of the exercise.

- Practice at first in walk, making sure you are bringing enough weight into your inside leg to balance the horse (read section *Managing your weight* p.53). Stand in the stirrups, keeping your lower leg under you, aiming to stay in that position for several strides. When you can keep your balance in this way do the exercise in trot.
- Once you have established a rising trot, bring yourself up into your stirrups, pushing off from your inside leg. You will have to lean forward sufficiently to be able to stay upright in the stirrups, so at first you may need to support yourself by putting your hands on to the horse's wither.
- Do not pull the reins back or support yourself on the pommel as it is too close into your body to permit the correct balance.
- Focus on your lower legs. This exercise is about suppling the joints and bringing your awareness into the legs and how they support your whole posture.
- Riders who are not already using their legs to balance themselves will find it quite challenging to bring them underneath and keep them there at first. It is fine if you can't stay up in the position for long, your strength and balance will develop quickly if you keep practicing.
- Aim to keep the position going for a few circles. When you come back down into the saddle you will be much more aware of each joint and how it has to stretch to form the correct leg position and bear your weight.



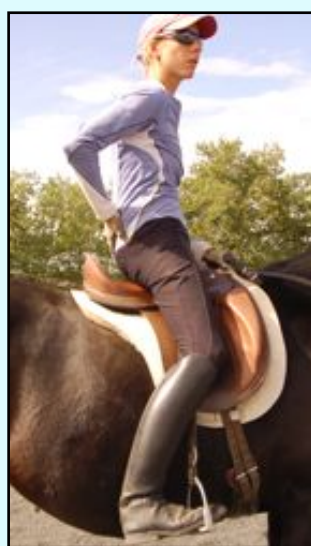
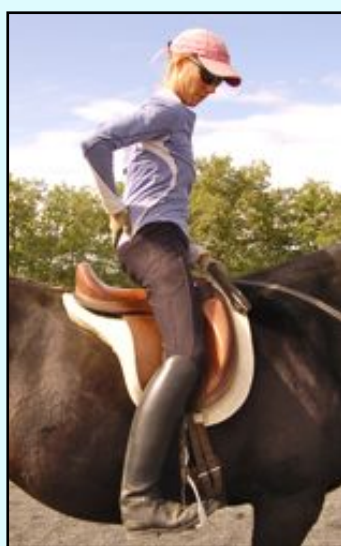
The deeper you can bring your lower leg under to support yourself, the less you will rely on your hands for your balance.

This exercise was very helpful with Zouzou as he had a chronically hollow posture and it was therefore very challenging to bring the lower leg underneath properly (the shape of his ribcage and spine pushed them forward).

The Pelvic Tuck: The Nucleus of your Postural Connection

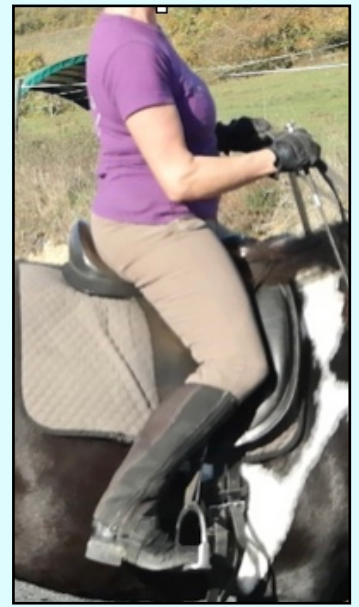
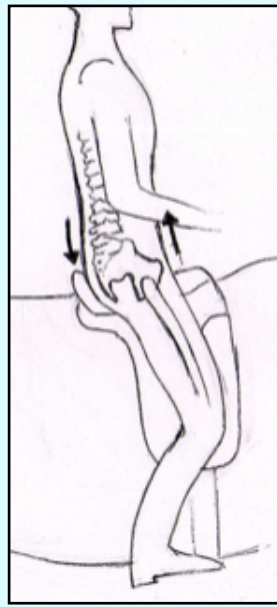
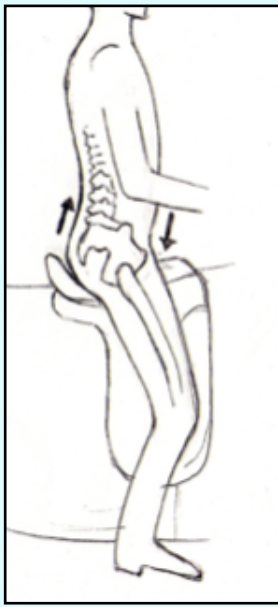
The pelvic tuck describes the orientation of your seat on the horse which allows you to stay with the horse's movement and influence it, at the same time as connecting your upper and lower body in balance. When you take the reins away as a source of balance and you ride a horse evenly above their spine, the only way to truly engage with the horse's movement is to sit on the back of your seat-bones bringing your pelvis into the tucked position by releasing the psoas muscle and engaging your core muscles, in particular the oblique abdominals. This allows your seat to both stick on to the horse's back *and* follow the movement. Your pelvis rocks with the horse's stride, tucking to a greater or lesser extent depending on the part of the stride it is connecting with.

Many riders sit on their pubic bone in a 'fork' seat, which effectively blocks the roll of the pelvic tuck. As a result, the horse's back is blocked from lifting up and they cannot bring their hind-legs underneath to support themselves or bring themselves onto their postural ring. The disengagement of the rider is therefore reflected in the disengagement of the horse, and like keeping the hand-brake on in a car, the swing through the horse's spine is blocked, and the rider can only hover on top without ever embracing the movement. (See drawing by Gabrielle Dareau p.47).

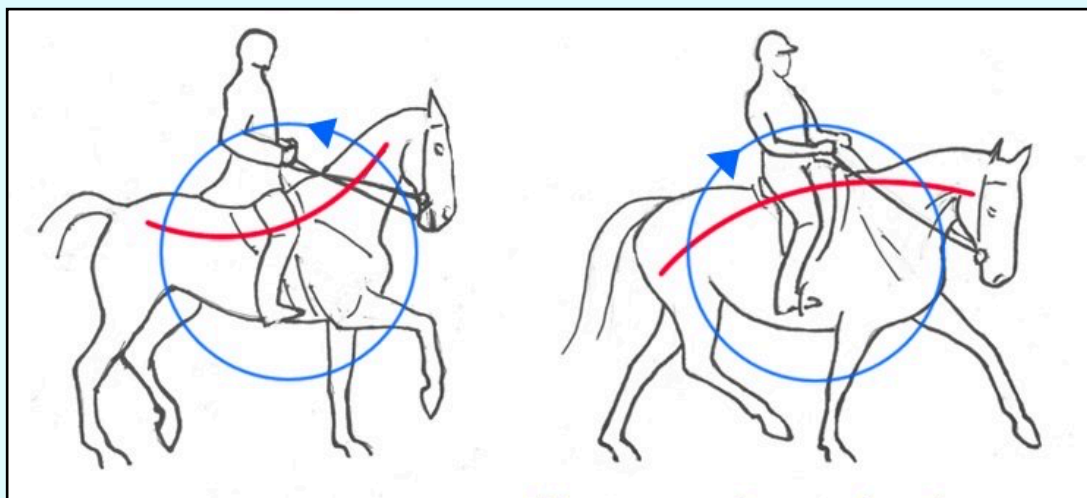


Although developing your pelvic tuck is done principally in movement (because it is a *dynamic* between your body and the horse's body) it certainly helps to learn how to put your seat into the tuck before you start. It is important to keep the other parts of your posture in place while you are organising your pelvis. You need to keep your lower leg under and your upper body back. Remember your pelvis is only as tucked as the correctness of the rest of your position.

Tipping forward or letting your lower leg shoot forward will un-tuck the pelvis. Be patient and give yourself time to improve. At first the pelvic tuck is often quite a strain on the hip-joints, don't force yourself so much as keep repeating the tuck and continue until it maintains itself and becomes more and more supple and powerful.



The left hand side shows a relatively common rider posture where the pelvis is tipped forward and 'un-tucked'. It is common because it is a typical default position that someone will take up in the saddle. Developing a strong pelvic tuck takes physical effort and mental concentration. It is more intuitive for us to protect our vulnerable belly area and to do that we tend to tip forward into more of a foetal position. We might correct that by hollowing our back and pushing our chest out forward. Unfortunately that tips us on to our crotch and props our seat-bones out behind us. In the un-tucked position the seat-bones act as a hand-brake against the horse's spine and the horse has little option but to drop their back.



Drawing by Gabrielle Dureau

Postural Leverage: Your Primary Engagement Tool

Postural leverage is the 'engaging effect' of the rider's postural ring. It is the special formula that gives a rider the ability to guide a horse without forcing them through discomfort and pain. The only reason there is such a blind spot around it, and so few people seem to know about it, is that it is not instantly accessible. It requires a process of development.

The difference between developing postural leverage and, say, playing an instrument or learning how to dance or play golf, is that the 'quick fix' in riding is so immediately accessible and delivers apparent results. The majority of riders fall into that trap and never get back out. Only through self-awareness can you realise the inauthenticity of the quick fix. The quick fix involves changing the horse and not the rider. Remember that when you develop your ability as a rider you will be able to communicate with the vast majority of horses, whereas if you focus on 'fixing' one horse, whatever results you seem to achieve will stop there. Not addressing their own weaknesses can also cause a rider to go through one horse after the other, seeking for the right one and never finding them.

Postural leverage comes from the way the rider stretches and maintains parts of their body in opposing directions. Just like stretching an archery bow so that an arrow can be propelled through the air, you create tensile force through your body. This can then be used to lever a horse into balance and is released into their movement. It is not an isolated tension which has nowhere to go, building up and causing damage, it is potential energy which is channeled kinetically into the horse's postural ring and back again. The leverage therefore becomes a positive, creative force.

All forces should be applied with sensitivity, although the strength of a rider's postural leverage will usually advance in alignment with their awareness of the horse's needs. It is also true that postural leverage is very different from the leverage a rider creates using spurs and a double bridle. That kind of leverage uses aerobic muscles only: arm, shoulder and leg muscles, and the energy created by those muscles is not recycled into the horse's movement because the rider cannot let it go. Instead it is a permanent situation of pushing and pulling which both traumatises the horse's mind and damages their joints. It also creates a lot of stress in the *rider's* body, particularly concussion in the spine.

Using postural leverage to bring Quisse on to her postural ring. The more novice a horse is in using their postural ring, the greater the angles in the rider's posture will be to initiate engagement. This is because the rider has to make up for the lack of postural strength in the horse with their own core strength.

In this photograph my lower leg has to come deep enough under my body to create the necessary leverage against my pelvis to stretch Quisse's spine. As she becomes stronger her back will lift more and my pelvis will tuck more easily so my lower leg will sit further forward. This is an example of why an arbitrary 'correct posture' has limited relevance in riding and training horses. **The correctness of your posture can only be defined by its effectiveness.**



The Importance of Postural Straightness

In order to straighten the horse by way of engaging your own postural ring, which engages *their* postural ring, you must have as even an influence as possible with both sides of your body. If you attempt to channel the horse's movement through a crooked framework, the energy lost will reduce your ability to engage them and reduce the energy being recycled. You may notice radical differences in the horse's movement when your own straightness improves. For example, sometimes bringing yourself straighter will encourage the horse to go forward more. You can tell if this is the case because although it is more forward, the movement will be better connected. This is sometimes referred to as a horse being 'on the aids'. It will not be movement which is unbalanced and difficult to control, as long as you continue to ride in straightness.

The other effect you might have when you become straighter is that your horse may slow down or stop. This happens for two reasons, or a combination of both. Firstly the straightness is bringing the horse on to their postural ring, which is similar to engaging the chain of a bicycle through the pedals rather than freewheeling. The movement is being channelled through the entire body of the horse, similar to the mechanism of the bike. It is no longer short-circuiting, so it does require more effort, and some horses whose natural transmission is limited will need more encouragement to keep going. Basically it is harder work for them to move straight. This will be a phase until they strengthen up, and the straightness ultimately brings out their innate power.

The second reason it might be difficult for you to keep the horse going when you become straighter in yourself, is that just like the horse, staying straight is enough of an effort to maintain, and you will need to strengthen up to be able to back that up with sensitive yet effective driving aids. Ultimately, however, when you have developed enough strength to maintain the leverage of your postural ring, postural straightness and driving ability actually support each other, although at first one tends to negate the other. As with trying to put a tight lid over two ends of a box, at first it is hard to get both secured at once, but when they are in place the tightness helps to keep the lid on.

The main thing is to notice when you have an effect of either kind i.e whether the horse feels able to flow more, or when they become more connected they start to slow down and collect more. These effects are very different from a horse *rushing* forward or *backing off* because of lack of balance or bullying aids. You may not relate to these differences straight away, it does take a lot of practical experience before they will become completely clear.

What does evenness really mean in the human body?

It is not really possible to understand the complexity of a living being by using analogies with objects. An even block of wood is even in terms of its shape, because its texture is relatively consistent. A human body however, is made up of many different types of tissues, all linked up in an incredibly complex way. The human body - or any living being for that matter - is dynamic. This means that everything about it, from the cellular level on up, has evolved to move, both internally and externally.

In our body we have the circulation of the blood and the lymphatic system. There is also the cranial rhythm, both the core rhythm and those which radiate from the cranial rhythm in the cerebrospinal fluid through all of our organs and tissues. When growing and developing in the womb, all the structures we are made up of are forming themselves within the rhythms of our mother's body, and when we are born our own rhythms kick in and take over. Any kind of trauma at any stage of our lives can impose a blockage or a restriction, and where the tissues become contracted, the fluids are then limited in their ability to reach those areas. So evenness is not just a matter of attempting to place our limbs and body parts in a geometrically equal place, from side to side. True evenness is intrinsic to our whole being. Releasing our own unique 'restriction patterns' is a fundamental part of becoming an effective rider.

Thinking of oneself as a complex web of tissues of different textures and shapes, which can become tied up or damaged in any part, helps one understand how important it really is both to know and to address one's own body. If for example a certain joint, say the sacroiliac joint on one side, is tighter than normal because of an injury, then the sacroiliac joint on the other side will be looser because the body will always find a balance overall. If you then ride a horse with this uneven pelvis, an uneven absorption of the horse's movement will result. This means that the energy will not flow evenly to the next structures in your body, and your ability to straighten the horse will be compromised. Ultimately you can only straighten a horse to your own degree of physiological straightness.



Both Gabrielle and Phoenix had considerable spinal issues to overcome to achieve the beautiful engagement through straightness shown here.

All ways of addressing your own straightness are valuable. Working with fixed physical tools is helpful, because they will always reflect back clearly. For example sitting on the edge of a kitchen chair, or balancing with an Indo board. Part of the complexity of working with a horse is that they will adapt themselves around you, and you adapt around them, and finding a neutral anchor is not possible. The most reliable sign is your capacity to authentically engage your horse, because you can only engage a horse with a relatively straight posture. The more clearly you are willing to perceive yourself, and the influence you have on the horse, the quicker you will resolve your crookedness pattern.

A mixture of therapeutic energy work, such as Craniosacral Therapy, and active riding work where you are building up your postural strength, seems to be the most effective way. If you can't ride all the time, Pilates, Indo boards, Yoga and exercise work-outs of that sort are excellent supplementary aids. Even just to know yourself better makes a huge difference. Provided you are being trained to engage your postural ring correctly, riding lessons on the lunge are second to none because obviously they address the riding dynamic itself.



Hope had a serious pelvic unevenness which gave her an un-level stride when she wasn't engaged.

Working together to improve our straightness allowed us some wonderful times together in engagement. Hope adored working in this way, she felt balanced and safe and she put everything she had into it.

I learned from her that success doesn't necessarily come from searching for the highest potential, but from what you are prepared to put into something, whatever the starting point.



Unevenness more apparent in the shoulders



Unevenness more apparent in the pelvis

All riders are on a 'straightness' journey, learning about their own body and how to strengthen and correct it. Sometimes there may be a developmental unevenness, such as a scoliosis (a curvature of the spine) but it can also be a pattern caused by injury. It might not even be a physical crookedness, but an absorption of the horse's crookedness pattern. Issues might emerge more on some horses than others, depending on their own straightness. Sometimes there is an innate pelvic unevenness, often between the sacroiliac joints, and sometimes the rider is being pushed out by the horse's natural crookedness. Most often it is a bit of everything, and in strengthening your pelvis you will gradually be able to resist the un-straightening effect of the horse, as well as evening up your own body.

straightened equivalents



Managing Your Weight

To know how to manage your weight on a horse it helps to understand more about their natural crookedness. There are two dynamics involved in a horse's natural crookedness:

- **Static Crookedness:** No horse starts out even, they all have a crookedness pattern which involves their whole body, and so each side of their body has developed with a slightly different shape and orientation to the other side. This crookedness can't be simplified into one plane, because it is integral to the whole body. There is a slight rotation laterally as well as longitudinally in how the ribcage and the spine are carried, which can be felt sitting on the horse. The static crookedness does not change from one rein to the other, so the way it presents itself on either rein depends on its interaction with the dynamic crookedness.
- **Dynamic Crookedness:** This is a locomotory crookedness which although related to the static crookedness is a function of the forces a horse must overcome to move with their particular body type. When a horse goes around a bend, because their inside hind-leg is describing a smaller circle it has more leverage than the outside hind-leg. Therefore its action displaces the horse's rib-cage to the outside each stride. The extent of this depends on the conformation of the horse, i.e. the openness of the stifle joint, the natural strength of the hocks and the hind-leg conformation.

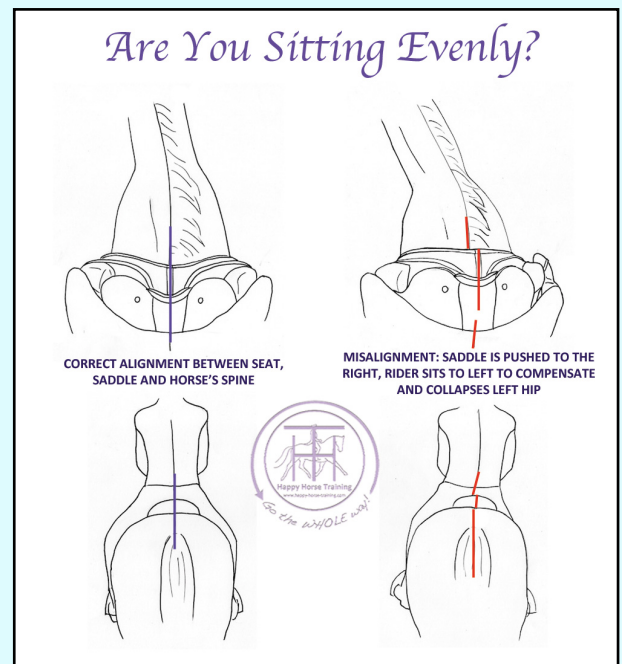
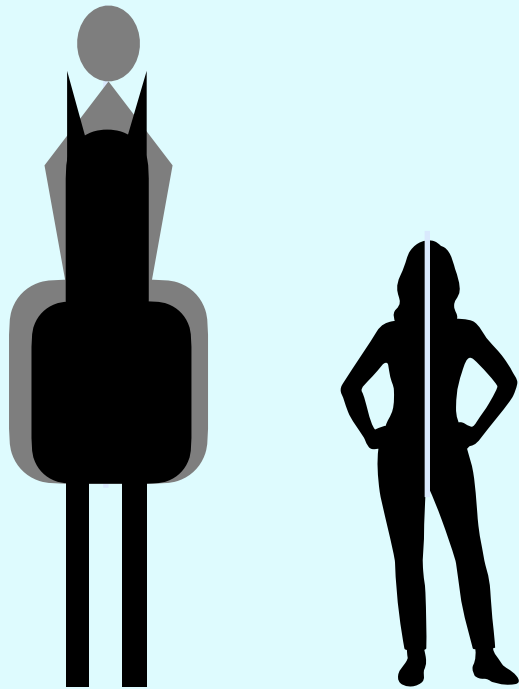
The dynamic crookedness is more visible, for example when the inside hind-leg will makes a slicing action rather than a straight push through. The repercussions of that through the horse's body are more observable than the static crookedness. The static crookedness is easier to feel than to see, but the feeling will always be a mixture of both. The main thing a rider has to focus on is how *they* are being influenced each stride, and how to correct it. To straighten a horse you must first place your seat as evenly as you can by looking at where the pommel of the saddle sits. Then become aware of the dynamic happening each stride the horse takes, when their entire crookedness pattern will influence your weight. In general, because of the dynamic crookedness influence, **the rider will be pushed more to the outside on each rein.**

If a horse has a very marked static crookedness then the rider might be pushed to the outside on one rein more than on the other. It also helps to understand your own crookedness pattern, i.e. which side of your body is stronger. Usually your stronger side is also your stiffer one - mostly reflected in the flexibility of the joints and how well you can control them, and your weaker side is more flexible. As with the horse you have to think of conditioning each side rather than only improving one.

Effective management of your weight is a function of your postural strength and straightness. The stronger and straighter you are, the easier it is for you to control where your weight goes. One way to clarify the process is to divide weight management into two planes, longitudinal and lateral.

Lateral weight management:

Lateral weight aids refers to how the weight is distributed on each side of the sagittal plane. The sagittal plane is the division of a body into two even halves, right and left. Imagine a horse and rider split evenly right down the centre line, where the mane runs and a dorsal stripe would go.



Drawing by Gabrielle Dureau

How to manage your weight laterally:

1. The first step is to **become aware** of the way you are pushed about each stride, like a buoy in the sea. Start by shutting your eyes as you are walking along and feel where your body is in space in relation to the horse. Then feel for how your body is influenced by the horse's stride. If it is difficult to feel, you can try imagining which side you would go to if you were to fall off. Open your eyes and look carefully at the pommel of the saddle. Look at exactly where you want to sit in the saddle, is it further over one way or the other? Are you trying to compensate for where the saddle is being carried by the horse? Can you see any irregularity in how the saddle sits on the horse? If you were to lead the horse along from the ground without a girth on the saddle, which way would the saddle begin to slide to? As the horse takes each step, watch the pommel and feel if your pelvis swings out in one direction more than the other. **It is worth taking enough time to feel and see this crookedness dynamic, because influencing it is the key to all riding.**



This rider has made a significant effort to correct her weight collapsing to the outside (in this case to her left and our right). Her left foot is lower than her right foot in the first photograph and although her pelvis is well centred in the saddle, the entire saddle is listing to her left. In the second photograph she is already levelling the saddle and her weight looks more stabilised into her right stirrup. You can also see that Mojo is correspondingly straighter in his inside (right) hind leg and beginning to carry more weight. It is a different part of the stride here, but his right hind-leg will take a straighter step and not travel across under his belly as in the first photograph.

2. The second step is to **practice bringing enough straightness into your posture** to resist the dynamic crookedness forces and influence the static crookedness.
 - First look carefully at the midline of the saddle and make sure you are sitting evenly on either side of the horse's spine. It can help to have someone look from the back, as it is not always obvious from the front if there is a discrepancy. If you have a tendency to sit further over to one side it will be reflecting the static crookedness of the horse, and your own static crookedness. You can learn your own particular habit and get good at correcting yourself. It is actually very difficult to correct these static imbalances because our spacial awareness wants us to find balance, so if the horse is unbalancing you from the angle of their torso, you want to compensate for that immediately. Very often when you correct it, as soon as you carry on again you will shift right back because it just doesn't feel straight! Having the self discipline to *stay feeling crooked until you can straighten up the horse* is a real test! Remember if you are sitting crooked on top of the saddle you will never be able to straighten the horse. This stage of the process is quite intellectual until you can train your senses to feel it. Learning your own compensations is one of the hardest things you can do.

- Secondly bring the focus on to the crookedness *dynamic*. It helps to bring the horse into as slow a walk as possible, so just like bringing a bicycle as slow as possible, there is less momentum to maintain the existing balance. That will both **make it clearer when you are being displaced** to the outside (at the moment the inside hind-leg pushes off) and **give you more of a window to make a difference**. Begin to resist this movement of your pelvis by focusing on keeping your inside seat-bone down in the saddle and use your core muscles to keep the inside of your pelvis from swinging out. It is a movement you are resisting, not a shifting in the saddle, so you have to be aware of the moment at which it happens. Once you feel it, repeat to yourself each stride, 'now', 'now', 'now' and every time focus on maintaining the tallness of the inside pillar: the stretch and straightness in that side of your body from the hip to the shoulder (down into the hip and up through the waist and ribcage and into the shoulder). The main traps you can fall into when doing this are still letting your pelvis swing out, and compensating by leaning your torso or your head in. So you then have a kink happening through your body. Usually it is just a case of building up enough strength, and tenacity is the answer. Once you can resist the swing with your pelvis, start focusing on stretching down into your inside leg and connecting with the inside hind-leg with your inside leg aids. (See photos above to visualise the inside pillar).

Each part of the straightening process supports the next part. Once you can keep your seat in place; the root will be in place and the other parts will fit in like a jigsaw. You will know when you have tipped the balance, and you have 'clicked' the horse into straightness when the following physiological changes take place in the horse:

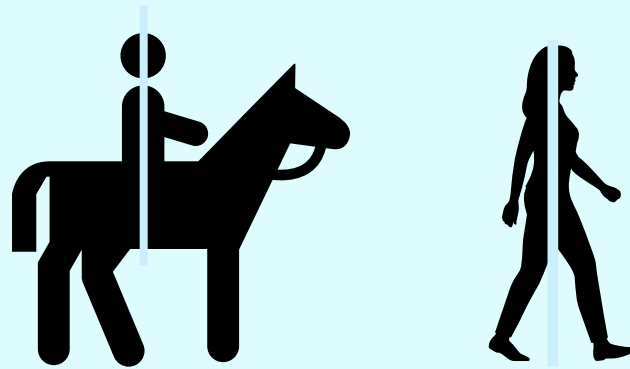
- **The horse's neck stretches forward and down (telescoping).**
- **The horse's jaw loosens and they relax their mouth.**
- **Their rib-cage seems to flatten and yield more to your leg.**
- **The horse's neck, shoulders, torso and hind-quarters come into alignment.**
- **They lift their back and your seat feels supported under both sides.**

When you have succeeded in straightening the horse through the lateral weight aids you will feel how much more balanced and receptive the horse is to your longitudinal (collecting) aids which control the horse's pace.



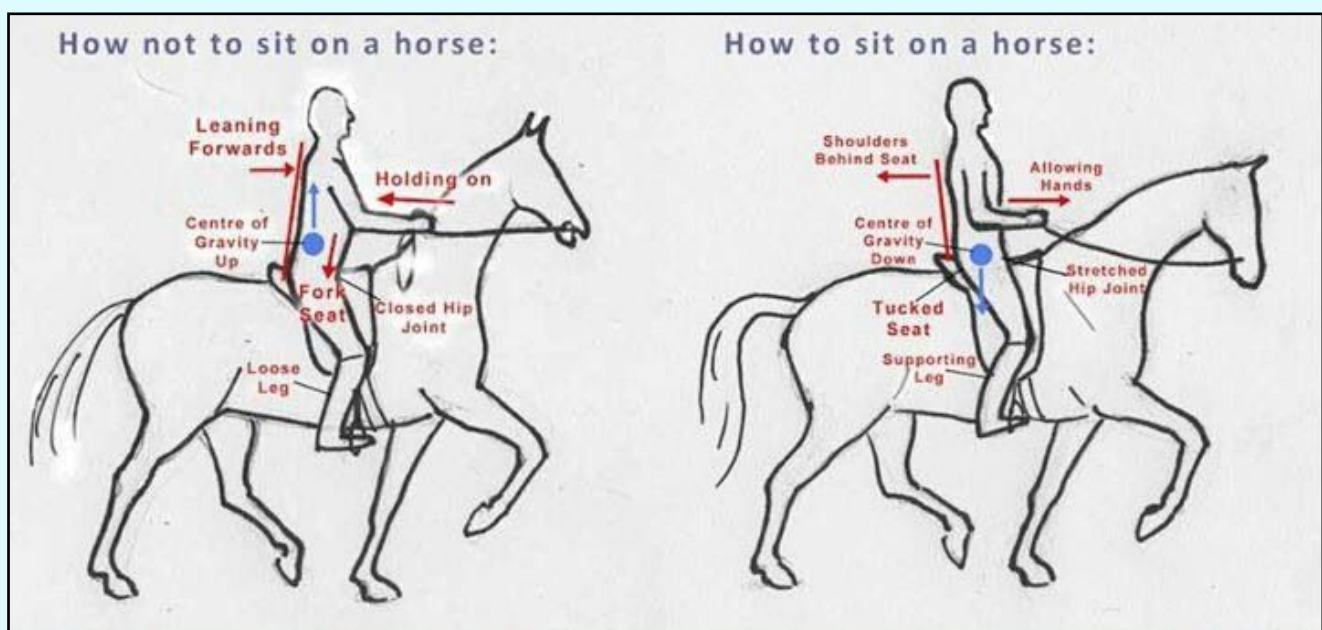
Longitudinal weight management:

The longitudinal aids refer to the plane running through your body, dividing it from front and back, in what is called the frontal or the coronal plane.



If too much of your body is in front of this plane then you will overload the horse's shoulders. That happens when a rider tips the shoulders in front of the hip joints. This is a very common biomechanical mistake that riders make which not only unbalances the horse but also disengages the rider's pelvic tuck, effectively disconnecting their postural ring.

The main thing to think about in terms of longitudinal balancing is to develop the ability to connect to the horse's back with the back of your seat-bones. Practice rolling to the very back and find the soft, muscular part of your seat. Then roll on to your pubic bone and see how well you can feel the movement in comparison. It usually feels quite strange at first to sit into the back of your seat-bones, as if you are leaning right back away from the horse. This is because it requires more core strength to maintain this posture. You must take the bull by the horns and accept the strangeness in order to develop the strength. Soon you will feel unbalanced and ineffective if you go back to your old way.



Drawing by Gabrielle Dureau

If the support of the reins is removed, then this posture is the *only* way a rider can balance when sitting on a horse's back in trot. If you sit on or near the pubic bone you will bounce or hover and this becomes impossible to maintain without reins. Even attempting to sit in the middle will still un-tuck your pelvis and prevent you from connecting into the horse's movement. It is necessary to train yourself to maintain your pelvic tuck during each stride at first, until it seems natural to be able to balance that way.

Once this is in place then you can start to work on keeping your legs underneath you. Your legs will want to creep forward and rise up when you first tuck your pelvis and come on to the back of your seat-bones because keeping them under asks them to work in the opposite direction. This opposition of forces is an essential part of your postural leverage. (See diagram p39).

Exercise 3: Transitioning From Sitting to Rising Trot

Going between sitting and rising trot helps to bring each part of your posture together. First establish your pelvic tuck and balance with the horse's stride in the sitting trot, then go into rising trot to enable you to bring your lower leg under, then go back into sitting trot, making sure that you go back far enough with your upper body not to block your seat from engaging.

Think about keeping your lower leg under you as you go back into sitting. This will demand flexibility from your hip joints. Sometimes it is visible when a rider doesn't have the flexibility in their hip-joints and they go from rising to sitting trot, instead of their pelvis tucking under and their lower leg staying in place, their whole seat will slide back in the saddle to allow the pelvis to come back down.

Remember to maintain the pelvic tuck when you go into the rising trot. The sitting trot favours the seat connection helping to influence the rising trot which favours the leg connection. When you practice this exchange between the two dynamics enough, eventually there will be very little loss of balance between the two. The rider's joints will become supple enough to allow the transition between rising and sitting to be seamless and the horse's balance will not be compromised but in fact maintained by the rider.



Maintaining the pelvic tuck going in rising trot while going out into a longer stretch.

Sculpting Your Legs

The ideal basic leg position is a marriage between the most comfortable connection for the horse and the most effective position for the rider to apply the aids with. The comfort of the horse depends on the way the aids are applied, as well as the static position your leg is sitting in, and horses seem to appreciate as 'turned in' a leg as possible. The more you can use the side of your leg, and the less you can use the back of your leg the better. Imagine using your shin rather than your heel, then you can get as much turn as possible and you end up using the side of your calf.

The sculpted leg is arguably the least natural part of the rider's posture, therefore it takes the most work. It may be straightforward to bring your leg back when your seat is forked and your pelvis un-tucked, but bringing the leg under when your seat is engaged seems impossible at first, unless you have very supple hip and ankle joints. Keep believing however, as long as you keep consciously moulding it at the same time as tucking your seat, the position will come.

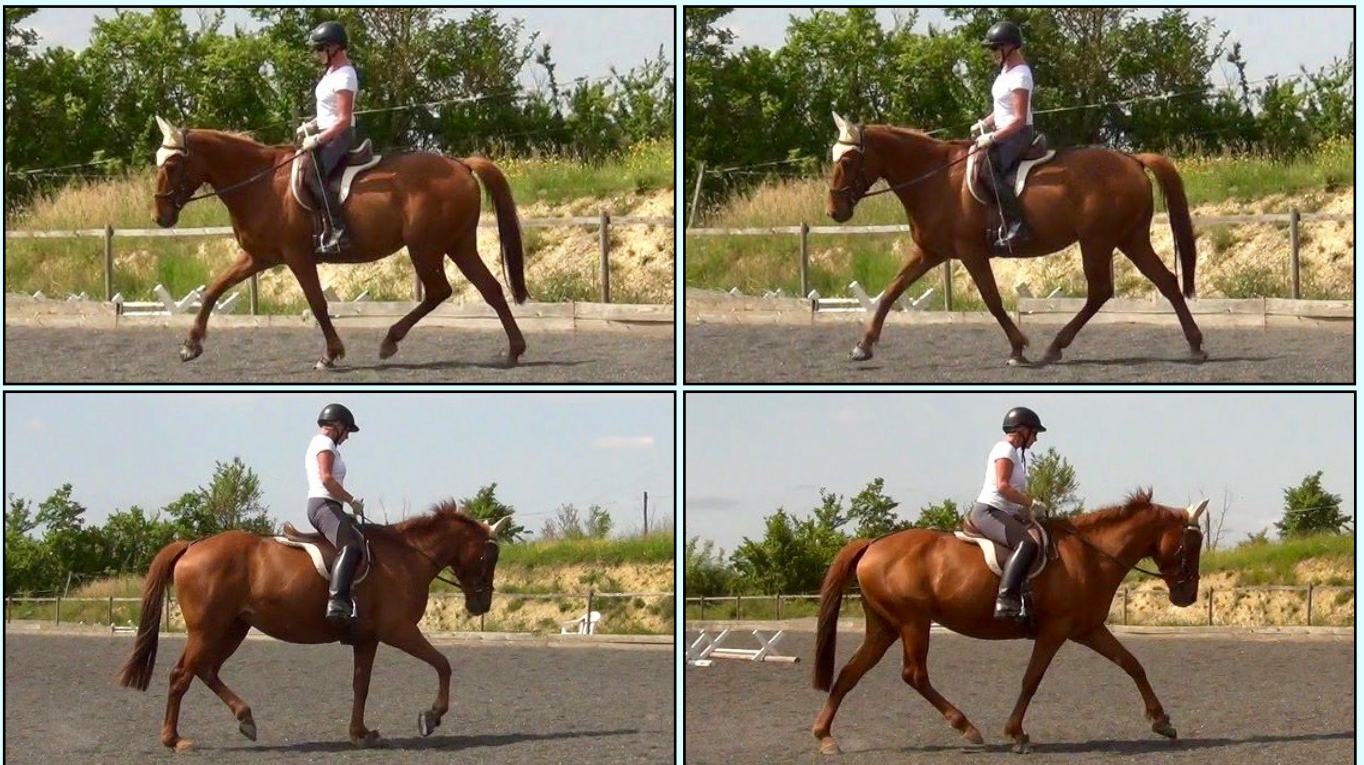


It is very helpful to have someone to help sculpt your leg into position. You can learn the muscle memory as well as having a jump start at maintaining your leg in place when the horse moves off.

The better you can shape your lower leg and keep it under you, the more control you will have over your ability to soften your horse's sides. This horse was very tight and hard in his sides at first. Being able to gently, carefully and also deeply massage him with my legs helped him to relax his diaphragm and begin to breathe better. Then he could let go of tension throughout his body. Over time he was able to stretch out his neck more than is pictured here.

To sculpt your leg correctly focus on sitting as close to the front of the saddle as possible with a tucked pelvis. Then stretch your thighs back as far as you can while turning your knees to the inside. After this, turn your calf so that your toes are pointing to the inside. Finally stretch into your ankle to lower the outside edge of your foot and bring your heels down lower than your sole. Eventually you will get the feeling that your thigh and calf are able to operate independently. Your thighs will stay more connected to the horse's torso, and your calf can act with greater freedom without displacing your overall postural leverage.

- **Think of bringing your leg under you by millimetres each stride rather than all at once, and that will slowly supple the joints.**
- **Imagine being able to touch your soles together underneath the horse's belly. That will help your turn your ankles in and not out.**
- **When you rise to the trot think of your knees becoming the fulcrum between your upper and lower body, as if they were bolted on to the saddle. Keep them underneath you as much as you can.**
- **Practice moving the stirrups as far forward as your first toe joint to allow more flexibility in your ankles. Only keep them there permanently when you feel secure enough in the stirrups.**
- **When rising to the trot you can jump your whole leg back during one stride. This is a more radical way to bring your leg back, but remember it can jump forward again just as easily.**



Rising phase inside & outside leg of rider

Sitting phase inside & outside leg of rider

Positioning and The Reins

When a beginner rider first gets on a horse and is asked to control where the horse is going and what speed they are moving at, they have little choice but to use the reins. To compound the situation, humans are a hand-orientated species and so it is natural for us to use the reins as a way of balancing. This prevents us from ever discovering that there is another way of controlling the horse, with an independent, balanced posture. Many rider's experience of riding starts and finishes with the reins. True riding is everything but that. Reins do have a part to play in the engagement machine. However their role can only become clear once the rider has developed the ability to balance without any reins at all. Until then independence from the reins will only be a theory without sensory reality. **The need to balance through the reins must be surrendered. The compulsion to control the speed of the horse with the reins must be relinquished and the habit of steering the horse with the reins must be reformed.** The correct functioning of reins relies on the correct functioning of the rest of the posture first. After this there are two functions which reflect the lateral and the longitudinal aspects of the engagement of the horse :

The lateral aspect of rein function:

The reins are an *extension* of the rider's arm in that they help to align the front end (neck and shoulders) of the horse's body, so they are guardians of straightness, but in a 'completing' sense rather than creating. They complete what was established by the rider's body and the way it interacts and influences the horse's body. Trying to straighten the horse with the reins only, or the reins first, is like trying to put icing on a cake that isn't cooked yet. The position of your reins relative to your seat is the perfect compass telling you how well you have straightened your horse. (See p.146 for more information).

Although simply changing your hand position will not bring the horse's body straight in itself, it is another piece of the jigsaw, and it will help to articulate *your* body in the right way. When a horse is truly aligned through their pelvis, torso, shoulders and neck they will be bending in such a way that sits the rider level on their back, and corrects the tilt to the outside. The hands will reflect that by sitting in such a way that the outside 'wall' of the horse's body is not breached. If the rider's outside hand creeps out or back past that wall (travels past the midline to the outside of the horse's sagittal plane) the bend will be corrupted. This happens partly by the rider's weight slipping to the outside, and partly by the action of the rein itself drawing the horse's neck out of the bend. **The horse must also be allowed the length of outside rein to accommodate the neck bend to the inside.**

If the rein is restrictive, the horse cannot bend the way they are going and therefore has to move crookedly. This is why the idea that you ride from the inside leg to the outside rein makes no biomechanical sense.

The inside hand sits just to the inside of the sagittal plane. With most rider conformation that works out as the outside rein sitting above the horse's wither and the inside rein sitting to the inside of the wither. If the hands aren't pointing that way as a direct extension of the rider's body, then the horse isn't straight yet. If the rider is attempting to guide the horse by *bringing the outside rein to the outside at any time*, then the horse is not yielding to the inside weight and leg aids and is not moving straight.

Putting your hands in this position is called 'positioning' because it holds the reins in the place where they would lie when the horse is in an engaged posture. This involves a telescoping neck and a relaxed jaw. The reins can be any length, even at the buckle, and they will have the positioning influence to some extent. That influence is partly on the rider's body and partly on the horse's physiology. It is not a 'backward' influence and not a forceful influence. Think of it like cupping your hands in a particular way which would encourage a little bird to want to sit in them comfortably. It is creating a space for the horse's neck to occupy, not imposing a space. Therefore the rein length must always allow the horse themselves to create the contact. Only when the rider can sense the horse coming into engagement, and the horse's jaw loosening do they take up the slack and connect through the rein. Any other teaching is a misconception of the true physiology of engagement.

Totti bending right, and my inside rein is sitting to the inside of her wither, with the outside rein above her wither, in line with the bend of her body. This indicates that my weight is even (not being pushed to the outside) and she is moving straight. You can see crookedness in a horse when the rider is trying to keep the horse to the outside with the outside rein, because the horse is not genuinely bending, and yielding from the rider's inside leg. Many advanced and Grand Prix level horses are manoeuvred in this way.



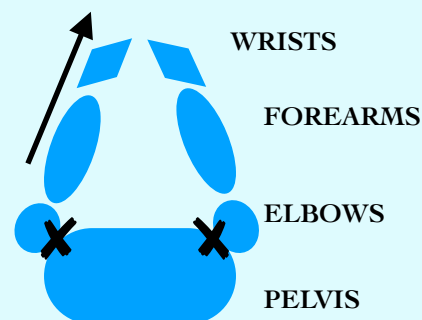
The longitudinal aspect of rein function:

The reins are also a *connector*, allowing an indirect communion between the rider's hand and the horse's mouth (or nose). They interconnect in the same way as the rider's leg directly contacts the horse's sides, or their seat indirectly contacts the horse's back through the saddle. As a rider we are seeking this physical connection with the horse in as many ways as possible because it allows a greater field of correspondence and influence. The zone of connection that the reins give us is more about receiving information than transmitting it, because the horse's head and neck are not the origin of physiological change. You can't engage a horse or control a horse (without creating tension) by influencing their mouth or nose. The best way to come to terms with this is to learn how to influence the rest of the horse's body. What you *can* do through the rein connection is to feel the status of the engagement and connect with it when it is present. Changes in the horse's body will indicate whether they are engaging or not: the alignment, the bend, the longitudinal stretch and the feeling of lift in their back. You can see to some degree whether they are telescoping their neck, bending in the direction of the movement and softening their jaw, although the most important information is the *feel* through the rein. It is the validation of the flow of movement not being blocked or turbulent.

When the horse is not yet engaged and their jaw is blocked, the rein has a wooden or disconnected feel in the contact. There can also be heaviness if the horse is using the rein as a balancing aid. This most often happens when the horse is tired and the rider has not released the rein and allowed stretching for long enough or often enough. Heaviness in the rein from the horse also happens if they have been trained with a rider-imposed contact and they become habituated to using the pressure against their mouth as a prop, like a fifth leg. Horses will always find such pressure uncomfortable and they might also resist it to try and protect themselves, which only exacerbates the weight in the rein. When the horse is engaged and moving in self carriage, the feeling through the rein is elastic. It is a similar connection to that felt through the string of a yoyo, and it has an alluring, magnetising quality because the horse's channeled energy is connecting with you. It is as if the rein comes alive and you can feel right into the horse's body with it. This living, vibrant feeling closes the circle so that the energy can keep flowing around again.

The main postural corrections of your arms:

1. Keeping your elbows softly, but consistently connected to your sides. Depending on your body type your elbows may fall against your hips or your waist. Feel where they fall at your sides to the front of the coronal plane and keep them in place to support your posture. The flexibility in the length of the reins comes from releasing the reins from your fingers, not extending the elbows, as this can result in loss of upper body balance.
2. Train the back of your wrists to align at the same angle as your forearms. Imagine a ruler sitting underneath where a watch face would sit, directing the wrist to stay flat, neither bending forward or back.



Rider Responsibilities Towards Young Horses

Of course it is not ideal to establish your independent seat on a young horse. The first stage, that of giving away your instinctive desires to balance with the reins, and stabilising your own postural ring, is best accomplished on an older horse, one less liable to be alarmed by your instability and inconsistent aiding. When you do come to ride a young horse it is a big advantage if you can control your own balance sufficiently to be able to perceive what the young horse needs and support that.

There is a certain dilemma at the beginning of training in that you need to balance the horse enough to stay calm and to encourage them to use their postural ring, but if you ask too much too soon, the horse will lose confidence in your guidance, because they won't be strong enough to move in that way. The optimum influence on the young horse at this early stage of their training is for the rider to offer enough postural resistance to the horse's natural crookedness to prevent a lack of balance which would cause the horse to worry or panic. Yet, the rider must not channel the horse so precisely that they are demanding a level of straightness which upsets them by placing too much stress on their body, especially the joints of their hind-legs. The more proficient a horse becomes in the straightness training necessary to manage a rider without incurring physical damage, the straighter and more energetically you can ask them to move.

How can you know where the threshold is?

You **feel** for the threshold by staying evenly between both zones to start with, so you allow your weight to be placed by the horse's natural movement to the degree which allows the horse to go forward as easily as that horse will go, but when you feel that your extra weight is adding too much, and causing an imbalance, when the horse is coming around a wide corner for example, you would always correct your weight gradually to the inside. The fact that riding a horse is of a dynamic nature, where different influences change the dynamic every stride, means that you need to seek the *rhythm* of each horse each day. This rhythm is really the communication between horse and rider, so you will influence it with your mood and your approach each day. Imagine it like a conversation, some people talk fast and don't leave much room for the listener to respond, sometimes neither party has much to say and other times both contributors are speaking at once. The possibilities are so diverse that there is no way to become sensitive other than by developing your concentration and feel every time you ride. Your ideal conversation is that both of you contribute and your rhythm of speaking and listening becomes easy and fluent. It is always the rider's responsibility to guide the conversation by listening carefully and responding sensitively.

An example of riding conversation between Totti and Me:

We have already established a mutual sense of awareness, from the first moment of seeing each other. Waiting for acquiescence at each stage..head-collar, grooming and dressing with tack. Acknowledging her mood, my mood..inviting her into my presence so we can train together. Adapting my behaviour, my energy and my responses to hers and forming a connection that is gentle, patient and trusting.

After permission to mount I stay present in every moment, sensing her body - how her back is feeling through the saddle cloth. Sensing for any abrupt or impetuous movement...is her body tight? how is her attention?... is she fixated on anything or able to hear me? There is a boundary, a wave, where I am both hearing her and supporting her in the same place. It is a matter of both absorbing and accepting any turbulence as well as generating and creating calm. A sense of time and space, time for me to ask and space for me to form my 'questions'. Taking time to allow my weight to come fully down on to her back, so I am not holding any part of myself tight. Gauging her response, does her back let my weight in? Are her sides relaxed and becoming sensitive? Delicately, yet soothingly asking her to walk forward with a subtle connection of my postural ring... slowly engaging my core muscles and becoming taller in my spine, aware of my pelvic angle yet not quite bringing it fully into engagement...carefully setting up my lower leg leverage and connection. The more time we take, the deeper we can engage.

When Totti is walking forward I begin to focus on channelling her body with leg, weight and postural positioning. Finding the direction as a result of the straightness. Appealing to her sensitivity is the key. I need to be fully wrapped around her body, so that she is positioned directly under me to be able to organise her into straightness. The source of the straightness is my own posture, and my focus is continuously checking in with this before offering it out to her and receiving her responses. If she speeds up or bends to the outside I fit into that so that I stay in a close place of influence. Bringing my pelvis into a deeper tuck, consolidating my weight to the inside.. the reins are still long. Perhaps I slow down the wave of my seat to relax her. As she begins to yield a little to my leg and weight, the new sense of balance breaks over her consciousness and she likes the feeling and listens for more. Her body becomes less foreign to me, she is opening up and seeking the collaboration. Her stride becomes more measured, she feels the security in the framework of engagement. She begins to raise her back and the memory of that ripple of through-ness comes back into her muscles. As her body becomes more articulate, I am encouraging her to participate, to join and to share. This is therapeutic for her. For me. Opening up to the duality of our partnership and starting to become aware of the power in it. How her hind-legs feel right underneath, supporting as well as empowering her. As she starts to telescope her neck out, mirroring her back rising, the contact through the reins is developing. We feel the joy of movement and suddenly we are ready to trot.



It is important to think of less compliant horses as horses who require *more* care and *more* sensitivity, not the other way around. These are the horses who find the relationship with people more threatening and more unbalancing, so to understand them, we must change ourselves more. Some of the things I have become better at are taking more time when a horse is not 'with' me. It is an art to connect with a horse in this way, because you are seeking to channel their behaviour. It is important to acknowledge this. When you are spending time with your horse, just being, grooming, or healing, the emphasis is different. This is like being the horse's guest, being invited into their space and listening to their wisdom. This is also something which must not be presumed if you wish to strengthen your bond. Am I welcome today? Does my horse wish to spend time with me and welcome me into her presence?



Training is the opposite direction of the wave. You are inviting the horse to be in *your* space. To share this activity with you. Your development as a rider is just as profound as the training of your horse, yet the source of the interaction is you. You are choosing to be the host. This does not mean that your horse cannot enjoy it or will not consent to train with you. Their acquiescence depends on the energy you bring and the relationship you have fostered. Horses can enter into your space with delight. When you take on the leadership, you channel the horse into a different balance than they assume naturally. The physical balance you facilitate will ultimately reflect in the psychological tranquility of the horse.

Over the last several years it has felt important to me to go as deeply into the energetic dialogue between myself and my horses as possible. This required an absolute relinquishment of expectations and objectives on my part. A willingness to listen to and act on every communication I picked up from the horses. What has been happening is that we work around a spiral, acknowledging our issues, letting them go, and coming into a greater integration of our mutual creativity every time. The horses have become less attached to their physical needs and more interested in working with me, and I have become less identified with an outcome. It is a process of awakening that is changing our behaviour and evolving our relationship over time so that we can do things together in a more and more authentic duality.

I write about this in my blog

[Voice For the Horse](#) .



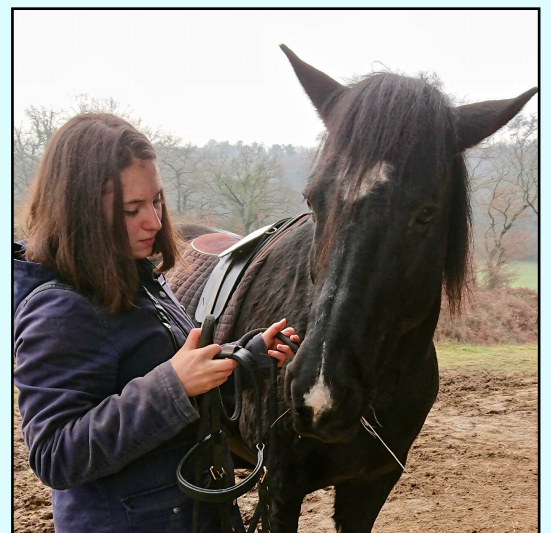
The Familiarisation Process

Familiarisation v Desensitisation:

There is an essential distinction to make between these two practices. **The aim behind desensitisation is to reduce sensitivity to the point where the horse accepts a stimulus without any reaction.** This is not ideal if our intention is to amplify the quality of our relationship, because forcibly reducing a horse's sensitivity is to reduce the essence of who they are. The principle intention when using desensitisation techniques is to avoid negative reactions from the horse, and this makes sense if the horse is seen as an object whose physical capacities are there to be exploited. In this case there is nothing to lose and everything to gain from desensitisation. However, if the relationship itself is valuable to you, it is important to understand that horses have an impressive ability to escape from situations they perceive as threatening by shutting down and retreating within themselves. Once they do this habitually it doesn't take much to tip them over into dissociation.

Familiarisation, on the other hand, is creating *positive* associations with an event or an object. The horse stays present and relaxed without dissociating. Of course to do this properly requires more care and attention from you because the experience does genuinely have to be pleasant, or at the least unthreatening, for your horse. Like everything we are trying to achieve with the horse, it is a two-way process: you observe and respond to the horse, and they listen and respond to you. Desensitisation is a one-way street, imposing an experience on a horse until they accept it, whether they agree or not.

The familiarisation process of mounting a horse is best included as part of the preparatory lungeing work, i.e. including a little bit at the end of every session. This way you can take it as gradually as you like, and the horse can integrate the process into their mind and body much more easily than if you focus only on it for several sessions. It also means you are addressing new experiences when the horse is in the best possible frame of mind, i.e. relaxed and attentive after the work session. Of course it is always important not to overdo the work at any time and if for some reason you think the horse is tired or is not in a good frame of mind you can leave out the familiarisation work that day.



1. Comfort at The Mounting Block

Start by showing your horse how to stand parallel at a mounting block. The willingness of a horse to bring themselves into alignment with the block is very important, because ultimately it signifies the horse's acceptance of being ridden. For this reason it must be introduced with a patient and encouraging attitude, not in an intolerant and dictatorial way. This is because you must preserve the option of choice in the horse's mind. You want to create a *relationship*, and therefore you have to found it and build it on mutual expression. Horses must be allowed to express their state of mind and body. That in turn does not mean that you can't embark on a course of action, but your course must be chosen relative to how your horse feels, not irrespective of it. The main reason this is so important is that training, and in particular, riding horses is not natural to them, especially working them in engagement which is the work we aspire to in this book. Therefore if you can keep the lines of communication functional and active, you won't abuse your horse's mind or body because you weren't aware that there was a problem. Contrary to what is popularly believed, listening to horses on this level will actually increase their generosity and their motivation, because they can trust us and don't need to spend their time defending themselves from insensitive demands. This is the only way can we really expect a horse to open themselves up to us.

The first step is to allow, and if it is appropriate encourage the horse to investigate the mounting block. It is best to make use of a mounting block if possible, because mounting from the ground puts unnecessary strain on the horse's back unless you are very nimble and have someone stabilising the saddle enough. If a horse accepts being lined up at a mounting block then you will find it easier to ask them to line up to anything suitable (banks, logs, walls etc.) out on rides.

Once the horse no longer has any curiosity or anxiety about the mounting block, begin to practice gentle yielding steps to bring them parallel to the block. Focus on doing everything as slowly as possible so that there is a definite atmosphere of calm and steadiness. The slower the horse moves, the easier it is to influence them. If things gets tense with high-energy movements then you will struggle to control the consequences. Always reward a yield from your horse, even a slight one, with calm rest and praise. The main thing is that **you** are calm and attentive during this work. You can do whatever appeals to you in your individual case. You must feel as if you have all the time in the world, and respond to calm, accepting behaviour by moving on with the process. Once your horse is happy to stand in a relaxed way parallel and close enough to the mounting block that you could get on easily, the next step is to get them used to doing that with a person standing on the mounting block. There is no timeline for this work other than how your horse responds.



Approaching the mounting block with Quaramba. Letting her investigate it in her own way. A good rule of thumb is to be more patient than feels necessary.



Avoid putting pressure on yourself or your horse. See your interaction as a process which can unfold as it needs to without expectations or desired results. Be willing to discover your horse.

Only proceed to the next stage when you feel your horse has relaxed fully into what you are doing right now.



You are creating a safe space for the horse and (just as importantly) a safe place for yourself. Your feeling of safety facilitates your horse's sense of security and vice versa.



2. Human at A Height

Make sure that your mounting block is solid and secure enough. You want to be able to get on and off it easily without making too much noise or risking falling off or having it collapse.

Remember that it is a completely new experience for most young horses when a person puts themselves up higher than the horse. Some horses find it quite unsettling. Issues and anxieties do not always surface instantly, so take it slowly. Make sure and make sure again. Once a negative association is made it is much harder to clear from the horse's mind. Nothing is more important than your approach in these exercises. Be calm and confident and do everything slowly and gently. It doesn't matter exactly how you do things, for example you can go up and down the block, or go up and wait there. You can do it while the horse is there, or already be there and bring the horse up. The main thing is to be in the right frame of mind, stay aware of the horse's reaction and be willing to change the plan if it isn't working well.

Ideally you have a helper holding the horse, and you will mount the block, or you might choose to be in charge of the horse and let your helper take on the role of rider. The person holding the horse acts as the anchor in the situation. They want to feel like they are weighted down to the ground, they make few movements and those are slow and smooth. Most important of all they are relaxed and confident. If anything happens to spook the horse or bring tension into the situation, they are the principal defuser. They maintain this calm connection with the horse throughout. They will be the one who is in charge of gently yielding the horse into place for the rider to mount. It is a little more complicated on your own, but still quite possible.

If you are on your own then you have to swop between each task, be the 'anchor/yielder' person on the ground until the horse is in place and relaxed, then be the rider who mounts up on the block. It might take a bit longer but the same outcome will unfold. Perhaps it will be even more strengthening for your partnership as there will be no diminution of the singular connection between you both. Make it clear in all of your actions that there is no hurry. You want to *allow* and almost encourage any issues or hesitancy in the horse to arise so that you can resolve it fully at this stage. Trying to hurry the horse into things, or mask what you are doing is a sure way to upset them because they can read your energy and your body language and they wonder what trick you are up to. Deep inside yourself you have to know that the horse can do this perfectly, as can you, and there is no need to misrepresent or rush anything.

You, as the rider need to make a connection with the horse on the ground first: physical stroking, scratching or rubbing. Then you slowly climb up the block. Break it down into several steps if possible so that the horse has time to absorb what you are doing. Never underestimate the significance of these stages for your horse. To us it seems like nothing, but getting up high beside a horse, above them, in effect, can be very threatening to a prey animal. If these first stages are done with care and patience, so that the horse is beginning each session in composure and presence, the whole ridden life of that horse will be positively influenced.

When you are able to get up on the block and stand there beside the horse without any sign of disquiet or shifting about, then you are ready for stage three. Some horses will breeze through these stages, others will present much more of a challenge. Remember there is no timeline. A horse often gets more value from a session if you stop early than trying to push for a conclusion.

Marie, a Spanish mare in my herd, has been through different stages of dissociation and trauma associated with working in the arena. Our sessions at the mounting block are an important indication of how she is feeling and what she is ready to undertake that day. It is important to take each day as a new beginning, because, although you are moving forward overall, it may seem as if you are taking steps back (going round the spiral). Marie can be sleepy and dissociated at the block one day, authentically calm and accepting another day and then a third day she might be tense. Each day is a new experience. Sometimes we don't pursue anything. Sometimes I can get straight on. On other days long sessions of familiarisation are appropriate. In the bigger picture she is gradually and profoundly knitting together and becoming whole in herself. If you love your horse and you deeply care about them, then you will know what feels right each day.



3. Pressure On the Saddle

The next step is to familiarise your horse with pressure from you and your weight against each part of their body. If you focus only on the saddle, at some point you might touch another place and they might panic because they haven't experienced that feeling before. This can be one of the turning points in the entire education of a horse. Acceptance and trust from your horse is to be regarded as a great accomplishment. If it is treated as a *fait accompli* from the start, then you may be setting up defences in the horse's mind and body, which are never let down in all the years after that you ride. It does depend on the temperament of the horse to some degree, but make sure to listen *all the way along*. Act as if the horse needs more time than they seem to because it is very hard to tell what effect you are having *at the time* purely from behaviour. Having a genuine reverence for your task should not be confused with hesitation or anxiety about what you are doing. **Fear of getting it wrong is one of the hardest traps to avoid. This fear is insidious and will *make* things go wrong if you allow it to become influential enough.** Like anything in life you cannot be an instant expert. Experience and mistakes are part of the learning process. The best way to approach your training experience is to accept that you are in this position with this horse because it is the best possible learning framework for you at this time, and trust yourself to make the best progress you are capable of. There is no point in regretting things which seem to go wrong, and blaming yourself, because the horse will sense these negative feelings in you. Honesty without blame is the quickest route to success. It goes without saying that you don't blame your horse! After all, the horse is only following your lead, and any problems he or she has with that are your responsibility to address.

It may seem that the familiarisation process is a means to an end in terms of your therapeutic intention, i.e. that you are doing it to be able to access the therapeutic matrix of training. Yet it can be directly therapeutic in itself. This is the most powerful way. All that is required is your sensitivity, guided by your awareness of the horse's energy.

- It is helpful to have someone you trust hold the young horse for you during this process. It is important that your ground person is calm and capable of handling the line.
- Make sure the saddle is comfortable for the horse. If there is *any* negative reaction (ears back, tail swishing, jerking away, nipping, biting, bucking or kicking) *at any time* to pressure from, or on, the saddle, or doing up the girth, that indicates some level of discomfort or pain. It will not be just the horse's character and there is nothing to gain from continuing in spite of a negative reaction. Horses quickly lose trust in people who ignore their signals. Especially such obvious signals as those.

- Start by putting some pressure in different places over the horse's back, you can press gently with your hand. Feel for the places, and the touch that will induce relaxation. If the horse fidgets and moves away, stay calm and patient (and encouraging) and gently yield them back into place. Next time you apply the pressure be more aware of your intention. There might be times when you *want* the horse to move from similar pressure, so you have to communicate your wish that the horse accepts the pressure and stands still. You do this by transmitting the energy of grounding and stability through your intelligent touch. This is why it is important to go slowly and open up as much of a space for listening to each other as possible. If you continue to ask in this way the moment of acceptance will come. Once you have that acceptance of general pressure, then practice leaning across the saddle. When the time feels right, let your weight go fully. Wait until the horse has fully absorbed the sensation, and is relaxed, then lift off again. You will understand the rhythm of your particular horse with time and experience.
- See it as a work in progress, do a little bit at the end of each groundwork session, as the natural development from the mounting block work. You don't have to go further every time, some days you can leave it entirely if the circumstances aren't right. It is always about quality not quantity, because only quality work will develop the horse's central nervous system in a valuable way.
- When your horse is 100% comfortable with your full weight leaning over, quietly put your leg over and sit in the saddle. This is the first time you will be able to truly feel your horse's back and it is quite possible to sense the horse's mind/body reaction to your weight. It is less awkward for the horse when you actually have your weight in the saddle than when you lean over, but that is not a reason to skip the leaning over step. You need to familiarise your horse to that very awkwardness, because it is not always possible to leap on to the saddle nimbly and lightly like an elf!
- Always control your weight as it comes into the saddle, lowering it down carefully. Each time be aware of the process of slowly, gently letting your weight down onto the horse. It is important to do this, because holding your weight above isn't actually lighter for them, as soon as you get on, the weight is all there above them, but it is top-heavy. Although this is not as comfortable for them as bottom-heavy weight because it is less balanced, it is still important to introduce the full weight in a gradual way, or the sensation of it dropping down might be perceived as a threat. Wait for the right moment to commit yourself fully, after your horse has integrated the feeling of weight on their back. Take gentle, deep and slow breaths to help you melt your weight down into the horse.

- If the horse begins to panic because of your weight, the ideal response is to remove it calmly, whether you are leaning over or actually sitting on the saddle. Go back a few stages until the horse is completely settled again and build back up to applying the weight. If you have been following the steps relatively faithfully and taking your time, it is very rare to encounter any real problems with a previously unbacked horse. When their confidence hasn't been affected they respond so well to patience, calmness and kindness. Horses that you are rehabilitating are a different matter, and there is no telling how long a particular part of the process may take for full healing to occur.

This is one of the key training 'secrets' of working with a prey animal. Do not 'push through' or persist when tension arises because once the fight or flight reaction is in progress, there are only two possible outcomes:

1. The sympathetic nervous system is in full flow allowing the horse to fight the threat, or more commonly run away from the threat, until they escape it. This is not an uncommon reaction. If a horse spooks, bucks a rider off, bolts back to the field or stable, shies and runs back to the gate of the arena (with or without their rider) these are all as a result of the first outcome of the fight/flight panic reaction.
2. The parasympathetic nervous system kicks in and overrides the sympathetic response and the horse goes into the freeze state. Freezing looks similar to mild sedation. It is a physiological state also known as dissociation, for example when a mouse 'plays dead' they are in the freeze state. It is not a conscious choice, but a last resort solution to what the horse's brain has judged as a hopeless situation. As a result of both the sympathetic and the parasympathetic nervous systems being in full flow and essentially opposing each other, the central nervous system is overwhelmed and depending on the recovery process it may be altered in a way which causes or contributes to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in the future. The dissociated state in horses is often misinterpreted as acceptance, and is even referred to as a horse being broken in or bombproof.



Look for the personality shining out of your horse's eyes, feel for their presence and awareness. Notice if they seem flat and distant. Your relationship is successful when it is bringing you both into the present moment.

Dissociation can become a safe place for a horse. If a foal is forcibly weaned, they can begin to dissociate at this time, and continue to do so as a result of similar handling or management practices such as isolation in a stable, forceful trimming, shoeing and training methods later on. Every interaction between horse and human has the potential to end up with a dissociated horse, and by the time you get to riding, you can be working with a dissociation 'junkie', a horse who will dissociate not as a last resort caused by forcing of their boundaries in that moment, but as the default option for any perceived threat which triggers their trauma response.

Avoiding straying into such stress reactions with a horse is largely about being prepared to create a safe space for you and the horse, which you can introduce, or extend into every situation. The safe space begins with your own vulnerability. When you can be vulnerable with a horse, just like with another person, you are allowing them to see you and understand you more clearly. This will have a profound influence on your relationship. Sometimes when a horse guardian does this, it seems that their horse can truly see them for the first time. Being vulnerable is a skill you must develop gradually and with respect for your own limits. Forcing yourself is as unhelpful as forcing a horse. Bit by bit allow yourself to become less defensive, and more trusting. Consider the following ideas:

- **Can you let your horse nuzzle you without moving your hands or body.**
- **Do you stroke, or pat your horse as a way of controlling their movements.**
- **Are you able to stand comfortably and relax deep in their physical space.**
- **Would you ever consider sitting down in your horse's physical space.**

Allow yourself to explore this without judging yourself. It is natural to defend your body, but your aim is to let go of that defensiveness and replace it with trust.

The reason it is so powerful to do this is that when you can trust your horse, they will be able to trust you. When they can trust you on this level, they become very safe to be around. It is a cycle of positive reinforcement.

Quaramba is a big, sensitive mare, she loves to move and express herself yet she has never been afraid of people. It is wonderful and challenging to explore mutual trust with her.



Pressure on the Saddle:



Your intention is always to maintain and ameliorate the well-being of your horse. Feel this is in everything you do.



Remember to be as relaxed and sensitive as possible in your own body.



If your horse wants to move always go with this, or tension will be stored up.



If your horse is relaxed with your weight lying across them, which is naturally more awkward, then they are ready for you to sit.

4. In the Saddle

A horse who is comfortable with the situation will give you a clear sense of security and solidity when you are in the saddle. This indicates that the horse is not aware of any threat from what you are doing. There is a spectrum however, and it is possible that you will feel more of a sense of lightness and vulnerability. When you feel this sense of lightness in their back - like an emptiness - this is the state *before* the actual fight/flight preparation, the 'assessment state'. If you are sensing the assessment state, remember that the horse will relax as soon as nothing frightens him or her for long enough, so prevention is ideal.

If the horse actually feels explosive, it means they are preparing to go into a fight or flight reaction. Calmly and carefully come back off again. It is essential in a case like this to pinpoint the reason. Whether it is physical, because of a spinal problem most likely, or whether it is because you have come too fast through the familiarisation process. It is better to wait until you have come up with some answers before you try again. Pushing through until a horse explodes lets the horse know that they must explode to get your attention. No horse does this without a reason, and it is rare for a well-prepared, unriden horse to feel like this.

If you are rehabilitating a traumatised horse, it may be a very therapeutic and healing course of action to demonstrate that you *will* back off and listen to how they feel. Perhaps it would be most therapeutic to support their boundary, which would be supporting the explosive energy by acknowledging it, staying centred and calm at the edge of it, yet not pushing through or past it. Whatever state your horse is in can be worked with.

Take your time moving the horse away from the mounting block with the new weight on their back. You may wish to wait at this stage for the next time. There is never any hurry. It helps just to shift them over one step at first, so they can feel your weight move while still standing relatively enclosed at the mounting block. It is that shifting of a foreign weight that a horse finds most disturbing initially. Once they are accustomed to it, you have made the most important progress.

Remember that a tense horse does not always express tension in a visible way, just like a person. When you become skilled at reading energy, you will get a better impression of exactly how your horse is feeling, but never take it for granted that they are accepting the circumstances just because they don't react. Immobility can be a sign of extreme tension.

First Time Sitting In the Saddle:



Lower your weight down carefully, without hesitating too much or feeling precarious. The energy you bring to the situation is highly influential. The main point to be sure of is that you are both ready.

Stay *slightly* tipped forward at first until your horse gets familiar with the feeling of your seat-bones. Coming up into your correctly balanced posture only when you sense that her back is relaxed. Doing this keeps you slightly disengaged from the movement which is less intimidating for her at first.



It is normal for a horse to wish to move off quite early on. Remember that horses feel comforted by having the freedom to move, so allow this. There is nothing to be gained by imposing rules. When she knows she is safe she will be happy to stand still.



Communication between you and the horse is a process, and must be developed gradually. At first focus more on mutual calm and acceptance and the time for more precise demands will present itself naturally.

Quaramba was very relaxed this first ride, and not even concerned by the herd moving away.



5. First Steps Together

When you feel that as a team you have achieved a settled and relaxed horse standing at the mounting block with the rider astride, you are ready to move off round the arena, or whatever area you are working in. Remember to be careful what noises you make when you are in the saddle early on. I remember sneezing and the young horse I was riding nearly lay down with fright. Act as if every noise and gesture you make in the saddle is entirely new for the horse because it is! A horse naturally takes a little more of their weight on their shoulders. It is one of the roles of the balancing rider to help the horse to shift their centre of gravity back. It is not necessary to tip right forward on a young horse, your weight is not lessened by doing that, in fact, from the beginning it is important not to expose the young horse to extra weight in front. It unbalances them and they will feel uncomfortable.

On the other hand, it is a good idea to take a little time to let your weight down fully into the back of your seat, and if it feels right you can keep some weight forward in your hips. Very inexperienced horses need enough time to become familiar with the feel of weight on their back. Soon your seat will be acceptable for the horse through the full range of angles. At the beginning however, you want to be as unobtrusive as possible, without tension.

In the first moments you are best to feel for the comfort zone of your particular horse, and stay within that. If you are tipping forward slightly, gradually stretch your posture more upright, so that you can introduce the balancing effect of your posture to the horse, before it has an unbalancing effect. Ask your helper on the ground how the horse is influencing your posture, and over time you can reform that. Horses will always put you in the place which corresponds with their natural balance, so you must learn what that is, and re-adjust it.

At first your lunging assistant will walk quite close by, this is important to give the young horse enough support and also help the rider to relax. As the partnership gains confidence the assistant can begin to give them more space, gradually letting out the line as it seems appropriate. It is important to feel that there is no rush, the process will unfold in its own rhythm. It is not necessarily always easy, there are sometimes sticking points, but always avoid any kind of battle. It is ideal if every care is taken to avoid conflict because resistance in the horse usually comes from fear. And if they become frightened then they will want to escape the situation.

The main thing to think about when you are sitting on your horse and walking around for the first time, is how you are managing your weight and your legs laterally. Your weight is particularly important, because from the very beginning **it must support the new straightness you have already been developing on the ground.** (See p.54.)

The natural crookedness of a horse will always be their default posture, because they have developed in that way since they were conceived in the womb. The work we do with them introduces another way of moving which will improve their paces and balance under a rider, but it can't efface their natural crookedness.

Supporting straightness with your weight works in the same way as loading a trailer or a cart evenly so it can move in a straight line. The concept is simple, but in practice it is not clear quite how much the horse's innate crookedness will influence a rider without them being aware of it. Most riders will feel more comfortable fitting in with the horse because it is *apparently* more comfortable like that for the horse. I say apparently because riding a horse in a way that compensates and therefore supports their crookedness will *become* uncomfortable for them in time because the extra weight of the rider has to be supported by a structure and a locomotion which is only strong enough to balance itself. Fitting in with the immediate comfort of the horse will therefore not benefit them in the long run.

It is ideal if you can practice understanding how to manage your weight on an experienced horse because when you start with your youngster, you want your weight control to be accomplished enough that you can impose the correct weight distribution in as unobtrusive a way as possible. If you insist on too 'correct' a balance at first, then you might easily cause an unwillingness in the horse to move forward. On the other hand, if you are not managing enough evenness from the start, your horse will be put off balance and that will gradually build up tension.

You will have some idea by this stage of the degree of natural crookedness of your horse, mainly from the difference from one rein to the other. A horse with a very profound crookedness will be markedly concave on one rein and markedly convex on the other, sometimes to the point of having difficulty even going around the circle at first. By the time you are getting on to ride, this weakness needs to have been significantly improved, because although eventually the rider can straighten the horse most effectively when they are actually riding, at first the rider is just another problem for the horse to try to balance and carry as well as taking up a lot of the horse's 'assessment' energy.

6. Changing The Rein

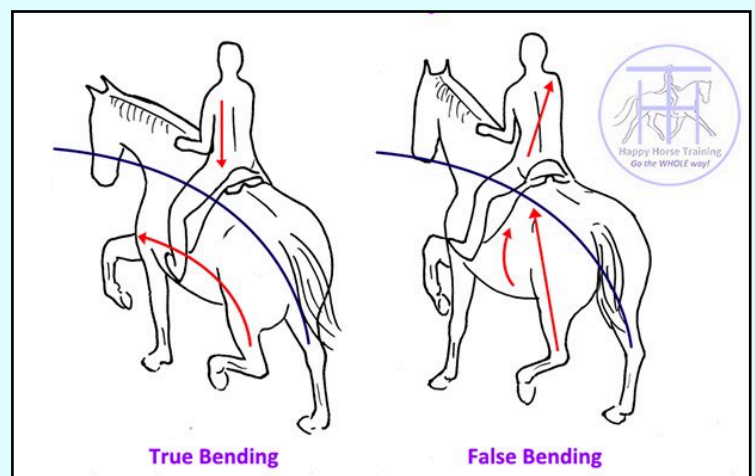
Start by walking around in large shapes with as little bend as you can. This will allow you to introduce straightness gently because you can bring the horse into the bend with your weight more subtly. The most difficult part at first is the change of rein because the weight of the rider has to change going from one rein to the other. Eventually when the horse is strong enough in their postural ring and the rider is matching that strength, going from one rein to the other will not seem to involve a large weight shift from the rider.

Imagine riding a bicycle and being able to hold it gradually more upright going from right to left, so it leans less and less to the right or the left, and is able to turn more. At first a young horse is less able to be upright through their body, so there is considerable lean when you go from one rein to the other. The rider who becomes an extension of the way the horse balances naturally will be pushed over to the outside and make it even harder for the horse to make the turn. The rider who consciously maintains their weight above the horse, channeling it so that it is not lost through misalignment, will help the horse to balance and make the turn more easily. As mentioned above, this is a new way of balancing for the horse, and that in itself can be challenging. It is however the only way the horse-rider combination can balance together.

Imagine you are riding on the right rein, and you are aware of gently keeping your weight down through your right side, staying tall through both sides of your body and straightening out any kink between your right hip-joint and your waist. Think of bringing the horse's ribcage upright by staying over to the inside of the horse's spine. This means that you don't let yourself slide over above the spine from right to left. Think of helping the horse to *turn* their body around to the right rather than leaning over or slanting their body through the turn. When you feel you can channel the movement all the way through, from the hind-leg, through the horse's torso, shoulder and neck in a curve which stays turning to the right, then think of where you want to change the rein.

You will need as much room as possible, because you are going to start gradually changing the direction of your alignment to the left. First of all, think about taking everything into a straight line, maintaining absolute evenness above the horse's spine. Then feel yourself carrying that evenness through into the left rein by staying where you are above the horse's spine, so it is transmitted down into the ribcage and brings the whole torso of the horse around to the left. Feel for any forces which come through from the horse's locomotion which act against your pelvis, pushing it off line. **At this stage remember to impose only what feels necessary to keep the horse feeling balanced enough under you to feel safe.** Observe where your arms fall and where your hands are in relation to the horse's neck and shoulders. Get a feel for the horse's crookedness pattern.

Biomechanics of the Bend
by Gabrielle Dureau



7. How Much To Do

Less is more because the session always has more influence than we can see from our perspective. Even a short session of walking around calmly with a rider will be integrated into the horse's consciousness and stimulate growth, just as anything which goes wrong, such as tiredness creeping in or physical weaknesses starting to be felt will be held in the tissues and retard development. A few circles on each rein in walk is enough at first. There are always optimum times for stopping throughout a session when the horse needs to process the new feeling of the rider's weight (how it stays on the saddle yet has some movement of its own) and when the whole experience becomes too tiring.

Remember that just carrying *any* weight is a completely new task for the horse, so aside from the psychological considerations, physically it requires new strength from the horse's body. Not only do you want to avoid the effects of tiredness in one session, you also want to limit the effects of sore muscles for the next session. The horse's tolerance is one of the most valuable assets you have, and it is difficult to reinstate once compromised. You have to develop the horse's athleticism to the point that work starts to feel good for them, but always respecting their tolerance levels on the way there. Start every session by first inviting the horse to work with you, listening and acting on their responses. Listen if they indicate they are not feeling like it that day. This way you will find their ideal rhythm. More than four days a week at this stage is inappropriate in my experience.



Marie had been ridden before, but felt very explosive for her previous owner, so we went right back to the very beginning. She was one of the horses who encouraged me to begin riding bit-less. The bit for her was a post traumatic stress trigger, and although working with it in these different circumstances was healing, we made the mutual decision to continue without it.



Be aware of your **longitudinal balance** when you are starting out on your first steps.

Depending on how your horse feels in themselves, begin sitting a little forward, and gradually ease yourself more upright until you are able to stretch into the wave of the horse's movement. The black arrow shows how I am not yet engaging with the movement which might worry Marie at this stage.



There is a similar optimum to find concerning your **lateral balance**. Although your horse is not yet ready to be straightened, you must make sure that your weight does not contribute to a loss of balance which will create anxiety. Here I am shifted to the outside slightly by Marie's natural crookedness, (black arrow) but I am still maintaining enough weight to the inside to balance us enough overall (green arrow).

Here, later on in our training, we are working much more independently, and

I am able to seek out the postural connection with Marie's stride without worrying her. With a patiently prepared young horse this stage can happen very quickly, even after a circle or two in the first ride. With Marie I was particularly careful because of her previous riding trauma and it took us several weeks.



We are starting to work towards actual engagement this photograph, and Marie is beginning to stretch into the contact. You can see how her walk is becoming straighter as her body begins to align.

Listening to and following her perception of her own body was essential as she was healing herself physiologically all the way along.



A Question of Balance

The Reality of Control

It is important to consider the subject of control when working with horses. Although people tend to want to exploit what horses have to give us, at the same time they want to feel safe. The general lack of compromise in this has led to much equine suffering and still does. All things we do in life are a reflection of our inner awareness, and needing to feel in control of a horse because that makes us feel safe, is no exception. This comes from a lack of acceptance of the present moment. A need to defend ourselves against what has not yet happened. Some of us hold on so tightly in a figurative sense, that we have no idea that we are even holding on. This manifests directly in the way we ride. At some point in our lives we may come to terms with the fact that we have no control over anything except our own mind. Control over another being is an illusion and the only thing we need to be able to do is let go of our illusions.

When we can take responsibility for our intentions, and recognise when we are reacting from fear, we can align with that space where events unfold in harmony. Riding a horse is such a beautiful matrix for reflecting our inner state. When you come from the mind-set that tells you you have to hold on to what you need, you have to defend yourself, you have to worry about your safety and keep things under control, then you will hold on to the horse's mouth, you will grip in the saddle you will tip forward and protect your vulnerable organs. That mind-set will attract all of the things you fear, because you are resonating with fear. You will create something to defend yourself from and see things that need to be controlled.

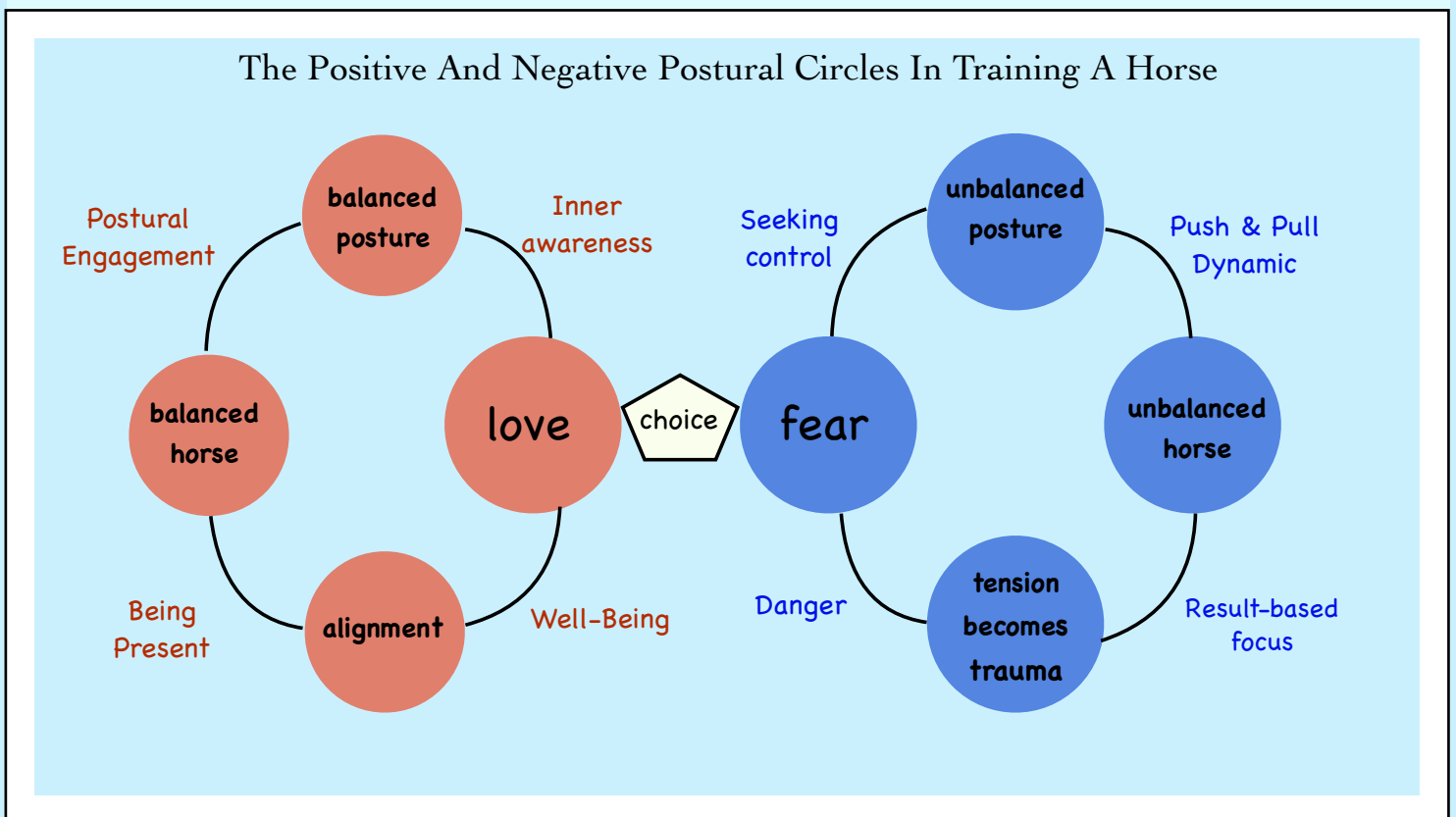
Everything in the outside world will mirror your energetic vibration.

If you are able to embrace fear and accept each moment as it happens, stay aware of your body, be grounded in it and let your thoughts begin to clear when you are riding, then you will be able to relax back into your seat, ride tall and engage with each stride at the same time as allowing the horse's movement to express itself fully. You will seek to *connect* with the horse rather than control them, and the reins will only be a means of sensing the horse's mouth and how it relates to the engagement of the whole.

In this vibration you are sending out the energy of harmony and confidence which will relax the horse and allow them to flourish and express themselves. One of the most delightful features of riding is that you can practice raising your energetic vibration in a such a practical way. It is a meditation that is rich in sensation, so as long as you remember to focus on your body and your horse's body, intellectual thoughts can be left behind quite naturally. This invaluable practice will then influence the rest of your life.

Sometimes our fears do not express themselves in a way that seems fearful. For example, fear is not being the best performer, not coming up to expectations and not succeeding in life. Such fear can reflect itself in forceful, ambitious riding. Control is still the primary issue, yet this time it is assumed and seized. There is not much difference between a nervous rider and a forceful rider in terms of their aiding system, both are equally illogical. The difference could be said to be the degree of effectiveness. A forceful rider will make the horse perform in ways that seem more productive, and they will seem to be in control, whereas a nervous rider will seem to be ineffective and out of control. Control, however, is still the focus. The direction is the same: moving away from partnership and cooperation and towards separation and divisiveness.

When the goal is to *communicate* with the horse, and experience what comes from that, then there is an opportunity to discover true alignment. Alignment is the love-based paradigm of control. It is not control of the situation, or of another being, or even oneself, it is the equilibrium that arises out of cooperation. Love-based control comes from balance. A balanced partnership can move, turn and stop with ease, and there is no need for excessive force. Balance requires the development of straightness, both in the horse and the rider. Achieving balance is an ongoing process where the means is not different from the end. In each moment with your horse you can choose to react to fear and or respond to love.



If you choose to follow the positive training circle with a horse, the biomechanical matrix of postural engagement is the sure way to put it into practice. However loving your intentions, riding a horse is not natural, or therapeutic in itself.

The Push & Pull Dynamic

The horse's natural way of balancing favours bringing more weight into the front of their body. They use their powerful hind-quarters to thrust themselves forward and prop off their front legs, bracing with their shoulders to manoeuvre and stop. When they go around a corner they negotiate the turn by jack-knifing their ribcage and shoulders, so that their body is bending away from the direction they are going in. Their whole body leans across with their legs moving on different tracks.



A horse's natural crookedness doesn't change depending on the direction they are going, so it will influence the way they carry themselves around a corner. The basic 'jack-knifed' posture is always there, so there isn't a 'good' rein and a 'bad' rein when training for straightness, there are just different issues on either rein. Perhaps horses move like this because it is the most efficient use of their energy, taking into account their innate crookedness and maybe it allows them to keep most of their awareness on their surrounding while running, as their neck is effectively liberated while their torso balances on the bends. Whatever the reason, their balance issues only arise when a human being gets on their back, adding their not insignificant weight to the overall balance, and knocking everything off. Some horses are naturally straighter than others, or their conformation balances them more 'uphill', and these horses will be able to absorb the unbalancing effect of the rider more easily. This does not mean that the issue is not there, only that it is less apparent, and the symptoms will be less severe. The consequence of this loss of balance introduces tension into the horse's body-mind. This can have several consequences:

- Associations forming in the horse's mind that a rider is a threat.
- Stimulation of the fight/flight central nervous system reaction.
- Negative associations from the rider *preventing the flight reaction*, which in itself is always a profoundly frightening experience for a horse, added to physical consequences from using a bit or noseband to control flight.
- Negative associations from *preventing the assessment reaction*. Sometimes a youngster will slow down or stop when they feel out of balance. Insistence that they move on again immediately, insensitively or forcefully will cause discomfort and more layers of tension.
- Negative associations from entering the dissociative state and perpetuating frightening experiences within that state. This is common in certain natural horsemanship practices using flooding techniques to start young horses.

These consequences set up the 'push and pull dynamic'. The rider is forcing the horse to go forward, and then forcing them to slow down, and the horse is trapped in between two places of pain and/or discomfort which is perpetuated every stride. For a prey animal it is the torture of a never-ending capture. It is unfortunate that many horses are only *coping* with being ridden.

Postural Engagement

Postural engagement is the matrix through which it is possible to train a horse without tension. It brings the horse and rider together instead of pushing them apart. It is not a myth. It really does exist. The postural ring is thought to be how dolphins can jump so incredibly fast through the sea. On the physical level it is a way of connecting muscles, ligaments and bones, so that they are drawn into a mechanism which changes the quality of the horse's movement completely. And the magic is that **the postural engagement of the horse is only initiated, completed and executed through a similar postural ring in the rider.** You can feel that when you link up with the horse and you engage yourself, in a similar way to gymnasts and surfers or those who practice martial arts, you create an effect through the horse's body which brings them into the same dynamic. The rider is the axle and the guide and the horse is the engine and the wheels. We become a powerful and coordinated machine. And that is only the physical part of it! there is also the fusion of energetic boundaries and the meeting of consciousness which make the development of this partnership so elevated.

The key to the positive postural cycle is finding balance between two beings. Separately the horse and rider are able to balance in their own ways. Coming together, they have to come to a mutual agreement, and the only way for it to be beneficial for both parties is for them to bring themselves into straightness. Otherwise it will be a union of crookedness which will find a compromise through compensation, yet where the horse ends up making most of the sacrifices.

When the rider is strong enough to maintain straightness in their physical structure, and transmit that to the horse by way of postural leverage, they will then be able to bring the horse into balance. It is this capacity to bring the horse into balance that is so important. It is this which unites the horse with the rider. The horse can feel the security of being in balance with a rider as a result of the engagement, and that is the compensation for the rider being there and altering the horse's balance in the first place. What makes it more than just compensation is the harmony that engagement brings into the horse's movement, the therapeutic influence of alignment and power. It is a transformed state of being, from the energetic dimension right into the physical. In fact I would say that ultimately the horse and rider become a conduit for something much greater: the energy of the universe.

When you are able to straighten your own body in association with the horse, you act like a tuning fork which sends out the vibrational alignment of straightness into the horse's movement.



Totti when she was a baby. She is low in front and her hip joints were quite inflexible, look at how her right hind-leg is moving as much sideways as forward. Her hind-quarters are high and not able to sit yet. This was her perfect dynamic for this time in her training. She was engaging beautifully. Gently and patiently encouraging her to maintain this for very short periods of time was all that was necessary to progress.



A few years later she has developed quite a different physiology. Her hind-legs have become much more flexible, and her hind-quarters are sitting more and able to generate enough power and balance to lift her shoulders. The shoulders themselves have greater scope and the overall elevation in her stride is greater. Again this is the perfect level of engagement for her at this time. There is no pushing or demanding for more than she willingly gives.

Integrating the Rider on the Lunge

Straightness in the Rider

It is ideal to continue for a while with the rider on the young horse still attached to the lunge line, until the first stages of the positive postural circle are established. In the preparation before mounting, the young horse was becoming proficient at balancing themselves in the new way, and the arrival of a rider can seem to disturb that progress. Of course it does not genuinely influence the progress, the previous training is all still there, but it does become obscured at first by all the new sensations and must be given space to re-emerge.

When a rider first gets onto a young horse, the horse will be under some stress because of the new experience, and might revert back to more instinctive tendencies in the way they balance and move. Sufficient time to habituate without further demands is very important, and keeping everything similar will allow the ripples to settle, and the straightness training can be recuperated and continued without any negative consequences.

The pathways in the horse's central nervous system are already formed from previous work on the lunge, and this part of the training can be a great opportunity to deepen them much further because you have the help of the lunging framework in place. You have already been teaching the young horse to bend their body around the circle, by way of the consistent contact in the lunge line and from the supportive forward aiding from the lunge whip. Now you can also use your weight aids in the saddle to encourage that bend. The rider's influence is central of course, the only caution is to remain aware of the intensity of that influence at first, and moderate it if need be.

What to focus on at this stage:

Keeping *your own* postural alignment correct. Have photos and videos taken if possible so that you can to study your posture visually. Relating what you see to what you feel is one of the most important ways of calibrating your proprioception. (See p49-52.) Consider your horse's straightening program as the result of your own straightening program. **Your own straightness is your principle mechanism for straightening your horse.** The two main reasons that straightness is not commonly accomplished in the horse and rider partnership are:

1. **Most riders are not intrinsically straight enough at the beginning.** Most people have crookedness throughout their body which becomes most visible in the pelvis and the spine. This crookedness prevents them from sitting evenly side to side and front to back on a horse. It will restrict the movement of the hip joints, which is most visible in the rising trot, so that the rider cannot move as an effective energy recycling unit.

The energy comes from the horse and is recycled through the rider back to the horse. The rider becomes a transformer, taking energy which is turbulent in nature, and aligning it through their own straightness and balance so that it is channeled back into the horse in a stream-lined, controlled manner. The cycle will then continue in this way and the movement becomes more and more pure and balanced and whole. Less and less energy is lost each stride.

2. **The physical connection between horse and rider is not being maintained from one stride to the next.** First the rider must identify where they are losing straightness each stride, then they have to develop the strength to avoid doing so. The dynamic posture is a whole different level from a static posture. You have to find straightness in connection with the horse's movement, not just being straight on top of their back. In practice it is a bit of both, you are bringing your straightness to the horse, so you have to be aware of how you are carrying yourself, and then how you are connecting that with the horse's movement. It is like making a doorway (the rider's straightness) and then guiding the horse through, and in going through the doorway the horse becomes straight themselves. Sometimes the connection (going through) will take more of a rider's attention, and other times the building of the doorway (the straightness) does.

Straightening yourself is the task of a lifetime. It is something you keep working on as long as you are riding. Improving it will only happen if you identify the crookedness and correct it persistently. To experience even a few strides of that 'plugged in' feeling that can only come from the level of physical alignment which then straightens out the horse, is magical.



Resources for straightening yourself:

- **Energy Therapy and Bodywork** are essential partners in the straightening journey. Follow your intuition and find the right therapy and/or postural training for you: Alexander Technique, Massage Therapy, Craniosacral Therapy, Osteopathy, Pilates, Bowen Therapy, Chiropractic, Acupuncture, Acupressure, Kinesiology, etc. There are hundreds of ways to get to know your body. You need to understand your own crookedness pattern and get into the unwinding process, this will also improve your level of body awareness. You can also work with your ego and how it influences your riding. In a way this is the most important, because honesty and self acceptance are at the heart of good riding.
- **Videos and photographs** are perfect for convincing you about your own posture and helping you to align what you see with what you feel. The majority of riders' zero point is crooked, so they can't feel at first when they are straight and they don't believe when they are crooked.
- **Trusted instructors** will be able to observe your whole riding dynamic and identify the sources of any mis-alignments. For example if you hang a little on your left rein, that might be coming from a lack of balance in your left leg because you are not keeping it in a supporting position under your body. This may source from an unevenness in your pelvis. So correcting the hand position will not last longer than a few strides, because the underlying cause has not changed.
- **Listening to your horse.** When you become sophisticated enough you will be able to hear what your horse can tell you about your own straightness. It is the most direct and genuine instruction. Both the rider and the horse have an individual pattern of how they have developed. These patterns might be more or less severe, and in one directional orientation or another. Both patterns will come together to form a unique dynamic. You can analyse (in sensation, not in theory) where the horse is placing you, i.e. how their crookedness affects you, as well as how you are reacting to it (how your crookedness influences the horse). Only when you understand the horse's pattern as well as your own, can you bring both into alignment as effectively as possible. The vast range of possibilities is what makes riding horses so challenging. Most sports or arts have a partner that remains relatively consistent, for example a musical instrument or sports equipment, but a horse is a living being with the capacity to change, perhaps radically, over time. The beauty is that straightness and balance are absolute qualities, and when you achieve even an approximation, the connection which results is undeniable.

Learning Your Zero

Think about your weight, and take time to sense how your horse is pushing you around in the saddle (with eyes closed is best). There is displacement both laterally and longitudinally (See p.53):

- **Train yourself to recognise the feeling of successfully resisting the sideways thrust.** There is a school of thought which advises the rider to *follow* this movement that originates from the horse's locomotion. To do so will, however, put you into the place where you are compensating for the horse's natural crookedness rather than re-establishing the new balance which you started in your training on the ground while lunging, and which can now be used to accommodate the rider without negative consequences. It can take some time for it to feel right not to compensate for the crookedness, because when you follow that thrust, you are going where the horse's immediate physical comfort zone wants you to be. But that is the 'easy option' and like any easy option there is payback later on. Once you have become aware of how persistently maintaining your weight to the inside actually straightens and balances the horse, it will feel very good, and the only reasonable way to ride. Likewise, when the horse becomes stronger in moving in straightness and gradually realises that you are continuously keeping them in balance and accommodating your extra weight, then they will appreciate it, and also accept you as a suitable leader.
- **Become aware of being tipped forward from the thrust of the movement.** It is most obvious from halt and going into halt, when the rider is thrown forward due to inertia of the motion. You have to develop your postural strength to match the horse's stopping power, and stay in place, otherwise you will overload the horse's shoulders and cause them to lose balance. If you do move, then you will lose the engagement which can only be created through consistent connection between your balanced posture and the horse. Losing the connection is similar to taking your foot off the pedal of a bicycle and freewheeling. Any kind of loss of posture will result in a disconnection with the horse and then your aids become redundant because they are no longer being channeled into the connection. When you have successfully trained yourself to stay upright throughout all transitions, the horse will trust you to stay in balance and their confidence in you will greatly increase. This has a very positive influence on their willingness to go forward.



Honey was a middle aged mare at this point and she had many previous training experiences. We were working on her straightness as she had some deeply ingrained crookedness pathways and an associated tension when she was being worked with. We started out walking together and focusing on gentle channeling exercises to establish moving (straighter) in better balance as a resource.



At first moving out on to the lunge on her right rein was very difficult for her. She had physical patterns in her pelvis and spine which made her defensive and resistant. It was essential to acknowledge the difficulties and support them rather than push through. Using the lunge whip as a tool to help her discover how she can move straight forward, as well as connecting with her physically in a way that is unthreatening and supporting. To do this successfully there must be no fear of the whip in the horse's mind. I am touching her side gently to help her awaken a new way of moving in her nervous system. This is not the same as using the whip as a threat.



The new way of carrying herself has allowed her to discover the stretch through her body which happens when a horse begins to align their pelvis and torso. She was able to stretch right down and relax. This is a major re-patterning of her central nervous system and her musculoskeletal system, and she had to drop into walk to process it. To insist that she stayed in trot would have re-initiated her old crookedness defence mechanisms.



As the equipment is a form of communication which helps to initiate the engagement and transmit therapeutic aids and not a means of control, it is beneficial to the partnership to consolidate this by spending time together without equipment. Practice being flexible, you can remove it at any point during the session. This gives you an opportunity to evaluate how the horse is processing the work, and whether there is any resistance or tension building.



When Honey was able to move in relative straightness without a rider she was ready to begin some ridden work. Her crookedness is quite visible here. Look at how the saddle seems to be shifted over to the outside. It is up to me to use my postural strength to stay in place during her stride, keeping my weight down my inside (right side) and in doing so influence Honey to align her body. She does this by lifting herself more upright, bringing her shoulders on to a track further to the inside (right), which aligns her inside front footfall with the inside hind footfall. Straightening is always a process of gradual improvement.



After the ride Honey is very relaxed and her facial expression is of contentment. Even though parts of the work might be challenging, **the overall direction must be therapeutic for yourself and for the horse.** Be willing to make sure this is how it feels and make any changes necessary to shift your course in that direction. Well-being must be the guiding light.

Becoming aware of your own balance is the essence of your role as a rider. Although a horse can balance themselves perfectly well, they don't naturally do it in a way which 'enhances' their own paces, unless they are excited. Then they will use their postural muscles and elevate their movement. If they can come to associate a rider with feeling balanced, and therefore powerful and elegant because they are moving straight by using their postural muscles, this gift we are giving them not only identifies us as their security and their trusted leader, but also as someone who can make them feel physically good.

Don't underestimate what this means to a horse - movement is profoundly important to them and this is one of our greatest ways of connecting with them. It is a deeply healing connection. The opposite scenario, becoming a burden for the horse through limiting and restricting their natural movement by hanging on to them for balance, and then forcing them to stop and go without even realising the underlying lack of balance, will distance you from your horse and may lower you in their estimation to the status of threat and predator.

All riders have some sense of what they want from a horse, and what they perceive the horse is giving them, but it is not necessarily an educated perception. We might think that we know what we want, and what we are asking. But few riders realise what they are already asking simply by sitting there. In fact 'asking' is not even accurate. When a trailer carries a load, it must adjust to that load, and whatever balance it is in. It is the same with the horse and rider, the horse must adjust to our weight, and whatever it might present to them simply by being as it is. What we then 'ask' subconsciously by moving our body, further to our basic weight dynamic, adds another dimension before we even think about what we ask for *consciously*. As says the proverb that has been attributed to Aristotle '*The more you know, the more you know you don't know*'. The key is to be as open as possible to becoming self-aware, and not make assumptions about how our aiding, both voluntary and involuntary, is experienced by the horse. Practicing a state of mindfulness will allow the information you need in each moment to be available.



Rider Balance Issues in the Lateral Plane

- All horses are born with a crookedness through their body. Most horses seem to be naturally bent to the right, but this seems to vary depending on their breed and country. An uneducated rider will be 'placed' (by the horse) as a result of that bend, and the way it tilts the horse's back. It is easy to see if you watch a video of yourself whether one of your feet is always carried lower on one side than the other. Even riders competing at the highest level fall into the crookedness trap, it cannot be taken lightly.
- In addition to the crookedness trap, when a horse is moving around a bend, most riders will be pushed to the outside of the circle as a result of shear forces caused by the way a horse naturally moves around a circle. The natural crookedness of the horse pushes the rider's weight out and then the inequality of the rider's weight will perpetuate that crookedness. When a horse is moving crookedly with the weight of a rider on top, they become kinked like a hose-pipe and their ability to go forward is compromised. The horse might then either rush forward out of balance, or slow down and drop out of the movement, and the rider becomes frustrated because the horse seems not to listen to their aids. In fact the horse *is* listening to the subconscious weight aids and responding in the only way they can.

Consequences:

When the horse is crooked because the rider's weight fits in with their natural crookedness, a rider will often use the outside rein to stabilise their misplaced weight, and steer the horse deeper into their natural crookedness to control their direction. Although this might allow the rider to take the horse approximately where they want in the arena, it is not a solution to the lack of control brought about by a crooked horse. This is probably the most fundamental mistake that can be made when riding a horse. It is well worth making the effort to understand it, and identify it in your riding. Imagine you are riding around the track of an arena on the right rein, and your horse starts to fall in to the middle of the school, what would you do to keep them on the track?

Option 1: Turn your torso slightly to the left, and take your left (outside) hand sideways towards the wall turning the horse out of the right bend, and ask the horse to go forward and regain the track. In doing so your weight will tend to come across the saddle to the outside and you will no longer be balancing above the horse, yet you can still control the direction of their legs by influencing their neck and shoulders, although you will lose the correct bend and the straightness.

Option 2: Bring or maintain your weight down the inside of the horse's body, as if you had a pillar down the inside. Use that postural pillar, as well as your inside leg, to encourage the right side of the horse's body to yield towards the left, yet maintaining the bend to the right. Your hands stay positioned to the right and the horse comes round to the right, but steps their body left and reaches the outside of the arena again.

Option 1 makes the horse more crooked and less balanced and **Option 2** further straightens and balances the horse. The *result* (staying to the outside of the arena) may be achieved more quickly with **Option 1** because horses take longer to develop their postural strength enough to maintain the bend as well as stepping straight, but the true result in any riding is always straightness and therefore balance. Even if it takes you two years to walk around the arena because you straightened the horse more, it is a far more meaningful achievement than being able to go wherever you want crookedly.

Rider Balance Issues in the Longitudinal Plane

- The rider may tip forward and their weight comes on to the horse's shoulders making the horse feel unbalanced, so they will either stop or rush forward and the rider may feel annoyed that the horse is not listening.
- The rider may allow their pelvis to untuck, causing their seat-bones to block the horse's back and stop the movement coming through the horse's body from their own pelvis, which they then untuck. This drops their back and hollows their top-line. The rider is upset that the horse is not consistent in their head-carriage.

When the root causes remain unchanged, the following consequences often come about:

- After the rider has tipped forward and caused the horse to stop, they will push or kick with the legs to drive the horse forward again, often without correcting the tipping posture, or tipping again when the horse moves off again, and the horse becomes more and more disengaged. The rider is not uniting the horse with their balanced postural leverage, but simply bouncing the horse around like a toboggan jumping from one side of the track to the other.
- If the horse rushes rather than stops when they feel unbalanced by extra weight on their shoulders, the rider will often pull on the reins to stop them, without correcting the weight imbalance, which might stop the horse, but also causes them to associate the bit with pain and fear because they couldn't run and they couldn't balance.

- When a rider's posture causes a horse to move in a hollow way, often a rider will fiddle with their hands to try to bring the horse's head 'in' but without correcting what was making the horse go hollow in the first place. This can cause a horse to resort to protecting themselves by over rounding their neck and disengaging further from their postural ring, i.e. dropping their back and pushing their hind-legs further out behind. Their forwardness also diminishes. This is referred to as the horse going 'behind the bit' yet it is rider initiated.

It is not important to understand these examples at this point if they aren't clear already, only to realise that what we feel as riders is not necessarily true. We all start from a different place in terms of our own straightness, body awareness, emotional stability and stage of education. Riding in an educated way doesn't happen naturally, it is not natural, and even natural talent is not actual training, only being more capable of undertaking the training.

It is helpful to think about the following questions when you ride:

- 1. What are you asking the horse and why?**
- 2. What are you already asking without realising it?**
- 3. Where is the horse putting you without you realising it?**
- 4. Why is the horse responding as they do, if it is not what you were asking?**

Whenever you are around horses, and above all on top of them, you must develop a continuous bodymind awareness. This includes everything about yourself, e.g. weight, spacial awareness, use of your body for aiding, emotional state, and on top of that all the information coming back to you from the horse. How do you feel *they* are moving, balancing and feeling as a whole?

There is so much information that you must be constantly prioritising. This means shifting your awareness from the specific to the whole and back again. You will develop what some people call a 'felt sense' for each part of your body when it is correct, and for the whole. It is like a diamond made up of multitudes of facets, and each time you ride you feel different facets, but they always add together to make the whole. If you take on board this process and fill your mind with awarenesses and corrections - as opposed to 'white noise' or thoughts about other things - then over time the 'voice' which tells you how you are and how you need to be becomes less immediate and more part of who you are. This is because you are patterning the information within your central nervous system, you are absorbing it inside, and that is when you will seem to be able to liberate your intuition more.

It can be thought of as a biomechanical framework that must be developed first, and then your source wisdom, your intuition, can flow into the framework to illuminate each unique moment of the partnership. It is a beautiful journey in which you are constantly refining and sophisticating your technique and liberating your intuition.

Setting The Stage

There is a point in the process of training a horse where the intention must evolve from habituating the horse to having a rider (the familiarisation process) to actually *soliciting responses* from the horse. When you are successful in attuning your intention to the well-being of the horse this progression is a natural development. Over time the horse becomes familiar with your presence and the awareness they were using to integrate the new sensations from your presence gradually becomes liberated for listening to your aids. **There should be no attempt to enforce the sensitivity of your horse.** This is one of the more radical differences between traditional horse training and the therapeutic approach. Most trainers will talk about increasing the pressure of aiding *until* the horse responds. This approach is making a lot of assumptions:

- 1. That the aiding is appropriate in that the aids being given are actually asking what the rider thinks they are asking.**
- 2. That the horse is able to respond in the way expected.**
- 3. That the balance of rider and horse allows the expected response.**

If any of these is falling short, for example if the rider isn't asking what they think they are, or the horse is too weak to respond or has a physical problem and can't respond, or the rider is putting the horse off balance and making it difficult for the horse to respond, then continuing to increase the pressure from your aids until they cause discomfort and even pain is only going to erode the trust bond between you. Think of the whole process as feeding something delicate through a machine, if it stops feeding through for any reason you need to look for the reason, not just keep trying to stuff it in.

Just as too many young horses are introduced to a rider too soon, too many are exposed to a rider's demands too soon. It is like doing up the buttons of your shirt wrong, once one is wrong the mistake carries on down the line, because what is at fault doesn't change: the intention behind the actions. Many people are too impatient and get out of synchrony with their horse's rhythm because they focus on what they ultimately want from the horse, and they think that if they don't have it now, they will never have it. It is possible to be satisfied at each stage of the training, as long as you accept and understand what is actually required, and are able to perceive its existence.

Again, the majority of misunderstandings and issues between horse and rider will be resolved when the underlying focus becomes improving the way the horse feels in each moment. This is the ultimate guide, it is a blueprint for every situation. All that is required is to heighten your sensitivity so that you can feel what is required and educate yourself to be able to provide it.

The Right Training Rhythm

With the above in mind, at this stage the actual practicality is very simple. It will consist of the same work you were doing on the lunge without the rider. But remember that you can't just plunge in and achieve the point you were at without a rider in one day. A rider being present makes the scenario completely different for the horse. Everything has changed and for them it is equivalent to being back at the very beginning again on the lunge.

The key to progress is to be in alignment with the horse's acceptance of the situation. This will integrate everything you do, so that you avoid radical changes in routine, or big steps up in your demands. For example you can start by acclimatising the horse to the mounting block for a little while at the end of lunging sessions. When the horse is ready the next step would be that the rider mounts and sits quietly for a few minutes. The next stage would be to walk a few steps, building up to the horse carrying a rider a short distance on both reins around the arena. At this point the handler on the ground is still the leader and the rider is a passenger. Be aware that the horse may find one rein more challenging to balance on than the other, always be patient and calm and ready to defuse any tension which arises in the horse.

Gradually, as the horse becomes more confident with the feeling of the weight and the look of the rider's leg and body in their peripheral vision, the handler can start introducing some transitions to halt. At this point the handler might create a bit more distance between themselves and the horse. Once this little bit of distance is familiar and working well, you might introduce the transitions to halt again, or the horse might be ready to go into trot. No one can tell you in a book exactly the right rhythm of progression for your horse, however the rhythm is rarely so different from one horse to another to remark upon, because it should be gradual whatever the horse's ability. The training rhythm is also dictated by your confidence and ability as a rider. It is more appropriate to modify your pace in alignment with your own comfort zone than it is to push. Horses are influenced most negatively by tension, so anxiety in yourself is not productive. Stick to what feels safe to you and your partnership will continue to knit itself together and grow as it needs to.



Feeling the rhythm is what makes a good horse trainer, and you will be doing this every time you work with that horse for the rest of your time with them. Every time you work with that horse you have to sense how the horse is feeling that day, in each moment in fact. Is it a day to support a shift? Is it a day to back off? Are you going too fast in general? or are you not quite achieving enough to keep the training developing? **The only way you can answer those questions is to do this work primarily for the good of the horse**, and with that agenda you can learn from your experience, mistakes and all, and sophisticate your 'trainer's mind'. Other agendas, such as competition schedules, clinics with instructors, hacking out alone or with friends, proving to yourself you are a good trainer/rider or making the cost of a horse worthwhile will impose their own values and obscure the true nature of your partnership.

If you can begin with the resolution to fit around your horse's needs, then you will be able to see the give and take emerging. When you have given the horse your best intention, the horse will give you their body to mould and shape. You give them your belief and they will give you their power. Your partnership will form itself like a golden plait, made of the best of both of you. It is always up to us to make the first step, because we have invited horses into our lives. Appreciating this will help us to be invited into their lives.

Some tips on recognising the right training rhythm:

Do not look at external results to judge the amount of training suitable for a session, instead **feel** for the moment of optimum performance. For example, if you are beginning to do some transitions up to trot, although your loose plan might be to achieve one on each rein, do not allow this to be your indicator of success. Go instead by the work itself. There is always a time in a session where a horse will achieve their best work, it is the moment when their joints have reached their optimum suppleness after they were loosened by the work and stretched a little, but before they become tired and then sore. If it happens that you sense that you are having the optimum work before you have changed the rein, then do not feel bound by procedure to go on to the other rein. You can do that the next time. It is far more beneficial for the horse to capture the optimum work because this is the mind and body state which will be integrated and programmed into the horse's central nervous system. It will set the horse up for the next session in the perfect orientation energetically. Of course it is a process in itself to learn to recognise the optimum for that horse on that day. You can't start to label it and fix it down. For some horses, depending on their age and their stage of training, it might happen when they have accepted your presence on their back, later on it might be when they are close to engaging and for others it might be somewhere within the engaged work.

When training a horse in engagement, the rider always rides in engagement themselves, and the horse will produce the corresponding level of which they are capable. So the more the horse engages themselves, the more deeply the rider can engage themselves i.e the rider's engagement will be more or less connected, depending on the horse's ability to respond. When riding a very young horse, you have to think about using your own engagement mainly to keep yourself in balance, but be careful with how insistent it becomes for the horse. Imagine that you are a little cog which is part of a big mechanism, you initiate the dynamic. And to shape the right dynamic, you have to be the right shape in yourself. The machine may not be able to engage with you fully at the beginning, because it is still in the developmental stages, and you cannot insist or use active force or you might damage the machine. *You* must remain in the right shape however, otherwise the machine will never be able to develop itself in the right way.

It is very difficult to tell how much is too much for a young horse. They may not know themselves. Over time a horse will gauge the work, depending on how they feel the next day and how particular work affects them, mind and body, and they will become surer of the optimum time themselves and often they will help you to decide. They might do this by indicating they would prefer to stop. In my experience horses rarely take advantage of this kind of exchange, by this time they usually enjoy their work and they choose to stop because they have reached their limit.

At the very beginning a young horse is innocent of the therapeutic influence of the work, so you have a greater responsibility to make sure it is positive. On the whole it does less damage to do less, even if you don't quite hit the optimum. Sometimes there is also a very narrow optimum, so one minute you are in the getting-things-together phase, and just reaching the getting-going phase, and the next you are in the tiredness phase. Be aware that you may be overdoing the work if the horse starts to become wary or defensive in the field rather than approaching you, and shows increasing reluctance and grumpiness about going to the arena. Be aware of a loss of personality in the horse and distancing from connection with yourself; as well as lack of motivation and good feeling about the relationship in yourself. Remember that these signs might appear for other reasons, such as tack not fitting well and a physical problem coming to the surface as a result of the work. *Listen* to the horse, tack problems are usually clear from direct reaction to the sight or feel of it. Think of troubleshooting as an opportunity to improve your partnership. Welcome it, and take time to let the truth come through. Acknowledge any fears you have about things going wrong.



Sometimes physical issues arising can be distinguished from overdoing things by analysing the stage of the work. Have you just begun to achieve engagement? It is like turning the pedals of a bike for the first time, you are stretching the entire mechanism into action and often spinal restrictions come up at this stage which were not evident before. If you are able to be truly honest with yourself, you will know the answer. *You will know* if you have been pushing things and you have overdone it. You might feel reluctant to admit it, and feel a bit guilty and want to blame the horse. If it is truly not your decision-making at fault, you will know that too. Either way the solution might be the same, back off, cut the sessions down. Maybe give the horse a holiday. Many things heal with time and space, preferably with the inclusion of some form of body therapy, and you can start again on a better note. One of the best ways to learn is by overstepping the limit, like letting your car run out of fuel, then you will know the limit for sure. It isn't something I would advise doing on purpose though, because it is a breach of trust. If it happens then you learn and move on, trust your horse to let it go and let it go yourself.

Some physical signs of overdoing training are:

- **During the work if the horse starts to lean on the bit this is a classic sign of a sore neck, and with a young horse means you have gone on far too long.**
- **Increasing agitation/tension, and increasing spookiness/nappiness.**
- **Reluctance to keep going and obvious lack of energy.**

These are situations you seek to avoid or remedy straight away if they occur. In this way, every day, you build up the horse's ability to carry the rider at the same time as listening to the handler on the ground. The rider has to use their own sensitivity to feel how quickly to introduce the aids. A gentle introduction of the aids from early on is a good idea, **but without expectation of a response** independent from the aiding of the handler on the ground. In this way the horse can both feel and trust the aids, and integrate their meaning. Aids are not a conditioning where something a horse learns by rote, i.e. that this aid means that response. Aiding at its best is a spontaneous physical response with a therapeutic benefit. The horse moves because they sense pressure, like being drawn into someones arms for a cuddle, and they feel more balanced in the new position. The reason young horses might not respond in this way straight away is that they are taking in so many sensations at first, they have to prioritise their awareness, and what they are focusing on may be elsewhere. Think of it as making a path through a tangled forest: the stronger the horse becomes in their posture and ability to move in balance, the more easily they can listen to your aids. This is when the path becomes clearer. The more you connect and interact with their body, the more sensitive it becomes to your aids, and then the path forms itself.



First moments without our training wheels! Here I am giving Marie all the time she needs to acclimatise and respond to my aiding alone. The slower we go, the better we can communicate and there will be no tensions stored up.

Now we are moving forward nicely, and I am using my weight to balance us, but not overwhelming her with positioning aids as well.



Now Marie is becoming comfortable in the situation. Her concentration span is longer and she is developing sensitivity to my leg and weight aids as well as the physical ability to respond into straightness and balance.

Forwardness with Principles

Every moment you are connecting with your horse, you are within the respiration of the partnership. There are in-breaths and out-breaths and the key is in the balance. The majority of horses are forced to respond every moment of the session. This expectation is so deeply rooted in the human mind that no space is left at all for the horse's side of the boundary. We may make some effort to listen to the horse's response to see if we judge it suitable relative to our aid, but to think about how the horse is feeling in themselves that day, what they might feel about us or what they might show us...in the vast majority of cases this possibility doesn't come into the rider's mind.

It only came into my consciousness as a rider because the horses I wanted to work with refused to be forced and I had no other choice! Riding horses rejected because of their refusal to comply can be very helpful in overcoming the ego. It does make things more complicated at first, because you have to start looking at two sides, and be prepared to let go of your immediate desires and go with what you don't know. Ultimately discovering the rhythm that lies beneath your desires as a separate person and finding your part in the whole machine, allows you to become aware of the true power of giving and receiving.

Much has been written about the aids and the way a horse should respond to them, but few people question *why* should the horse respond at all. Looking for the answer to this question brought me close to giving up with riding until I realised that riding horses can be a gift to them. When you change your intention at the root level, then you can develop the wisdom to have an authentic conversation with the horse. The bottom line is that if we wish to ride, the horse we are sitting on must go forward, this cannot be taken for granted. True forwardness is a gift from the horse, should they decide to give it, and there is a fundamental difference in forwardness that is given and not taken. **Forwardness that is willingly given is forwardness without tension.**

Tuning into Tension

One of the most important steps you can make towards connecting with your horse is to improve your recognition of tension. Tension in a horse's mind causes stiffness in their movement. Imagine the way you would feel if someone pointed a gun at you and asked you the right answer to a mathematical problem. Sometimes the will to survive will allow you to transcend your fear and be able to answer, just as people find phenomenal strength to lift cars and save people in a crisis. This adrenaline fuelled strength and ability is actually what many horses resort to, in order to transcend desperate circumstances under a forceful rider, but there are serious longterm consequences.

Pushing any one to an unnatural limit will cause a breakdown physically and mentally - and this is what happens to many competition and sport horses. For the rider, even if you were able to live with the fact that you were destroying your horse over time, there is another reason that tension is disagreeable to *any* extent in the horse you are riding. **It doesn't feel good.** Feelings are relative to a certain extent, otherwise no-one would get pleasure out of riding stiff old riding school horses, or broken down donkeys on the beach. The better you educate your body, the more sensitive it becomes and the more discerning your perception. This is why we are all in different places on the path towards truth. Paradoxically however, the absolute truth of pure presence which is free of tension can touch any of us if we allow it. This is what our authentic selves are made of, and if we wish to recognise it we can at any time. This is why a child sitting on a horse for the first time can feel that tension-free state, just as an accomplished rider can.

There are many people who have ridden all of their lives, yet they cannot distinguish between a tense and a tension-free horse. The importance of learning to distinguish cannot be overstated because **it is the light which shows you the pathway to training your horse.** Without it you are in the dark and you may turn to results to show you whether your path is right, but results are never sure in themselves. They are always arbitrary. For example you cannot rate your progress by whether your horse can do a canter transition or a shoulder-in or not, because they do not have an absolute quality, i.e. there is a whole spectrum of incorrect to correct canter transitions. To find something that is undeniably right is the key, and the one thing which has that status is the quality of the connection itself. Becoming aware of tension in yourself, in your horse and in the relationship between you is the perfect way to navigate this journey which is bringing you both closer, or not.



Examples of obvious expressions of tension in different horses:

On the ground:

- **Pawing the ground, circling and pulling against a lead-rope or the reins to escape.**
- **Licking and chewing rapidly and/or raising and lowering the head in a rushed manner.**
- **Pushing roughly into your personal space and sometimes snatching with the mouth, nudging or shoving with the head.**
- **Nodding the head/popping the lips/ head-shaking/raising the tail high.**
- **Fixating on something.**

Under saddle:

- **Speeding up and horse's sides becoming tight and reactive.**
- **The desire to go to the gate, or becoming distracted dropping shoulder, half-rears and spins.**
- **Neighing, pausing, frequently looking into the distance.**

These are all obvious signs of tension.

Tension feels like a barrier between the horse's receptivity and your aids. The form of this barrier varies depending on the degree to which the tension has become physical. When tension is habitually felt by the horse, it will affect the tissues like ink seeping into them, and gradually the tissues become more restricted and hardened. This is why habitually tense horses become stiffer over time and more fixed in their responses to the rider. When tension is 'fresh' you can feel it as an interference in the following ways:

1. It can render the horse unresponsive to all communication. Imagine if the horse you are riding catches sight of a hot air balloon (for example) and suddenly you might as well be riding a plastic chair! Not only is all of their attention fixed on the object, the tension it incites in the horse tightens up their muscles and sets their fight and flight mechanisms on stand by. This is one of the most obvious expressions of tension in a horse.



2. Sometimes, if your horse already holds a level of tension within as a result of their lifestyle, their tack or a physical problem, you can feel it in a less overt way than the first example. It forms an insidious veil which separates the two of you. Various manifestations of this might be:
 - A feeling of systemic heaviness in the horse, not necessarily in a specific part of them, but throughout their body.
 - Suppressed energy, like a ticking bomb which can be felt as frozenness.
 - A 'stubbornness' or recalcitrance which you can't get through.
 - A shell surrounding the horse physically, so your seat doesn't melt in to their back, and your legs cannot wrap around them comfortably.
 - The horse might feel as if they are magnetised against you so that all of your aids are repelled.
 - A profound lack of balance, the horse's centre of gravity seems too high and you feel like you are 'above' your horse and not 'within' them.
3. Sometimes when you are aware of tension within yourself, say nervousness or excitement, this may well be coming from the horse. It can take a long time to achieve the level of awareness, the presence, as a rider to identify such feelings within yourself, and even longer to realise when they are coming from the horse. All kinds of emotions are transmitted from horses to riders, often as the horse is experiencing them as a result of their work. Anger and sadness and positive feelings too, like euphoria and exhilaration. One way to differentiate is to be aware of the typical range/nature of emotions you feel. If you do feel that you are channeling the horses emotions, acknowledging them is a powerful healing channel. (See p.117 Khalif's story).

All of these feelings can also emanate from you, the rider, and affect the horse in the same way as the horse may affect you. Tracking the tension is in fact your life's work with your horse. Horses attract tension like a magnet because they resonate with it as the prey animals they are. This is the greatest gift you can give to your horse, to liberate them from this tension and help them to transcend their terrestrial manifestation for a while.

Eradicating tension is like unwinding a large and intricate knot. Patiently and carefully you come back to the source, and the closer you get to the unwound state, the stronger the vibration of your connecting energy. The clearer the horse feels to ride, the more accepting of your body they are, and the more receptive to your aids they become. Beyond tension the boundaries will become more transparent between you, until you become aware of a new realm of feelings and thoughts and dimensions within the connection.

Pushkin's Story

Pushkin's story illustrates how tension which is not addressed at each stage of the training process can build up to an extent where it causes a greater and greater obstruction to training progress. Pushkin was a four year old who had already been backed when I started working with him, and with the benefit of hindsight I can understand now that his postural strength was very undeveloped. He had a natural tendency to hollow his spine because of his conformation, and this had not been addressed sufficiently before he was ridden, so he had a chronic restriction in his lumbothoracic junction. At this point if I had known this I would not have continued to ride him, but would have worked him on the lunge and helped him therapeutically until he was truly strong enough for a rider. I did continue to lunge him, but my lunging was not bringing him to the point where he could develop his postural ring. I didn't understand that he already had a back problem as a four year old, and that he was unable to release onto his postural ring.

I do remember that he was a tense horse, for example, when I lunged him out in the field he would sometimes run away. I was advised to attach the lunge line to the bit to control him. This can only have fixed his tension in deeper, as lunging straight on to a bit is extremely severe. If I had known how to listen to him, and understand more about where he was in his bodymind, I would have been able to take things gradually enough to help him heal, and release his tension as we went along. In all of the dressage I had seen up until this point, the bottom line was always force, simply because people did not question it. Allowing a horse to recover themselves in a herd for long enough, and then introducing oneself in a patient, listening way, was not part of my education at all.

There was, at that time, and maybe still is, a very powerful fearfulness about lingering with the training of a horse. If the horse resisted there was a strong sense of the necessity to nip it in the bud and push on. Forwardness was the ultimate goal, and it had to be insisted upon whatever the cost. Horses went by the way-side, they were sold as unsuitable and given up on if they could not accept these demands. Horses which did not accept were not 'dressage horses' or had the wrong temperament or bad conformation, but the approach was not questioned because it is written in all the books and had always been the way. Horses who did accept this, were the ones who could compensate better physically, and perhaps mentally too, but they were still compensating. Layer of tension would form upon layer of tension, and the horse would become like a strange machine, capable of going through many different forms of locomotion, but always as if each part of them was stuck together separately.

As time went by I became interested in Craniosacral Therapy, and the concept of physical and emotional damage, and healing itself, became real for me.

I had a way to go before my training and riding approach made the break away from the leg to hand, 'force the forwardness' techniques I had been exposed to. Learning more about true straightness was part of this. At this point I was still following the outside rein to inside hand theory, which stifled any opportunity for the horse to strengthen their weaknesses by fixing them into those weaknesses.

Pushkin and I came to a brick wall in his therapeutic process. I identified his back issues, but I couldn't treat him because he became too tense. He would distract himself in any way he could and not allow me to address his body. I would say looking back that this was because he knew he needed the compensations he had made in his body to protect himself from the way he was being trained. I was trying to remove this protection so that he could heal himself, yet continuing to ride him in a way he needed the protection for. It was vicious circle that could only have been resolved with a more holistic management and training approach. In the end this was the very reason I stopped doing the therapy full time, because I realised I was making horses more vulnerable. They could not heal when they were still shod and kept in stables and ridden with force. Even before I had come so far down the holistic route I understood the importance of this.

As Pushkin became more 'trained' he also became more filled with tension. I was not aware enough to feel its presence all of the time, but I could sense that he was a bit like a nuclear explosion. I would take him to work, and if he saw something - anything - different, outside of the arena, it would trigger a reaction in him which kept on reverberating and growing until I couldn't reach him at all. He would go forward and he didn't even spook or jump about in any way, but was he was closed off to my aids. I wanted to join with him and be accepted by him, and he blocked me out. There was a line of trees at the end of the arena and these trees became his most common trigger. It got to the point when sometimes he would only have to look at a tree to become tight and tense. He simply had too much unreleased tension, which came from the underlying spinal issues which prevented him from engaging authentically and therefore releasing tension through the work. His was not a rare case, and if he had not injured himself in the field so badly that he couldn't continue to work, he might have simply become stiffer as the tension fixed itself into his body. How many truly loose horses older than seven or eight do you see doing dressage? Extravagant paces aside.

Pushkin was much loved and he was well looked after in the conventional way, but because he never had the opportunity to truly connect with a person, we could never release the boundary between us which would make us feel like one being. When you reach that place with a horse, for however short a time, it is as if you move forward on a grander scale spiritually, closer to the acceptance of who you really are.



Quaramba and I have benefited from all of the lessons learned from horses previously

Over time I have learned that the most important thing of all in developing a genuinely trusting relationship with any horse is to **acknowledge how I feel, and listen to how the horse is feeling in each moment and let that indicate our path.**

If we have fear, let it be heard...

When tension arises, let it be felt...

If it means we stop and reconnect with the herd, we can do that. If we choose to meditate that is also possible. Or we can carry on with the work. Sometimes we might do all three. As you learn to be inspired by the powerful intention of improving the well-being of your horse, and other agendas drop away, it becomes clear that there are limitless options that you are flexible enough to discover. Not only this, you realise that your ability to perceive the situation increases. A new dimension opens up where you can actually communicate with your horse.

So it is that true, willing forwardness from a horse can only happen when the horse is in a relatively tension-free state of mind. Working in a tension free way has to be a state of being and therefore a lifestyle. The horse's lifestyle will reflect your evolution towards tension free living. Ideally you want to be starting work with a horse who is still possessed of their 'horse spirit'. Such a horse is recognisable by their presence, their personality and their interest in you. If they lack these things one of the best remedies is to live with their own kind for a while until the spark which is 'them' returns. After this the horse-human relationship itself can be healed through dialogue, the foundation of which is the introduction of choice for the horse, and remembering how to sense energy, as horses do.

Horses who spend time on their own, shut into a stable, or segregated in paddocks will harbour tension from these unnatural limitations. It will surface at the moment of engagement. At the moment in the work where the choice to open their body to you is to be made, the panic comes out. This is because the horse must become vulnerable to you. They are giving you the power they have over themselves. When a horse engages fully in a physical way, they become part of you, as you become part of them. It requires trust on both sides, but the human is the orchestrator. The horse must allow themselves to be blind-folded and led to a different place. Only once they are there can they understand that it can soothe and empower them. You will know when you reach this moment of vulnerability because it is then that you will see the extent of the tension which is there. Sometimes this moment is characterised by an attempt by the horse to re-connect with their herd, they might neigh, or their herd-mates might call to them. Imagine a horse coming to the edge of the ravine, and acknowledging the choice which must be made, then they will communicate with those they trust the most, and then they make their choice.

Horses who are already in partnership with their human will often not need this 'last goodbye' they will look for the ravine and cross it with joy. Others may be torn between the two. Those in whom the grounding and balancing of a herd does not exist will rarely choose to cross. In fact it takes much skill and sensitivity as a rider to bring them to the edge at all. Many horses who are are compelled to work without concern for their boundary will perform in a fashion which runs parallel to that which would bring them to this ravine. They can't get there because they never lower their defences. They may seem very obedient and compliant horses, but they are colourless. Only experience and your heart can tell you this difference. 'Approaching the ravine' is very much a physical process. It is the work leading up to engagement because of course, the other side of the ravine is the engagement. The physical engagement will become the friend of the horse once they realise how good it can feel and how much they can relax within it. But this doesn't happen straight away because it also requires strength and suppleness.

If your horse already has the kind of lifestyle they need and you are bringing them to this place, but they don't cross over and give themselves to you, then either they have a physical problem which is preventing them from uniting with you, or you are not providing the right kind of mechanism (with your posture) for them to engage with. These possibilities are discussed later on. The important thing at this point is to get to know the way tension expresses itself in you and your horse.

Any time that something is preoccupying your horse so that you can't connect with them, apart from when they are eating, it is likely to be tension. Even eating has a certain tension associated with it. Tension in itself is not a bad thing, it is a state of being. A state of readiness. It is not the state in which you want to work with your horse because it is all consuming. It absorbs the horse's attention, their energy, and their physical 'availability'. There is a spectrum of states of tension which would be intense interest at one end leading up to the full readiness (fight or flight) state. Going from nothing to full beats the acceleration of a Ferrari. Most of us will have ridden a horse when they went into this state and felt their heart pounding as if it would explode. You might have noticed that other signs may be much more subtle. The physiological responses happen at the flick of a switch however, hormones flooding in, blood pressure going up, heart thumping loudly, respiration acceleration and muscles contracting. The muscles take resources which would normally be directed to digestion and cell growth, so this is not the ideal state for a horse to absorb training in.

The better you are at recognising this state, the more sophisticated your training will be, because in order to prevent or release it, you have to know how it manifests. Individual horses, like people not only express themselves in different ways, they also have different default settings in terms of tension. A naturally tension-prone horse often copes better with being tense, whereas once a naturally calm horse gets wound up, they can't calm down easily at all.



Training Without Tension

There are two ways to lower the tension which comes between you and your horse. Each one helps the next one and you can definitely create a resonance around your horses, or a zone where serenity and calm are the norm.

The two ways are **avoiding tension** and **releasing tension**.

Avoiding tension can be broken down into the way you manage your horses, and the way you behave around them. The way you manage them is focusing on the day to day circumstances themselves which incite tension in a horse and avoiding them entirely. These have been mentioned many times already, and include segregation of horses, limiting their ability to move, changing the herd structure continuously, feeding high-cereal diet, inconsistent or unreliable access to food, shoeing (interferes with the horse's ability to ground their energy as well as the physiological damage they cause), rugging/clipping (interferes with the horses thermoregulation causing anxiety) and regular use of pharmaceutical drugs/ vaccinations which upset and damage the horse's physiological systems.

Avoiding tension through the way you behave around horses is very simple to understand and much harder to put into practise! Sooner or later it becomes clear that our horses reflect our own state of mind. The more balanced and present a person you can be, the calmer and more receptive your horse will be around you. Here are some tips which might help you to develop this kind of balance, and to see more clearly where you are in that process.

- **Be open to the idea that you are projecting your own state of mind on to your horse.** The horse will pick up instantly how you feel, and any stress you may be under. This will sometimes resonate with their own stress, or initiate a stressful reaction from them, which you might then assume is that horse's personality, or their mood that day. It does require self observation to connect up how you may be influencing a situation, although the theory is so obvious and simple.
- **Spend some time with your horse devoted entirely to bringing your attention to your own state of mind.** Sense your own level of tension that day, and then turn your attention to your horse. If you practice this often enough you will start to become aware of the correlations, i.e. the kinds of mood in you which provokes particular moods in your horse. Horses greatly appreciate this kind of self comprehension in people, and you will find it improves your relationship greatly. Allow yourself to embrace how you feel without judging it or disguising it. Acknowledgment of feelings is the most powerful way to facilitate their release.



My herd lives together in their own mixed gender community, free to develop friendships in their own ways.



I find it ideal for our relationship if the horses are able to organise their own needs as independently as possible.

It is fascinating to get to know them by becoming a part of their lives and the routines they develop themselves.



When I am with them I remind myself to come free of expectations and stay focused on their wellbeing.



All the humans in their lives then benefit from the horses generosity and kindness.



- **Everything you do with your horse can be an exercise in mindfulness.** An active meditation from start to finish. Going and greeting your horse, grooming them, walking with them, groundwork and riding are all part of it. Focus on each action being as attentive and beautiful as possible. The compassion in the partnership makes it beautiful, creative and intelligent. Be aware of your own tension, if it arises, and how you express it. Some people might slow down and become clumsy and slow, whereas others become erratic and rushed.

Knowing how to **release tension** is a horse owners concern because you cannot always avoid it:

1. Changing the management of the horse can have a radical tension-releasing effect. Tension need not be accepted as the normal state of bodymind for any horse. Common causes which can be changed at their source are:
 - **Lack of exercise through keeping horses confined.** Horses are often tense going out to the field, or coming into an arena from their stable. If training time alone is used to release that tension, your partnership will suffer, because the horse will associate the training place with feeling tense and unhappy. The only effective way to change this scenario is not to confine or segregate your horse.
 - **Unsuitable diet, high in cereal can cause persistent tension.**
 - **Pain can make a horse tense, either slightly edgy or likely to react violently.**
2. If you are sure the tension is a transient state which is caused by something unusual that day, the best way of approaching the situation is to be present with your horse. In their natural state a horse will often go through this process, what I have previously called 'threat assessment'. People have a habit with horses of trying to prevent them doing this, because they are insist on having the horse's attention straight away. Often they assume the horse will only get worse, or will learn to behave like that or get away with the behaviour. **In fact the more time that is given to threat assessment initially, the less attached the horse will be to it over time,** unless the horse has another problem, most often a physical issue, which is the true source of their tension.

You can learn to listen for possible threat in partnership with your horse. Perhaps you will be able to take on that role in certain circumstances, and encourage the horse to relax fully in your presence. At the very least you will understand the rhythm of the horse better.



Khalif's Story

Khalif is a five year old gelding owned by Anna who attended one of our holistic horsemanship clinics. The first day we worked with Khalif, he was quite worried about being in a new situation, which would be normal for any young horse in a strange place with no other horses he knew. There was something in his eye and his energy however that made it clear that he was in a post traumatic stress reaction. A traumatised horse can have physical damage/malfunction in their central nervous system, and when they begin to react to a situation which triggers them, their tension continues to rise until they feel so overwhelmed they need to find a physical release. Anna described how Khalif had a point where he would lose control of himself and behave dangerously, and it was frightening for her because she didn't know how to manage it, or even what would trigger it.

Often with a traumatised horse there is an identifiable trigger, and that makes working with those horses more straightforward. In Khalif's case he seemed to be triggered by anything. In observing and tuning into the situation, it became clear that the trigger was the partnership itself. Just being with people and being asked to obey people sent him into the fight or flight state. That was a place to start, so we began by finding his boundary. This is the distance we could stand away from him that made him feel comfortable. When we found that place, it wasn't far, maybe three metres back from him, after a few minutes Anna started to feel a sense of confusion and desperation.

She felt this way often when she was working with Khalif, and had always assumed it was her own feelings. It might have been, but often when we have a very close relationship with a horse, we channel *their* emotions, because it is a way they can release those feelings through us. Unfortunately if we then react to those feelings as if they were our own, the feelings are intensified and the tension in the situation elevates. When Anna considered this and decided that the emotions she was picking up were actually sourcing from him, suddenly it made sense and she felt a huge sense of relief. Those particular emotions are sometimes referred to as 'overwhelm' and are a feature of PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder).

When Anna could allow the overwhelm to be acknowledged in her and released, Khalif was able to start to release some of the trauma energy trapped inside him, like steam from a pressure cooker. This had to be done gradually, little by little, so that his system could adjust itself to each stage and integrate the changes. Anna kept channeling feelings from Khalif, and she then felt a profound sense of hopelessness, and saw him lying down and not able to get up. That brought up some sadness for her... she was now at the heart of the energetic memory of the traumatisation when Khalif originally gave up hope and entered the dissociated state.

In physiological terms this moment of hopelessness happens when the sympathetic nervous system is in full flow (firing the fight/flight reaction) and then the parasympathetic nervous system (which is stimulated when the horse believes they have no hope and they are going to die) overrides the sympathetic functioning. The two systems have opposing effects, and when they are fired up together it seems to cause a physiological melt down. When this has happened once, the central nervous system then seems to be prone to going back into the same chain of reactions, whether or not the threat is real. When a horse goes into that state it is not possible to reach them simply by doing the right things, because they are already in the past, re-living whatever caused their trauma in the first place. This is why we couldn't just carry on and ask Khalif to lunge or be ridden.

By following the trail of energetic layers, Anna had connected with the core layer where Khalif had been damaged, and she could be the catalyst for his healing. After that he visibly melted, and his tension seemed to just drain away. It was an unusually powerful shift, maybe because there was a lot of energy at the clinic, or Anna was unattached to an outcome other than Khalif's well-being. Whatever it was he was truly a different horse, and the next day he was still in that deep calm, so Gaby was able to ride him and make progress with his physical training.

Anna hadn't ridden him very many times, and sometimes he would become reluctant to go forward and seem like he might do something explosive. In his calm state he came to the same stop, but in a slower, relaxed way. This meant that he could be gently encouraged to yield and begin to use his postural muscles. Weakness in his lumbar spine and tension in his temporomandibular joint came to the surface. During the session he seemed to lengthen his whole frame and his haunches filled out so they looked rounder and less triangular. His tail relaxed and he softened his neck. He didn't need to do a long session, it was more about taking him one step further into comfort with a rider. He was even calmer and much more supple at the end than the beginning, which is really the only goal. Anna also felt she had tools to find a way back from the trauma reaction if it ever came up again.



3. The following are some exercises to help a horse release tension from the ground or in the saddle. If you are in the saddle, for the 'earthing' practice, imagine the horse's feet rather than your own.

- **Focusing on the tension within yourself opens up a release channel.**
- **Make gentle, long out-breaths imagining the tension leaving you both.**
- **Stay very still and feel your energy earthing into the ground.**
- **Be quiet and un-reactive, but give time and attention to your horse.**
- **Think of slowing everything down, listen to the stillness with your horse.**

Remember that when the horse is in a state of tension, it is important to **address** that state, not fight it or ignore it. Many of us were taught to push a horse on through by getting past the scary object or pretending it isn't there. This reaction is actually a form of distraction from the present moment. It may seem to work in that for that session you can continue with your schedule, but the tension will be stored inside the horse and not released. As described in the story about Pushkin, such stored tension at some point will become insurmountable. This is why horses begin to refuse to go into the arena or go into wild displays of violent behaviour or become aggressive. The release will come at some point, but it will be in these kind of uncontrolled and divisive ways. In other words you, the handler and rider of your horse, are not considered or included in these expressions of panic. This is because many times before you excluded yourself from the horse's feelings about his or her environment by refusing to listen. Just as with a person, if you listen, you will be confided in.

Confiding in us is one of the greatest gifts a horse can give us. The first stage of that is to be consulted, the second is to be trusted. This is the epitome of success in a partnership with your horse. So, instead of being frightened, impatient or annoyed by your horse being in a state of tension, see it as an opportunity to make a deeper connection. Sometimes when this kind of fixed-in tension is allowed to surface, the horse will want to run to let it release. This is a difficult thing to manage, because facilitating it requires a lot confidence from the rider, to make no attempt to block the horse's expression of movement. Obviously for the tension to release the horse must be completely liberated, and it can be difficult to avoid re-traumatisation. As soon as a horse runs from tension, this will fire up their fight/flight mechanism again, so you are as likely to set off more tension than release it. A horse getting tired is not the same as becoming relaxed. A better option is to reunite the horse with a safe place, usually their herd or their territory. If you can facilitate that, then you will be associated with the safe place and not the tension itself. Stay in each moment with the process, and that will help you decide how to proceed.

It may be appropriate to stop there and continue the next time. You may choose to carry on once the horse has relaxed. Remember that your decision is always based on the well-being of your horse and not pursuing any other result-based agenda.

4. Last but certainly not least is the tremendous tension releasing capacity of the ridden work itself. The paradox is that a tense horse cannot work properly yet there is nothing more profoundly relaxing for a horse than this kind of postural work. Staying in each moment will guide the individual therapeutic process for your horse.

A good way to see it is that reaching that pure, complete state of relaxation, stillness and presence, is like getting to the top of a mountain. You are using little hooks to climb, and each time you release tension in one way, for example the horse's lifestyle being more holistic, you put in another hook which brings you into the position of being able to release more tension in another way, such as training the horse in engagement without force. In this way you can work through all the layers of tension.

When you start to release tension in your horse, stay in touch with the **process**. If a horse is stiff because of many years of laying down layers of tension, when you start to listen to your horse and expose the tension, so that it can find a way out, you are encouraging the stiffness to change back into the fear energy which was trapped in the tissues in the first place. This is a serious undertaking, and may take some time. Progress depends on many factors, the age of the horse, the depth of their tension and your ability to facilitate the release. Conditioned behaviours which relate to that fear might begin to resurface, and it may seem like you are going backwards in your relationship. Keep trusting the process and that in your listening and supporting, you are finally allowing those patterns to escape.

One of the most important factors which is not generally considered is choice, the horse's choice. Sometimes we put ourselves into the role of healer or rescuer, which can be appropriate. It can also be inappropriate, and limiting to an animal, fixing them into the story of their terrible life or their multiple problems. Sometimes when engaging in a conscious and loving way with a horse and providing them with every remedy and therapy you can find, they will continue to reject what you wish to accomplish. The greatest gift you can offer a horse is to let them have their voice. Some horses simply don't choose to work with people, they are happiest and most fulfilled living in a herd with minimal human contact. Sometimes they are happy with contact but being ridden is difficult for them. Letting go is always a difficult decision to make, yet it can be the most liberating. None of us knows all the influences and possibilities in our lives, but if we can get into alignment with what feels right in each moment it allows all sorts of valuable opportunities enough space to manifest themselves.

Development Of Aid Sensitivity

The Conditioning Question

It is helpful to be aware of the subject of learning through conditioning when working with horses. There are two recognised forms of conditioning, classical and operant. Classical involves the association of a neutral (unconnected) signal with an unconditioned response. So the most famous example of that is the study performed with dogs by the Russian physicist Ivan Pavlov. He associated the sound of a bell (neutral/unconnected) with the unconditioned physiological responses dogs have when presented with food. Every time he presented the dogs with meat he rang the bell, and so after a while the unconditional responses when they saw meat (drooling etc..) would be stimulated by the sound of the bell *alone*.

I have described this scenario quite often as 'positive association'. It is unavoidable in relationships because our brains adapt to what they are presented with, and as long as we are acting from our hearts, there need be no negative consequences in horses associating us with being calm, feeling good and receiving what they need to live comfortably. I feel that the best approach when handling horses is not to set out specifically to set up these associations. As soon as we start 'thinking' and stop 'being' we have already lost the connection. That these associations do happen, organically, over time, as long as they are bringing our horses closer and not further away, then it is great.

Operant conditioning is different in that it is targeting voluntary, not involuntary responses. The 'reinforcement' can be negative or positive and happens *after* a voluntary response. It has to happen after of course because it is not a simple association, but a *consequence*-based adaptation. Some examples might be, a child does well writing an essay at school and receives a gold star. Positive reinforcement for successful writing. The same scenario could be rewarded by negative reinforcement which would be not having to write the essay again (note that negative reinforcement means removal or withdrawal, not enforcing an active punishment). Either way, the focus is on forming pathways in the brain where actions cause consequences. It can of course be described as an association, but it is working on a more 'conscious' level.

This is specifically what I feel uncomfortable with when working with horses. A fundamental difference between horses and humans is in the functioning of our brains. Horses are not intellectuals, and so focusing on stimulating them to 'think' in such a way does not feel in harmony with their outlook. This observation comes from practical experience, not theory. In my experience when horses are given treats for performing a specific trick or a task of whatever kind, they become anxious and distracted. They become *less present*.

Instead of opening up more space in the relationship, this form of training seems to narrow down the interaction. The culmination of this is that some of the horses who have been victims of persistent and prolonged operant conditioning (whether it goes under the name of Natural Horsemanship, Liberty training or Clicker Training) lose their natural presence. They will perform impressive tricks, such as running into trailers a long distance away from their handlers, corrupted dressage movements and other behaviours on command, with very little prompting from their handler. The danger is that in operant conditioning the behaviour is voluntary, and the reinforcement comes afterwards, so there is more separation than connection. It is essentially pressing a button, and a robot within your horse comes to life. The robot is not connected with you in each moment, except to react to further conditioned stimuli, and you can no longer listen to the horse because they are unable to relax and be themselves in your company. The spontaneity and potential in the partnership is gradually lost.

Horses are *being*, not thinking animals, so when they are conditioned to perform they don't 'think' about what they are doing, or why, they just have these pathways hard-wired in their brains and they carry them out mindlessly. Maybe the people who are interested in this kind of training would benefit from asking themselves why they want a horse to perform tricks in this way. Of course whatever you do with a horse is always a personal choice. **If it inspires you to develop direct communion between two present beings, then it is best to avoid any kind of memorised response or altered state of mind which affects the present moment with your horse.**

How does this relate to riding a horse?

This is a truly fascinating subject and I am still very much in the process of discovery. I feel passionate about working purely with the **unconditioned response**. This can only be possible by becoming acutely aware of the particularities of each moment as a rider. By maintaining a 'beginners mind' approach, you can feel the unique physical connection to be made in that moment.

The unconditioned response you are seeking is not a response to pain and/or fear, but in fact quite the opposite. Instead of seeking to control the horse by setting up a 'contrast' scenario where there will be pain/discomfort as long as the horse is not 'doing' what you require, instead, you are using what could be termed as pleasurable physical contact to evolve the horse's physical state so they become more graceful and powerful. With this approach, in addition to basic comfort, there is also improved bodily function, suppleness and heightened performance. The physical high which results is therapeutic and enjoyable for the horse and rider.

There are ultimately two processes going on:

1. The *comfort aiding* system which uses a therapeutic approach similar to massage, where the aids used are unique and specific to each moment with each horse.

There can be no fixed guideline in this, other than seeking to use the language of contact, which includes pressure and release of pressure, in order to both **initiate the therapeutic physiological transformation** and to **channel the horse's movement towards the straightening influence of the rider's posture**. If your aids become upsetting, intimidating, or in any way tension-inducing for your horse, they have ceased to be in alignment with the connection you wish to maintain. These 'pleasure' aids can be insistent or firm in circumstances which call for that kind of support of the horse's boundary, but as soon as *tension* results the connection has been broken.

2. Secondly there is the straightening and engaging influence of the *rider's posture* itself, which relies on the rider being straight and engaged and influencing the horse directly.

These two processes work harmoniously together to gradually and sensitively transform the horse from wherever they are starting out in any particular session, into a looser, more comfortable, happier horse.

How does the comfort aiding system work in practice?

A good way of describing it is mobile acupressure. Many horse texts talk about pressure and release, with release being the reward, and there may be an element of this on occasion, but thinking about the whole aiding system in that way results in a one dimensional approach. It is not accurate to categorise the vast array of possible sensations so crudely. Think of different situations: sometimes pressure is pleasurable and sometimes release is pleasurable. Sometimes the contrast itself is pleasurable:

Examples of pleasurable pressure:

- Acupressure and massage therapies.
- Having a hug from someone.
- Stretching tight limbs.
- Sprinting or working out.

Examples of pleasurable release:

- Resting after exercise or feeling tired.
- Going from a stuffy room into the fresh air.
- Breathing out.
- Softening of physical restrictions.
- Emotional release from sharing a problem.



Having a rigid mindset that we always use pressure as a means of *enforcing* our agenda, and when we decide we have received enough we can then relieve the pressure as a reward certainly narrows down the diversity of our physical partnership with our horse. For a start we are living beings, not machines, we change from moment to moment and we cannot possibly produce aids which are identical every time for every different type of response we might desire. Equally horses are constantly changing and they cannot be expected to be in the same position to respond every time in the same way. There cannot be a fixed, repeatable pattern to our aiding conversation with the horse. Instead of thinking of our aids being at our disposal to make the horse *do* things, it is possible to look at the situation differently. Think of the aids being there to help **bring the horse into a more fulfilled state of being**. This changes everything. You and your communication change from being a threat to being a therapist.

'In-Comfort' In Practice

Most riders have some impression of the way in which their horse is responding to their aids, and certainly the degree of the response. In order to feel **why** the horse is reacting or not, you have to be able to go one stage further back, to perceive how the horse is feeling in themselves. This is only ever felt through the filter of our own senses, but even that filter will become finer and clearer with practice.

In order to develop the ability to feel from the horse's perspective, first of all you have to develop your ability to perceive how your own body feels. Tuning in to your inner rhythms and the integrity of your organs, the state of each different tissue. Most of us are only aware of the more intense sensations of pain and/or pleasure that our nerves are communicating but there is a whole world of possibility there waiting to be awakened. Nerves can communicate the most subtle information. Energy states and memories, emotions and patterns. Practice focusing on how you feel within regularly enough and that world will start to unfold.

The main stumbling block in this endeavour is the intellectual mind. Becoming aware of your body is a meditation and if thoughts arise in your mind they will distract you. It is hard work to concentrate on how you feel, and you have to be willing to continually re-focus your attention. The best time to practice is when you have the most energy and your mind is at its calmest. It will always be a work in progress, so there isn't a certain point at which you are ready to start tuning in to your horse. Every time you ride is an exercise in awareness, and you begin to establish your self-awareness, you will become more and more sensitive to how your horse feels.

It is important to realise that as soon as you become aware of any sensation in your body, this awareness will have initiated a shift. This is healing. When you are feeling into areas where the energy flow is disturbed in some way, your focus stimulates your own healing intelligence. When you are able to feel the sense picture of the horse as you are riding, you will also be actively responding to that with your aids, so the intrinsic healing brought about by your awareness of energetic patterns is supplemented by the dynamic physical relationship:

Example of energetic perception within oneself:

Allowing my awareness to descend into my own body, I feel a tight stretched feeling in my spine at the upper thoracic vertebrae. There is a mild sense of restriction in my diaphragm, which makes it feel like I am not getting quite enough air. I feel a subtle imbalance in my throat, as well as a heaviness and drawing feeling in my temporomandibular joint. This heaviness eases and I become aware of my sternum area feeling stuffy and blocked. As I concentrate on that. I become aware of an anxiety associated with the physical restriction there. Looking at the anxiety balloons it into fear, and I let it envelop me, vibrating through every cell, until it recedes... Now I can feel some tiredness in the muscles of my shoulders...at this point it feels important to open out my perception and become aware of my whole body. I am drawn to my physical boundary, and I can feel how my skin closes around my physical body, but the energy spills over, radiating further and further out. When I tune back into my physical body, deep into the core, the spinal cord and vertebral column feels like it is waking up and becoming more connected, there is integration happening now within my whole system...

Example of energetic perception with the horse while riding (emotional focus):

As we are walking along at the beginning of our session, it feels good to feed out more rein until I am holding the buckle, and my horse is enthusiastic to stretch her neck out all the way. She is really striding out and I am aware of the power liberated in her shoulders, followed by the swing underneath of her hind-legs. Following into those physical sensations, I begin to raise my sensitivity towards her, today this feels like charging up a battery. When it is ready there is a stillness, a space opening... her mood feels animated.. a trace of excitement which is recycling into her strong forward pace. She is joyful, yet there is a trace of anxiety. Instantly my lower legs begin to soften and become gentler. The wish to reassure, to offer connection, to provide an earth for her anxiety, arises. Careful not to trigger her more, I ease the side of my leg against her in alignment with a mild straightening of my pelvis and strengthening of the inside pillar of my body. Her ribcage feels my leg, the gentle, stretching invitation to soften, and energy travels deeper into her diaphragm. As it is unwinding she takes a deeper, slower breath. At the same time she absorbs the straightening influence and her body shifts subtly into greater balance. The tension begins to melt out of her muscles and her anxiety fades. As we come into the corner of the arena her excitement has transformed into contentment, and we settle deeper into our mutual harmony...

Example of energetic perception within horse while riding (physical focus):

Sitting in the saddle allowing my weight to sink down gently into the horse until I feel calm and centred in my own body, gradually I let my mind open up to my horse's energy, calmly looking for a place of no-pressure, non-trying, which allows me to be present and aware. I feel happy to be listening like this and curious to know what might be there. I am picking up a sense of heaviness in the horse's spine underneath me, this softens into a kind of fragility. Acknowledging that fragility seems to allow it to strengthen into a more confident weight-carrying energy. It feels right to let my legs connect and embrace the horse's sides like a sensitive, but familiar hug. I remember to balance my own body and the horse is encouraged to move forward. I am absorbing the sensations of the movement, the parts of the stride that are easy and soft and the parts that jar. I pick up a feeling of holding in the horse's neck around C3 and follow it down into the ligaments and muscles connecting into the horse's shoulders. I have a loose rein but I want to give the reins out further. Actively liberating the horse's neck. I feel a loosening gradually unwinding through the horse's shoulders and sense how that begins to lengthen the stride and for the first time I become aware of the energy of the hind-legs pushing off under me. I feel deeper into that and become aware of some hardness in the haunch area which seems to connect to a woolly feeling in the left hind-leg. It feels as if the right hind-leg takes more weight to support the other leg's weakness. As I am tuning in it feels right to bring my weight deeper into the inside of my body, holding the inside of my pelvis still to help the horse bend around my leg, and my leg then naturally feels deeper under myself and is sucked deeper into the horse's side. The horse stretches their neck and softens in their mouth in a way that encourages me to gather up some of the slack in the rein and generally gather ourselves into a more engaged walk. I am on the right rein and I feel I want to creep my outside leg back as much as I can to reach that woolly left hind-leg and help support it into a stronger activity....



Starting bit-less training with Totti, with the tree-less Total Contact saddle.

You can allow a continuous stream of such information to come into your mind, or you can more actively 'scan' your body, tuning into specific parts and becoming aware of how they feel. You can compare the textures of one part with another or you can imagine yourself in geometric shapes, e.g. is my spine feeling straight? am I even on both sides of my body? Use your imagination and whatever comes to you to help you tap into the power of your own perception. Not only will it improve your riding, it will improve your health!

It does help to have a basic understanding of human and horse anatomy, so that you can relate the sensations you are feeling to physical structures, as well as being able to describe and interpret them. It is important not to get the cart before the horse however and impose theoretical anatomical knowledge you may have on to what you are feeling. Truly perceiving what is there involves *listening* alone. You can match up what you feel to what you know (interpret) but maintaining the integrity of the one way flow of information is paramount. Everyone filters information, but the more open and clear you are in your intention, the better you will absorb the truth.

How can having an awareness of one's own body translate into being able to perceive things in a horse's body?

Everything is an expression of energy. Even inanimate objects have an energetic resonance they are vibrating at. Living beings have a whole energetic system, which is flowing and changing all the time. It is possible to commune with *all* life, plants and trees included. The practice I am describing here uses the mammalian nervous system for its channel. We can get so close to our horses because we share so much on every level. Imagine for a moment that you had just fallen on your knee or you had stubbed your toe... you know what that would be like, you can *feel* it. You haven't actually done it, so you are not experiencing the actual pain, but if you can imagine what it would feel like, you can also feel those nerve pathways in your body right now. When you 'borrow' the nervous system of another being, you perceive the information in a similar way, you develop the ability to feel a carbon copy of their own sense picture. Perhaps a 'translation' of their sense picture would be a better expression, as you are still feeling their nervous information through your own - just as you see other people through your own eyes. It will always be an *impression* which is more or less educated by your capacity to perceive beyond ego.

If your intention is to use an energetic connection to improve your awareness of your horse when riding, it is essential to be able to respond to what you perceive adequately with your aiding skills. This is why training yourself to ride well is so important. Riding can then become an authentic dialogue which celebrates mutual sensitivity. Practice when you ride by beginning your focus within yourself to establish a sense picture. Listen to the subtlest sensations.

As a species we have removed ourselves further and further into our intellect, losing touch with many connections, all of which have a physical manifestation. The nerves and nervous tissue we used to connect with our body have become underdeveloped through lack of use as we live more and more in the realm of abstract thought. For this reason we tend to think that the ghostlike sensations we can reach at first are simply *imaginary*. Even your imagined thoughts still come from somewhere and if you are specifically tuning in to your body it is highly likely that you are making a real connection. To get closer to your source again, who you really are, as well as how your body functions, you must have some faith in the process. Believe in your own perception, encourage it and it will grow to the point where you no longer feel any inclination to question it.

When you feel that you have some connection with yourself, expand your awareness to include your horse. There are several ways to do this while riding:

- **Feel the horse with your contact points (legs and seat). Use the nerves you have in your body to feel the texture of the horse's back and legs. Begin by feeling from your external proprioceptors to the first layer of the horse's body you are meeting. Even on this level you can feel many things. How hard a horse feels in their sides, how accepting they are of your leg, whether they seem to absorb or repel you. How does your saddle feel, can you imagine feeling the horse's back beneath the saddle. Can you imagine how the saddle feels to the horse?**
- **See if you can capture an impression of your horse's energy, their emotions or any tension they might be feeling. You can start by reading their behaviour, but ultimately you can connect on an energetic level. Can you feel sadness, anger or fear? What happens when you tune in to this, does it expand, change, or dissipate? Do you sense those emotions in yourself, are they your own, or perhaps you are resonating with your horse? Feel for ways you can reduce any tension with your riding.**

The potential is vast once you accept that your perception of your horse is not restricted to skin on skin contact. You can become aware of the horse's body in the way described above, perceiving the 'sense picture'. Gradually the 'perception engine' you have developed will give you access to whichever part of the horse you wish to tune into. This can open many doors when it comes to training. When you can receive information about how your horse actually feels, you are in a far more sensitive and intelligent position to approach the work. Some days you will find you are more tuned in and sensitive than others and your training session will reflect that. It isn't appropriate to have expectations about it and letting them go is part of the process of becoming present. That being said, heightening your own awareness is particularly helpful when you are taking a young horse through the process of physiological transformation.

The better you can listen, the quicker you will know if a physical issue comes up that you need to respond to. It makes the whole process so much more fulfilling. I have observed that horses who have been ridden in a typically force-orientated way, even competing at a high level, have a similar one-dimensionality about the way they go. They feel as if they only move in one narrow way which is rigid and flat as a result. Becoming fixated on what you can do with your horse instead of the quality of the feeling itself when you ride might be such a common oversight because people in general don't realise how much they can develop the quality of how the horse feels. Instead of shutting down the spontaneity and potential by domination, it is possible to transform even a very limited horse.



Mojo was limited by his physical body, he had very straight hind-legs and he found bending very difficult, it often seemed as if his stifles were blocking him. When I learned to be present with those limitations, and gently support them instead of pushing him, it felt as if he was able to transcend his body. This happened both within the session and over time.



It is clear in this photograph how he has developed the strength to carry himself in greater collection, and his musculature reflects that. The most valuable changes, however, were in our partnership which became a friendship as I let go of my expectations and assumptions.

The Aiding Process

Understanding the Aids

Establishing your awareness of how your weight is sitting on the horse is the foundation of understanding aiding. Become aware of where your horse wants to place your weight, and how much you are resisting that, in relation to what feels acceptable in terms of balance. Along with this develop your awareness of your posture in the longitudinal sense, your *self-engagement* it could be called: how much you are able to tuck your pelvis, keep your legs under you, flatten your shoulders, and stay equally stretched across your torso. The quality of your seat aiding will come directly from the effectiveness of your weight management and your own postural engagement. **Think of it as using your posture as an actual aid.** Your posture is both the foundation and a dynamic. Our ultimate goal with the horse is a connection between our two bodies which transcends the formality of giving an aid and receiving a response. Another useful image is to consider that your posture is a doorway, and your other aids are there to encourage the horse to go through it. The straightness and evenness of the door then forms the horse. **The seat aids are basically passive and containing, whereas leg aids are active and expressing.** This differentiation is extremely important when it comes to applying the aids. If a rider has not achieved independence between the passive and the active aids, this may lead to:

- **Active aiding with the seat, which will stifle the forward movement and encourage the horse to drop their back.**
- **Passive legs which have not developed the strength to aid in a sensitive, consistent way.**

More complex relationships of passive and active aids can also occur:

- **Sometimes both seat and leg are passive and containing, say, when riding a tense, over-sensitive horse. This is a delicate situation because there can be no release for the tension until the leg has an authentic connected relationship with the horse's sides. The solution is to channel the horse into straightness so your active leg can be accepted. (See p.151).**
- **Activity all round, mostly seen with a reluctant horse. It is not a solution because an active seat is the enemy of postural engagement in a horse. The horse must be able to stretch their back and connect with the rider's seat which can 'lock into' that in a way which releases itself to the movement at the same time as channeling it. Moving your seat will disturb the lift in the horse's back and increase their reluctance to go forward.**

Riding demands the ability to use your legs in many different ways to initiate different responses in the horse. Leg aids must be applied in a *forward* direction which is the opposite than that which comes naturally to us. The best way to develop this ability is to liberate your leg by training it to move in a circular motion. The circle is orientated so that the leg is brought against the horse in a forward direction, and it then comes round away from the horse in the backward direction. **So there is an anti-clockwise direction with the left leg, and a clockwise direction with the right leg.**

The reasons to develop the leg in this way are:

- To be able to use the leg in a sensitive, articulate way to **stimulate your horse to go forward**. If you imagine using your leg in a backward way, it can only result in some form of a blow, whether gentle or not, it is the same 'shape' of aid as a blow. Not only that, it is directed backward against the horse's side, so in terms of yielding you are asking the horse to move backwards from your leg, which is the opposite from the response you really want. The horse's forward movement can be forward and sideways or forward and straight, the leg aid itself will be defined by the orientation of the horse and which part of their body (available to the leg) is most appropriate to connect with.
- To be able to use your leg effectively to **contain movement**. The containing leg has two influences. Firstly to slow the movement, so controlling the pace itself. Secondly it is used simultaneously with your postural engagement (leverage) to re-balance the horse, bringing their centre of gravity back. So the leg aid serves to connect the horse up to the postural leverage. It is like creating a dam for the horse's energy so that the energy is then available to be re-directed.
- The last use of the leg is particularly important. The leg must be applied in a forward direction to allow the rider to connect with the ribcage of the horse in a hugging, consolidating way. This will **embrace the horse and encourage them to yield and relax their physical body**. It is a connection between horse and human which cannot exist when there is lack of balance. Balance must be there already from the postural engagement between the two. The intention is to intensify the union of horse and rider, to glue them together so that physical tension (most often in the diaphragm) can be released, and a merge can happen energetically.



Aiding is not based on hard and fast rules and regulations, it is highly personal and unique for any horse-rider combination. But it is important to learn how to apply the aids, which does have a particular form, as we have discussed previously. This form is based on functionality, i.e aids can only communicate in the most sensitive and articulate way when they are applied in a certain way. It is like learning the words of a language, which are the words and cannot be changed too much, then there are certain rules of grammar, and as with aiding there are certain circumstances in which to apply the aids to make sense. Beyond that however, the language needs to be tailored to the individual dialogue with each horse.

Think of how you start off with a bicycle. You have your starting position sitting on the bike, in balance with the upright stance of the bike. Then you create leverage on the bike by way of the pedals. The bike is then propelled forward and you continue to balance it with your body, and you pedal to keep moving. Gradually the balance comes more easily as the momentum carries you in a more stream-lined manner. Riding a horse must be understood to have a 'leverage' dynamic in the same way. With a horse you use your leg to yield the horse to step forward, and in resisting the influence of that movement on your own body, the horse is levered onto their postural muscles. Your leg movement has the same effect as when the bike pedal turns, *your body* acts as the transmission (the lever) which receives the movement and levers the bike forward, turning the wheels. The important part is to maintain the integrity of your posture, like a lever in action. **If the lever bends then the energy will not be channeled through it**, and neither bike nor horse will move forward in engagement.

Both the bike and the horse can move forward *outside of* engagement, the bike will be 'free wheeling' outside of the traction of the gears, and the horse can move outside of engagement under the rider. Most horses are ridden outside of engagement, and they can then only be stopped or guided by the disconnected action of pulling on their head, which is similar to the effect of the front brakes on a bike. Controlling a bike with the gears is closest to what you can do as a rider on a horse, but it is so much more sophisticated than that, because the postural muscles of both horse and rider become united staying in balance and in one powerful mechanism. As if your bike came alive and could read your thoughts as well as your most subtle body language. This leverage applied by way of the rider's posture is a powerful tool. It must be used in its subtlest form with a young horse. It is very important that it *is* used however, otherwise your training will not have started and will have no purpose in terms of engagement. The longer a horse is ridden 'traction-off' the more difficult the process of applying the traction becomes, because the pathways are being forged along different lines.

Adapting Your Aiding For A Young Horse

The first concession you make in the early riding stages with a young horse is the forward yield (pushing the bike pedal). The young horse is not yet ready to respond either to this aid alone or any full-on leg aid of this sort. The assistant will patiently and gently ask the horse to move forward in the way the horse is accustomed to in the previous work on the lunge, and the rider can use whatever degree of accompaniment with their leg *feels right*. That may, in some cases and quite rightly be nothing at the very beginning. What is crucial is that as your horse moves, *you maintain your position in place*. Very few riders actually do this. When the horse pushes off from one back leg there is a wave of movement which rolls through the horse's body, and then another from the other hind leg, and mostly the rider reacts subconsciously to this by being pushed forward as if from a wave in the sea. It may only be a slight tipping forward, but the leverage is nonetheless lost. The horse will move forward with their front end, already putting the weight into their front legs, and the engagement of the hindquarters and lifting of the back is not achieved.

Performing an engaged transition is harder for the horse than a disconnected one. It requires more power, and all the parts of the body which make up the ring of engagement are stretching and working. The more that the postural ring is used, the stronger it will become. Although riding a horse without it may be easier at first, problems will arise later on as the intrinsic lack of balance and difficulties in controlling the horse become apparent. In addition to the physiological wear on the horse from continually moving out of balance and not using their joints in a shock absorbing way. Introduce the engagement slowly and simply, and it will become a security for your horse.

Feel for the connection you have successfully initiated in the first few strides, and feel how maintaining your tallness will maintain balance. Gradually allow your weight to fully melt down into the horse. Remember that your weight is your weight and you can't sit lighter by trying to hold your weight off the horse. That will also cause you to bounce more, because your weight is part of what sticks you onto the horse's back. Letting it go fully allows you to merge your balance with the horse's balance. Absorbing the weight of a relaxed person is much more comfortable for the horse, and your relaxation will also relax the horse mentally. Allow your lower back to follow the swing of the horse's stride. The junction between your lower back (the lumbar spine) and the back your seat (the sacrum), the lumbosacral junction is extremely important for the rider. It is the principal shock absorber of the spine. All the movement which comes through the horse into you must be received by the flexibility of this junction in your body. This is also the junction between the part of you which is *above* the horse and the part which is *around* the horse.

Imagine a horse sent on to a racetrack to bring in another horse who is running at full speed. The first horse will gradually guide the full-speed galloper across the track and at the same time slow the pace until both horses can come back to a stop. This is the job of your lumbosacral junction, it follows the movement, matching it at first, then gradually guides and controls it without force or abruptness.

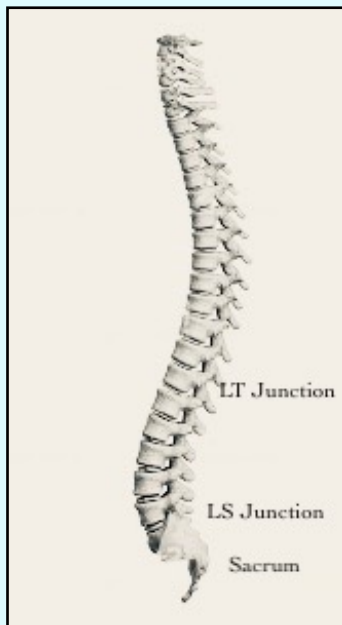
Many riders are restricted in this part of their spine. This restriction is transmitted to the horse and causes them to become stiff in their back. The shock absorption can only be effective where the movement of the horse first meets the rider's body. If there is a block there, then it is like a river meeting a concrete dam, the flow is halted abruptly and the force caused is stored as tension in the horse's spine. Like a wall appearing on the race-track in front of the horse galloping at full speed. There would be a crash and the violence of the impact is stored up as frozen energy. The other consequence is that the movement which is backing up into the horse when the rider's lumbosacral junction is blocked, will cause a jerky action in the horse, and the rider will tend to absorb this movement further up their spine, either at the lumbothoracic junction or in their neck. This can be seen as a nodding or unstable upper body, and is neither functionally correct nor attractive. All riders must make sure their LS Junction is functional and as flexible as possible, it is one of the mainstays of successful riding.



The horse's movement comes around in the clockwise direction and meets the rider's seat which absorbs and recycles the movement in the anticlockwise direction.

There are five sacral vertebra in the human spine which fuse together by adulthood into one single bone called the sacrum.

The top end attaches to the first lumbar vertebra and the bottom attaches to the coccygeal vertebrae. The sacrum is shaped like an upside down triangle, and at each side connects with the iliac bones of the pelvis, forming the sacroiliac joints.



There are five lumbar vertebrae, the top one attaches to the first of twelve thoracic vertebrae to form the lumbothoracic junction.

Both the lumbothoracic and the lumbosacral junctions take a lot of compressive force and can become damaged. Correct riding, with the pelvis tucked and engagement with the wave of the horse's movement, will help to supple them.



Role of the Reins at This Stage

At this stage of training the reins may be held, but as *the contact comes only from the horse* there is no benefit in having them any shorter than keeps the horse from tripping up in them, so hold them as near the buckle as possible. One of the most important considerations you can make when riding is **whether or not the thought that the reins are a means of control exists in your mind, and if it does, how much power it has over you.** Unless you were fortunate enough to learn to ride on the lunge and develop your balance without reins for long enough to relinquish this natural human tendency completely, it is more than likely you will still cling on to it to some degree. The best way to resolve it is to re-pattern your thought processes. You can do this at any time, riding or not.

Imagine what it feels like to use your hands to influence the reins to keep your balance in the saddle and/or to slow down the horse, and then replace this train of thought with a different one. This could be that you balance yourself by rolling on to the back of your seat-bones and tucking your pelvis. It could be that you slow the horse down by drawing yourself up tall, and simultaneously bringing the horse back to you by slowing down the movement in your lumbothoracic junction. When you imagine these replacement forms of balancing, always imagine relinquishing the reins at the same time. Train yourself every time you ride to disengage from dependence on the reins:

- **Warm up on a long rein, and encourage your horse to associate a long rein with relaxation.**
- **Make a forward yield from time to time with one or both hands. Even with very loose reins, this still disconnects any energetic holding or restriction which might be lurking or building up.**
- **Widen your perception so that you are feeling the entire combination of your body and the horse's body. Feel for the source of the movement and the direction it is going in, and check out again and again that it comes from behind and underneath your seat, and rises up and out in front of you, and your hands give and give and give it away.**
- **Explore how much you can accomplish on a long rein, in changes of direction, bending, sideways work and transitions.**



Introducing Transitions

When you start these first down transitions, agree with your assistant when you are going to ask and allow the assistant to initiate the transition with the horse, while you focus on the energetic flow. Grow your spine up into the sky like a tree, and tuck your seat up under you, engage your abdominal muscles and bring the movement in your lumbothoracic junction gradually to a halt. Make sure you keep the physical connection between your leg and the horse's side. A correct transition must keep the hindquarters traveling underneath right up until the halt, and if you take your leg off the horse may stop with their shoulders and leave their hind legs trailing. At this stage maintain only the physical touch of your leg against the horse, without application of pressure unless it feels right. How physical, i.e how much actual 'doing-ness' you put into these feelings with your body depends on the individual horse, but at first there is typically minimal action, you are only following and fitting in to your assistants aiding connection. Avoid making it about how much you can get away with, young horses will seem to tolerate far more than they actually can because they don't always react straight away. They keep absorbing like a sponge and then later on, when they are already overwhelmed their stress comes out.

Think of the horse's movement as a body of water. It has to be supported by something to keep it contained, and in riding, that something is engagement. The stronger your ability to engage the horse becomes, the more effective your channeling abilities will be. Transitions work a bit like the lock system in a canal. To open the gates for the barge to go through, the water level has to rise enough. So when the movement of the horse has enough energy contained in it, you will flow easily into the next gait without losing the engagement. The preparation for the transition - what raises the water in the canal - is a balance of two things: stimulating more movement and containing that movement.

Containing the movement means converting it from kinetic energy into potential energy. At first with less experienced riders and less trained horses there will be more of a separation between the two parts. You ask for the extra movement and then collect it back, storing up the energy, then you ask for more and so on until you have enough potential energy in the gait you are in to flow easily into the next gait. Later on the different parts become more simultaneous, and the process is quicker, so transitions can come swiftly yet still retain their seamless nature. At first it might take you a couple of circles in the arena to prepare a quality upward transition in this way. In between initiating and collecting the movement, you may need to straighten the horse and re-balance them. **It does not matter how long the preparation is, it is the quality of the transition that is important.**

There is no point in sacrificing the seamlessness in order to produce a transition whenever you want it. As soon as you start insisting that the horse complete the full transition quickly, tension will be introduced into the horse's body because you have changed your focus from maintaining the connection through energy management to what is merely an abstract idea: to insist that a horse perform in a certain way at a certain time. This idea is not related to how ready the horse is in that moment, it only an idea in the rider's mind, so it bypasses the dialogue completely. For that reason the horse will probably object and resistance will come into their muscles and their mind. Riding a horse well is bound by the laws of physics which are absolute truths involving forces and balance, and unless you respect them, and take the time it takes to achieve the balanced dynamic through respecting them, then it is the equivalent of losing your temper and starting to shout at someone when you do not have the patience to continue a discussion.

Channeling the movement is achieved through the rider's own straightness and your ability to bring that to the horse and straighten them. Then when you have this channel set up, and the movement is flowing in this way, the balance will be there to allow you to control the flow. So when you ask the horse for more movement (to begin preparation for the transition) it will be available, and when you ask the horse to slow down to store energy to produce a pure transition, the horse will be able to respond. This is the ideal scenario that you are working towards. With a young horse who is still being introduced to the rider and the aids, you will be able to produce your first trot when the horse is able to carry themselves straight enough for enough movement to come through. Imagine a hose when it is too kinked (the horse's natural crookedness) water cannot flow through it, and the more you straighten out the kink, the more water can flow through. So all you have to be concerned with ultimately is your straightening process. Gradually habituating the horse to your weight, and then bringing your weight into evenness. Often you can feel that the horse becomes freer in the walk as they become straighter, and energy comes into the strides more easily. In this way the trot will seem to arrive on its own, and the same with canter later on.

Generating the movement is accomplished through the intelligence of your leg aiding, to develop receptivity and unity from acceptance in your horse. The inside leg will tend to be the most active in this process.

1. Gently investigate if your leg is welcome. Focus on sculpting your leg in a controlled and intrinsic manner. Focus on stretching the joints of your hip, knee and ankle to their ultimate capacity *without* disturbing the horse.
2. Begin the massaging, softening process which will heighten the horse's sensitivity and familiarise them with the leg aids. Feel for a connection to the horse's breathing through their diaphragm.

3. Be attentive to any sensitivity which begins to express itself in the horse's sides. Begin to cultivate that subtle thread of communication between the voice of your leg and the responses of your horse. Widen your awareness so you feel the repercussions right through the horse's body.

Remember that the horse is your greatest teacher, the horse's responses are your guide. There are no rules which take precedence over that. When the young horse is moving with enough fluidity that they can balance well in walk, and you have established enough connection with your leg that it is at least accepted, then you have almost created the space for your first trot. Whether or not you will choose to stay in sitting trot or go into rising trot after a couple of strides depends on two things:

1. **The individual horse.** This is mainly a question of forwardness. In general more forward going horses will have more movement in their body and it will be easier for the rider to align themselves with the horse in rising trot than sitting. Your goal is to fit in as closely as possible with the horse's movement so that you don't create disturbances which panic the horse, or even worry them. The first trot is a test for the rider to maintain their own balance and through that help the horse to stay balanced so that there is a positive association with going into trot. The most common disturbance a rider can make is to tip forward too much and untuck their pelvis. This is the hollowing reflex in the rider which will be reflected in the horse. Although it differs from rider to rider, it is usually easier to maintain an engaged posture in rising trot, and it is definitely easier to stay with big movement in rising trot. Less forward horses might find it less disturbing for the rider to stay sitting. Often when they feel a rider move (to go up into rising trot) they will back off further and come back into walk, so establishing their confidence is easier from an initial practice of sitting trot. This does require a supple and educated rider, because too much bouncing around will be just as disturbing as rising, if not more so.
2. **The individual rider.** It works on a scale of progress as well as individual talent, so riders might find sitting trot easier at some times of their riding career and later on they might find rising trot easier and so on. Some riders are more practiced in rising trot, but if you can't do a correct engaged sitting trot then your rising trot is not likely to be engaged either. If you do struggle to stay balanced in trot it is an excellent idea to practice, and ideally take lunge lessons on a more experienced horse. Young horses are most vulnerable to losing their confidence at this stage, and they can develop some profound resistances.

When you sense that your horse is ready for their first trot, allow the assistant to take most of the responsibility for generating the movement. This will be in the same dialogue-sensitive way as before there was a rider on their back.

At this stage the rider is most concerned with staying in balance in their own posture and carefully using their passive weight aids to keep the horse as balanced as possible. As described in Part 1 of *How to Train a Horse Without Force*, the assistant will reflect the preparatory aids for trot that a rider would give on the ground; building up the movement (kinetic energy) and balancing it within the horse's body (potential energy). The assistant on the ground uses the lunge whip, their posture and the contact in the lunge line to communicate this, and by this stage the horse's ability to respond will already be well established.

The rider needs to prepare themselves for the push-off stride, and be ready to resist any tipping forward and lifting out of their seat with their core muscles. Imagine being balanced back into the padded part of the seat-bones, stuck on like glue, yet when the wave comes through, your pelvis will rock under you, your lumbosacral junction will absorb the movement and you will stay tall and elegant. The *next* stride is when you decide if you are rising or staying sitting. If you rise, then you must have your lower leg deep enough under you to help you lift up in balance. If it is too far forward then you will be forced to haul yourself up from your shoulders. Some riders pull themselves up using the reins which is to be avoided at all costs! Allow your shoulders to come enough in front of the vertical to prevent you getting behind the movement and losing your balance, but try not to tip so far forward that you load the horse's shoulders with more weight. Keep it in the forefront of your mind that you need to help the horse to balance your weight, so use your inside leg to lift your weight up, and focus on continuing to anchor yourself through that leg.

If you choose to stay sitting, focus on letting the horse absorb your seat into their movement, stay tall and keep your pelvis tucked. Imagine lifting your pubic bone up in front of you. Think of keeping your back flat, as if you were leaning against a wall. Focus on resisting the push to the outside as the horse pushes off into trot, imagine your inside seat-bone staying in place on the inside of the horse's spine. Think of your pelvis as a box that has to sit flat on the horse's back and not slide off to the outside. Accept whatever the young horse gives you and appreciate any effort. Even if there is only an attempt to push off the first time. Use any hesitancy as an opportunity to anchor yourself deeper and create more balance. Avoid using the reins at this stage, they have no role and avoiding negative associations is paramount.

Usually young horses are more reluctant to go forward when they are relaxed, so they will come back to walk on their own. Sitting a little taller, slowing your rising or limiting your following seat will be sufficient. Try to gently maintain the leg connection so that you maintain your overall connection. During any forward movement at all, the leg must always be present, even if it is neutral. That is because its presence against the horse's sides, just like the rider's elbows against their sides, is a part of the postural ring, between horse and rider.

Absence of the leg is similar to taking your feet off the pedals of a bicycle. Keeping your feet on the pedals, even if you aren't actually pedalling, keeps you in touch with the mechanism and your next push will be seamless. Because a horse is a living creature, they can feel your leg there and that keeps their hind-legs with you as part of the engagement.

If the horse does begin to rush, your assistant can help to communicate that you wish to slow down, perhaps by using a voice aid they have used in the lunging previously, and by slowing down their movements, becoming taller and by very gradually shortening the line. The rider can have a profound influence by slowing down their rising, bringing their upper body taller and relaxing more.

The key to slowing any horse down is to bring them into balance, and that is done by improving their straightness.

Do this by letting more weight down into your inside leg and use that to encourage the horse to lift their ribcage and turn their body more, bringing their shoulders round onto the bend. As soon as they begin to move in a more balanced way, they will be able to slow down. Only use the reins to stop the horse as an absolute last resort. In fact it is advisable to have the reins attached to the nose-band at this stage, so that no negative associations can be made in the horse's mind from a bit.



The Micklem Multibridle is ideal for a set-up without a bit and having the lunge-line attached to the nose ring on the top (indicated by the arrow).



First steps of trot with Totti. I have been focusing on aligning her body underneath me until she was strong enough to walk straight. This strength which developed her postural muscles has now given her the ability to transition up into trot. As there is more natural momentum in trot, if we stay straight enough, she will balance well and continue to build strength.



As the horse becomes confident with the feeling of a rider's weight in the walk and trot transition, the responsibility for giving the stimulating aids can be taken over more and more by the rider. It will feel natural if the whole process has been undertaken gradually because the horse will become more able to focus on the rider, and so will be more receptive. The rider just has to fit in with the heightening of receptivity in the horse. Think of the horse's receptivity (sensitivity through acceptance) to your aids as like a plant you are growing. It needs to be looked after and allowed to grow and strengthen before it can yield fruit. Often riders try to harvest too soon and they end up pulling the whole plant out of the ground.

An excellent way of introducing the young horse to the feeling of collecting their body and controlling their forward pace, as well as beginning to extend themselves and move bigger without rushing, are transitions *within* the trot. As soon as you can maintain a trot for long enough, through supporting, not forcing the horse's boundaries then instead of bringing the horse right down to walk, think of asking for a slightly slower trot for a few strides. Because a slower trot is more collected it requires more postural effort, so the horse needs more energy to keep it going. You will need to focus on maintaining your postural engagement, not leaning or tipping forward or letting your postural leverage slip by losing your pelvic tuck or letting your lower leg slip forward. This will support the horse in bringing themselves into a more engaged posture, so they can carry themselves with more cadence, maintaining a trot with less momentum.

Change your leg aids to more of a containing feeling, like an embracing leg which can store the energy. At first just the slightest sensation of pause in the horse's forward movement is to be rewarded with much appreciation. After the pause, relax your leg, stay balanced and encourage the horse to open themselves out a little again. Your leg will change to a lighter, more liberating aid which is more stimulating and less containing. Imagine you were riding uphill and that the horse can now stretch their limbs further and make larger strides. If the horse has enough strength they will offer you some larger strides, but they may not have the power yet, so don't force it because that will make the horse rush. There is no value in *faster* steps, and patterning the habit of rushing is not a good idea. If you continue to ask gently over time, the horse will continue to strengthen and the bigger trot will come.

It is asking for a much greater strength and flexibility for a horse to produce different *qualities* of trot, rather than just the easiest stride length and tempo for their conformation. At first with a young or inexperienced horse, you are only showing them the way to alter their body to be able to develop that ability, and any attempt they make is valuable. Because there is no tension involved, no pain in their mouth or forceful driving aids, all the activity you are creating is going straight into growth, so you don't need to hammer away at these exercises, repeating for repetition's sake. Look only for a sense of physical and energetic connection with the concept, something for their nervous system to pattern, and that is enough.

Introducing Straightness

Most of the work you do when riding in an arena is on a bend, whether it is a circle or a corner. Maintaining this bend correctly, requires a lot of attention. Keeping your weight central on a turn will often feel to you as if you are bringing more weight down the inside. This is because you are already being thrown out to the outside to some degree, and you may not be aware of the extent of this.

The Digital Shift:
In the first photo my weight is being pushed to the outside (we are on a left bend). In Photo 2 I resist with my postural strength and Totti lifts on to her postural ring.



The following exercises help you to become aware of your level of straightness and how to ride a horse straight, one or more of which might resonate with you:

Exercise 4: Going Straight

1. **Standing in the saddle:** This exercise will tell you **where** you are allowing the majority of your weight to fall. Riders who are being placed by the horse's natural crookedness will tend to be pushed into their outside foot round a turn.
- In walk (or halt if you are finding it difficult to balance) practice standing up in the saddle as if you were performing the rising phase of a rising trot. You need considerable core strength and suppleness in your ankles and hip joints to be able to keep your lower leg under your body enough to stay up out of the saddle over more than a couple of strides. Try to gauge whether you are balancing through your inside pillar or down the outside.
 - Once you can manage well enough with two stirrups, take the real test, remove the outside stirrup and see if you can still stand up out of the saddle. If you find that much more difficult it is a sign that your weight tends to fall down the outside, and that will also result in a tendency to hang on the outside rein to balance. Any kinks in the pillar mean that your weight isn't maintaining itself to the inside. This is usually due to lack of strength but if you find it doesn't improve given practice and time then consider some bodywork to help you release any restrictions which are limiting your progress.

Once you are balanced in halt, ask your horse to move off and see how well you can manoeuvre around the arena.

The more supple you become, and the better you can control your weight, the more vertical your posture can become.

Remember you are asking the horse to turn by supporting your weight which is coming down your inside pillar.

If you have to lean over or hang on the inside rein to turn, you know that your weight is not yet mastered.



2. **The Mountain Analogy:** Whenever you are riding on a bend, imagine that you are in fact riding round a conical shaped mountain, on a very narrow path. To stay on the path you have to keep your weight to the inside to help the horse balance and stay on the path, and you must maintain the bend, positioning the horse's head in the direction you are riding towards, otherwise the horse will turn away from the mountain and might fall off the path.
3. **The Digital Shift:** Although the horse requires a certain level of suppleness and postural strength to truly straighten up through their whole body, the actual change from straightness to crookedness seems to happen in a digital way. That means, one stride they are crooked and the next they are straight. (See p.143 photograph of Totti). **Therefore, one of the most effective ways to straighten a horse is to slow them down enough that the time in between one stride and the next is long enough to give you a chance to establish a new, straight posture and hold it. Establishing straightness in your posture means resisting the slump back into the horse's crookedness every stride. As the horse brings their inside hind-leg through and pushes off, there is a corresponding tilt to the outside of the rib-cage, at which point the rider will sway to the outside. It is that sway you must resist with your postural strength.** The horse will quickly respond by coming more upright in their torso, bending truly into the turn and lifting their back. Other signs in the horse of becoming straight are their sides becoming softer to the leg, their diaphragm opening, clearing of their lungs, their neck beginning to telescope and softening and movement of their jaw. As you and the horse get stronger you will be able to maintain this straightness over several strides and then for longer and longer periods.
4. **The Compass:** An excellent way to tell whether your weight is correctly balanced is using your arms as a compass. When you are in the saddle, let your elbows sit against your sides and allow your forearms to stretch out straight from your elbows. It is important not to let the wrist 'break'. Where your hands are sitting in relation to the horse's neck and shoulders will indicate what you need to know about your weight. **If the outside hand sits or points to the outside of the horse's neck, then your weight is falling to the outside. When your weight is correct, and the horse is straight, then your outside hand will be above the wither, and the inside hand will sit to the inside of the horse's neck.** (See photographs below). To get a true picture your elbows must be against your sides and then allow your hands to point where they naturally go. They will be following the line of your torso which will point to the outside if it is turning to the outside because the weight is falling to the outside. If you only correct your hands and not your seat, then you will create a compensating twist in your body.



Odette is moving on a right bend in this photograph. Gabrielle's left hand is sitting above the wither of the horse, and the right hand is positioned to the right of the wither. This indicates that the rider has their weight correctly balanced, and the horse is moving in straightness.



Here Odette is on the left rein, and now Gabrielle's right hand is above the wither, and her left hand is over to the left, indicating the correctly balanced weight. You can sense her easily moving forward straight or on to a left circle from her acceptance of the leg.



Side view of Gabrielle riding Odette.

5. **The Train Compartments:** Another helpful analogy is to think of the horse as a train with different compartments that need to be both aligned *and* maintained on the tracks. When a horse moves in their natural crookedness they tend to put more weight down through one side of their body rather than staying square across both sides. You need to be able to feel what is happening in the horse's body and **use your own weight to bring the horse out of the 'side-wheelie' and flat on to both tracks. Then you can channel the energy longitudinally through the aligned compartments of the horse's body.** It helps to take your awareness out of the horse's front-end and focus into their whole body. This also brings your thoughts out of our hands and what they are doing and into your seat and legs and how they are relating to the horse.
6. **The Toboggan:** Thinking of the horse as a toboggan that must be **channeled straight forward down the slope rather than swinging from side to side.** This particular analogy is good for bringing more awareness to the flow of movement through the horse's body, and how the flow itself brings alignment to the physical structures.

The straightening process is achieved by the rider bringing the physical structure of the horse into alignment through aligning their own structure (body), and then the horse is asked to move forward with that new balance until the momentum built up locks the straightness in. The feeling of engagement - locking in, traction-on, going through - however it is described, is worth the effort and the search a million times over. It is indescribable, and very few riders are not touched by the magic of it.



Totti 'taking off' when we achieve that magical alignment!

The Training Spiral

One of the reasons that training a horse is a difficult task is that straightness is a digital dynamic, as described above, and yet it must be attained in an incremental way. This makes more sense when seen in terms of the **training spiral**. The spiral is a name for the development process of all the different aspects of the horse's mind and body. There are many of these, including:

- **Mental willingness.**
- **Physical forwardness.**
- **Postural strength.**
- **Suppleness of joints.**

Imagine all of these aspects being like individual trails of smoke or lengths of ribbon which are intertwined, and for the horse to make progress, these aspects must strengthen, but they don't all do that at the same time or in the same way. So it seems when training a horse that you are coming around in circles, but in fact you are moving along in a spiral because you have been developing one of the aspects. An example of this might be if your horse is forward and balanced enough to begin work on the canter. The work on the canter, which is naturally a low, babyish canter, then stimulates a new phase of postural development, so the trot, which *was* a lower more babyish trot becomes more advanced. At this point the young horse now cannot canter easily anymore because he is too weak to canter at the same level as he trots but is no longer physically as he was when he produced a babyish canter.

This scenario could seem like you are coming around in a circle when in fact you are much further ahead along the spiral. You just need to continue with the new trot, as you did with the original trot, until the horse is able to canter in the new, more advanced way. Riders who are not prepared to accept the way a horse develops, and force the horse to produce the movement anyway, because they could do it before, or because they think that they should be doing it, will lose the horse's confidence in their judgement, and the tension which results in the horse's mind will fix into their body.

If a horse can't do a movement *without effort which is stressful* to them, then what they do produce will be compensated in a negative way. For example a young horse who is not balanced or not ready in their mind to trot yet, if forced to do so will trot in an arrhythmic, unbalanced way which the rider will not be able to control without force and the vicious circle of push and pull will commence. You have to trust your horse's judgement to some degree. Indeed there are some horses who need the support, and will respond and develop when you push them a bit, but there are also horses who will retreat and shut down if you push them. It is your responsibility to find that line with each horse.

This applies not just for riding horses, but in knowing their whole character. How they behave with the other horses, what stimulates them and what frightens them. If every stage of training you reach with your horse is allowed to unfold naturally within the horse's capacities then you will avoid loss of balance and rhythm, and therefore loss of control. There is no true benefit to be gained in forcing the horse out of rhythm just because you wish to introduce a new movement. This is because you are not *conditioning* the horse. When you ride 'real' dressage, you are in fact developing the horse's physique. Therefore when they are ready for the next stage, they will actually be ready, and it will come without sacrificing any quality. This doesn't mean you can always avoid times when the horse rushes and moves in an awkward way, but there is a big difference between initiating these times and dealing with them if they arise. It is the same principle as teaching riders on the lunge. Avoiding a situation where a beginner rider begins to bounce around and feel insecure will also avoid them having to make unwelcome compensations such as grabbing the saddle or stiffening up. Making sure (within reason) that the horse's movement stays within the capacities of the rider's seat will always encourage higher quality work from the rider and gradually their flexibility will increase. A train has to stay on the track for it to make progress.

Although sometimes trainers advocate pushing a horse and rider out of their 'comfort zone' this can be counterproductive. It is important to define what is meant here by the comfort zone. Taking the example of the rider, the comfort zone in the **rider** can be interpreted either as the *quality zone*, where the work is correct and staying within its own balance and coordination, or it can be interpreted as someone who is riding within their own natural crookedness, not challenging themselves to achieve a correct posture, and therefore riding in a *stagnant* way. Correct riding is not easy until it is mastered and effort cannot be avoided, the point is that the effort must be intelligently channeled. As any rider would wish to ride in a smooth and balanced way on a horse, then that is the only kind of riding they must practice. At first this may mean *only the walk* is of value in developing their seat.

The same approach applies to training a horse, there is no benefit in pushing a horse out of balance, because control will be lost and undesirable consequences may result. If a horse frequently plants and refuses to move, panics and rushes, then nothing has been gained. Negative pathways have been formed which could have been avoided. This is why the trainer who stays within a horse's limits will make the best progress. It is much easier to go fifty ways in the wrong direction, than to find the one right way. Remember that the limits exist for a reason, they come from the body-mind of the horse. Some horses give over their body more than others, because their mind is more tolerant, but where the line is drawn between body and mind is of little importance. The trainer can best influence the limits by respecting them.

If a horse is very timid, and only allows their body to be influenced to a very limited degree, yet the trainer respects that and doesn't decide that this horse *can* do it, in accepting the horse's mental limit, gradually the horse will open their body more and more. In finding that they can, because their body is capable, they will gain more confidence, and their mental limit will adapt and stretch. A horse who is limited more in the body, but allows more access to it must also be carefully listened to, such a horse would be capable of allowing serious physical damage to occur if a trainer simply pushed and pushed.

Working with the limits means staying at the edge of them and supporting the horse until they stretch and develop. It is not the same as forcing through, or hanging back. In practice, relating this concept to riding a trot transition would mean taking enough time to prepare the quality of the walk until the transition comes easily and smoothly without loss of connection. Feel for the boundary of your horse's forwardness and balance: the sense of asking enough to stimulate but not enough to stress or aggravate the horse. Gradually the horse will become more supple and stronger and able to carry themselves in balance in larger strides and their sensitivity will increase, so by staying within their limitations you have successfully reduced them. This means being fully in the present moment and requires the greatest awareness and dedication from the rider.

How supporting the limits works in practice with the young horse:

1. When the youngster feels reluctant to go forward:

Respecting limits is another way of saying *listening* to those limits, and when you listen to something you learn more about it. There is always a reason for every behaviour, and when you can take time and offer attention to this behaviour, instead of attempting to eradicate it, then more light will be shed on what is causing it. When you ride you are engaging yourself and your best postural effort with the horse, like putting a key in a lock, and now you apply the same level of pressure with which the lock resists you. Embrace and support that pressure, without exceeding it, and gradually the lock will unwind and the door will swing open. With the horse who is unwilling to go forward: be attentive, sit correctly, and engage yourself with the resistance itself. What does it feel like in the horse? Where is it held? How profound it is? In acknowledging these things you are already supporting it. Continue to match the resistance with your own awareness, and feel in your body for how to support the resistance physically. Perhaps you hug the horse's sides with your leg, at the same level of the resistance. Maybe you feel the tightness in the horse's back with your seat. Listen to the reluctance itself, and if you do this with enough focus, it will begin to shift. The horse may relax and feel okay to move, or maybe you will become aware of a physical issue.. sensitive feet perhaps or a sore back. Allow information to come to you, be as receptive in yourself as you are able.

2. If the youngster is overenthusiastic to go forward, yet difficult to contact with the leg:

This can be a sign of too much tension. The question is whether the tension exists in the horse already or is building up during the work. If the tension is present from the beginning of the work sessions then it could be coming from the horse's lifestyle. The more stimulating and natural their environment, the less likely it will be that the horse has to use the work session as a way of venting energy. If the tension seems to build up throughout the session you need to consider whether you have pushed forward too fast in any of the previous work. It isn't going to be possible to avoid all difficult scenarios, but the sooner you respond to problems arising, the less likely they are to become habitual. If you feel that you may have overdone it, you can choose to give the horse a rest from the work for a while, or go back to groundwork for a while. Go deep into your own intentions and check out if you are pushing and imposing expectations.

Of course it is possible to use the training itself as a channel for the horse's energy. In teaching the horse to move straight you are equipping them with the perfect way to release any tension which arises. Engagement motivates the horse's entire body to come together and harmonise. Not only does it channel the movement and make it controllable because it requires energy, it is also a balanced way of moving, and it stabilises the horse's body and mind. It harnesses the tension without producing more. The situation is delicate at this early stage however, because the young horse is not accustomed to engagement yet. Remember that you need to use the straightening process as a doorway to accessing their sides with your leg. Always feed any extra forward energy into straightening the horse. This will gradually make your leg acceptable to their sides, because you will be releasing their diaphragm at the same time. Part of the way of bringing the horse back into balance with you is through your leg.

Izzy is an older horse who could not accept the leg at first.



Izzy's Story

Some horses are more sensitive than others, so they are less tolerant to feeling out of balance or unsafe. That means that they have less ability to compensate for their situation, so they reach boiling point sooner. Horses like that are often more responsive and more generous when they do feel safe and balanced. Izzy was such a horse, and she has been through some tough times as a result. Her attempts to escape situations she couldn't cope with caused her to flip over backwards three times, injuring herself severely on one occasion. Her owners believed she could make it through and against all odds she did. Working with her was a gift, as she was so willing to connect. Considering the trauma she had suffered, it would not have been surprising if she had been totally shut-down, but she had almost gone full circle (or spiral) and she was open in a way that was so beautiful - as if she had seen the worst and had no more fears. At first she was physically tight with tension, her sides were untouchable and she felt like a time-bomb. Gradually she allowed the weight to come down onto her back, and she let me sit up and bring my upper body back until I could engage my seat-bones in the 'green light', not the 'red light' position.

If you tip on to your fork, or attempt to sit 'upright', your seat-bones cannot roll forward with the horse's movement and allow the spinal undulation,. You bounce off the horse's back, and can't embrace the hind-leg movement with your seat and it is therefore a red light to the horses movement. The 'green light' position means tucking your seat and going with the movement. Once I could sit into her movement, it was possible to begin to channel it straighter, and the balance that came with that gave her confidence to relax enough to begin accepting my leg. My leg could then start to massage her sides and she could breathe and loosen her diaphragm. The positive cycle was installing itself and every part of it facilitated a deeper connection with the other parts. In two sessions Izzy went from explosive and stilted to so much softer and looser that she felt confident enough to bound forward in rhythm, channeling straight and powerful. She had all that pent up tension to release and she could let herself go, yet remain in engagement, balanced and calm.

Zoom's Story

Zoom was a little Connemara gelding of about four years old. He had been backed and brought on in the typical six week timescale and he came to us afterwards for some extra schooling. At first it seemed like every muscle in his body was tight with anxiety. There was only a limited time to make a difference so we couldn't follow our own advice, which would be to put him back out in a herd for at least six months, then start again from the beginning, connecting and working on the ground for however long it took to replace his fear and weakness with confidence and strength. The ultimate key to relaxing him was balancing him under the rider, because lack of balance was at the root of his fear.

He had been forcibly pushed out of his 'baby' reluctance to go forward, and found himself out of balance under the rider, and then the bit was used to control his flight response. If there had been time to allow the existing tension to dissipate out of his mind and body, and then train him to balance himself in a different way *without* a rider, we could have brought him back to the same 'riding' issue as a different horse. Some of the negative association would have still been there, but they would have easily been re-patterned because they would no longer have been connected to real physical weakness. As he was, so full of tension, there was very little room for manoeuvre, and the slightest noise, movement or shift of weight of the rider would spook him. When he was engaged and moving as straight as he could, he would begin to let go of the tension.

As with Izzy, this kind of riding requires a high level of sensitivity and skill, to avoid triggering further tension and develop enough physical connection to bring about balance and relaxation in the work. The real lesson with Izzy and Zoom is that prevention is both easier and less demanding than cure.

Marie's Progress

Having adopted Marie, I was able to respect the time she needed to return to being ridden. Every horse has different wrinkles in their education, and their relationship with people, just as we do. Genuine training is embracing the wrinkles in ourselves and in the horses, and exposing them to the light of understanding and acknowledgment. This is why there is no 'should' because the patterns, the wrinkles, are all uniquely individual. In Marie's case we took a long time to be able to make a trot transition. On the surface it seems simple - of course she can go into trot! In reality, so many different parts had to be made whole. For Marie to be able to go into trot without panicking, or freezing up, she had to be able to allow herself to accept the connecting aids of the rider. To respond in this way was not just a behavioural choice, it was profoundly physical. Her body had to heal deep inconsistencies, imbalances and damage in order to be able to function in balance and respond to straightening aids. In one way the training is a linear series of events, but there is also a quantum leap that must be made when everything has been prepared and healed and lined up in the right place. This was what the trot transition represented for Marie: a quantum leap into engagement, which was a physical ascendance onto the postural ring, an emotional release into trust and an energetic leap into a merge with another being.



Our first trot together.

Integrating The Rider Off the Lunge

When are you ready to ride without assistance?

- **When you can line the horse up to the mounting block and get on in a relaxed way without any resistance or anxiety in the horse.**
- **The horse feels stable and safe when you are in the saddle.**
- **The horse is beginning to respond to gentle leg aiding to go forward and stay on a circle without becoming unsettled.**
- **You are able to do simple upward and downward transitions between halt, walk and trot.**
- **The trot feels balanced enough that you can prevent the horse beginning to rush.**

Understanding Engagement In The Horse

Engaging a horse is like baking a cake, you bring together different ingredients, some more vital than others, and you make something which is above and beyond the ingredients themselves. Of course it is above and beyond because of the energetic change that takes place in the oven, and the energetic change between horse and rider is just as radical. There is not a rigid order in the addition of the ingredients, because the nature of engagement is synchrony of all the parts, like a machine. The best way is to be attentive to the presence of each element and encourage those that are missing or weak. The engagement mechanism itself will encourage the harmonisation of the ingredients if you can tip the balance enough in its favour. The following is an exploration of the typical ingredients

Receptivity:

Receptivity in the horse is the result of a tension-free state of body-mind. A horse can only listen to you if they are relaxed enough. While lack of tension is dependent on certain lifestyle factors, much can also be achieved in each moment through the state of mind of the rider. The more you can access the state of mindfulness which allows you to accept each moment as it is happening, and respond directly with the knowledge from your source, the better you can connect with a horse. This is because all beings are connected through universal consciousness: the 'being-ness', and that is the universal language. We don't have to imitate their body-language or vocal expressions, we just have access the state where we can perceive energy.

Receptivity in the horse cannot be forced, the only way to encourage it is to give it enough space. The key is that the space, the *listening*, must be mindful. It takes energy to be present with your horse and listen to them. If you are prepared to commit this energy then, gradually you will funnel the horse's attention and confidence towards you, and your ultimate reward is that the horse will listen to you and respond to you. As your partnership matures, the horse's receptivity will become more and more developed. Bear in mind that it is always a function of *your* receptivity. Receptivity is one of the most subtle ingredients of engagement, and yet one of the most crucial. Tense horses are not receptive, so they will only respond to forceful training methods. Forceful training methods create more tension so it is a vicious circle. In many situations the horses and riders are so habituated to the perpetual tension that they have become entirely blind to it. Receptivity in a horse needs to be cherished as the gift that it is. Whereas tension is like an impermeable veil which blocks the connection between horse and rider and separates them more and more, receptivity is like electricity sparking between you and the horse bringing tangibility and comprehension.

Yield:

Yield is another ingredient in engagement. The complication can be that horses who have been forced may yield from an unreceptive state. This is not a true yield because it is not happening within a true connection with you: it is carried out as an avoidance mechanism. So there is no true precision and harmony which comes about when horse and rider are acting as a team. A genuine yield is an absorption of the rider's energy in a way that alters the horse's state of being. The horse becomes a channel in the same way as the rider is a channel, and both channels connect and feed into each other allowing control which is not the control of one being over an other, but the self control of two beings which have temporarily become one. Engagement between horse and rider is the ultimate expression of this yield connection. It starts on the ground in the way you interact around the horse, handling them and then training towards straightness. By the time you are in the saddle, ideally it has become strong enough to carry you through the new procedures until the channels are opened for it to express itself again.



Yielding is the cornerstone of engagement in the horse-human partnership. It must be developed, not demanded, from supporting the resistance to it. Both in ourselves and in the horses. To yield is essentially to flow, which will always lead to connection. In practice it is the feeling of merging with another being, through physical and energetic harmony.

Activity, Carry and Drive:

Activity is the energy generated by the horse, often referred to as impulsion. It can be expressed by the horse in a 'carrying' way where some energy is held in potential form and the horse covers less ground, or it can be expressed in a 'forward driving' way where the horse covers more ground. In the former more collected movement, the horse is using mainly postural strength to balance and more extended movement uses momentum also. If you imagine using the gas pedal in association with the gears in a car to move forward, the car will engage because it is constructed to move like that. A horse is more complicated because they will not engage just because the rider uses the gas pedal. Even when they are trained to the degree where it is natural to them, the rider still has to complete their part of the mechanism. So the rider must see themselves as a part of the machine, and their own postural engagement, (the way they connect themselves to the horse through their seat and leg) *is* the engagement. Only when you feel it like that can you understand that **the activity does not engage the horse in itself**. You can make a horse go 'forward, forward, forward' as much as you like, but without the mechanism in place for the activity to go through, there will be no engagement.

Activity is always necessary for engagement, in the same way as water is always needed to float a dinghy, it is not always in the same form of energy though, as mentioned above. When you want to perform a very slow, precise movement the activity will mostly be stored up as potential energy, so it *appears* as if the horse is not going forward. If they are engaged and using their postural strength to carry themselves in balance, then they will still have activity. Of course a horse could just be plodding along without any activity, but they would not be engaged. Think of the difference between a ballet dancer when they are doing slow, contained movements, and then when they start to leap and jump. It takes energy to perform at either end of the spectrum.

When you are first introducing engagement to a young horse it can be done by straightening their posture to channel their movement. It is easier to influence their posture when the horse is moving at a slower speed, so their activity has more carry than drive. Engagement *can* be generated using drive energy, although it is easier to do this when the strength of the horse's postural ring is already established. At first the drive will come as a result of the engagement, and once present it will help to lock the engagement in. Think of the analogy that once the water hose is unkinked (rider using weight aids and their own straightness to straighten the horse) the flow of water can come through unhindered (the carry can convert into drive energy) and **then the flow of water itself sustains the integrity of the hose so that the kink cannot reappear** i.e, the momentum produced by the drive energy then maintains the engagement.

Alignment:

Engagement is the performance of a living machine between horse and rider, and like any machine, the parts have to be in alignment before they can interlock and function. Although initially engagement between horse and rider may seem to be about finding control through balance, the ultimate accomplishment is the therapeutic effect of improving the quality of the horse's movement. The movement will become cadenced and have more harmony, depth and presence. Whereas a non-living machine will have parts which have already been manufactured in the right shape, neither horse nor human come into the partnership with perfectly even bodies. This living realignment is the beauty of the process. The principal alignment in the horse's body happens at the junction between the horse's torso and their shoulders. Once this is stabilised, the rest will fit into place. Because they are sitting above it, this junction is the part of the horse the rider can directly influence. The focus of alignment in the rider is in the pelvis, as this is where the rider contacts the horse's back.

Transmission:

The transmission in a car is the mechanical system which conveys the power of the engine to the axle and down into the wheels. As well as transmitting the power it also adapts that power to the performance required by the car. This adaptation is achieved through a system of gears which increase or decrease the torque. So in practical terms if a car is being asked to go at a slow speed, yet it needs more power to be able to move, the gears adapt the power of the engine by increasing the torque. Higher gears have a smaller diameter and produce less torque so the power is channeled into speed in the wheels.

The relevance of this in riding a horse is that when you train a horse to engage, you are creating a similar system of leverage, where the power from the horse's engine (the activity from their hind-quarters) is adapted to the pace the horse is moving at. **The system can only function when the rider themselves creates the transmission, which is the dynamic between their posture and the horse's posture.** Controlling the horse through 'reaction', i.e. stopping them through their reaction to the pain in their mouth or nose, and driving them forward from anticipation of pain in their sides is a completely different practice. It is founded on lack of balance and damage limitation.

It is not necessary to try and figure out all the parallels between engaging a horse and the way a car works, but it does help to explain more clearly how engagement works. It is interesting to reflect that the beauty of working with yourself and a horse is that we are living beings, and we can continue to sophisticate our transmission over time. A horse who is strong in their postural ring and moves powerfully in self carriage will develop a bigger engine and can even keep adding gears.

It is true that genetics makes a considerable difference, but the transmission is the part you can enhance the most, and it is ultimately the most important part of the engagement dynamic. You can have a car with the most powerful engine in the world, but if the transmission can't bring that power successfully to the ground it is useless. That is why 'ordinary' horses can produce such beautiful movement through training in engagement.

Depth:

Engagement increases the quality of the horse's movement in two main ways. Firstly it synchronises it by bringing it into physiological balance. An engaged horse moving in straightness comes into harmony on many different levels. You can see rhythm coming into the stride and you can feel the way each part of the horse's body is linking up and stretching itself into the mechanism of the movement. The physiological balance also brings a psychological well-being.

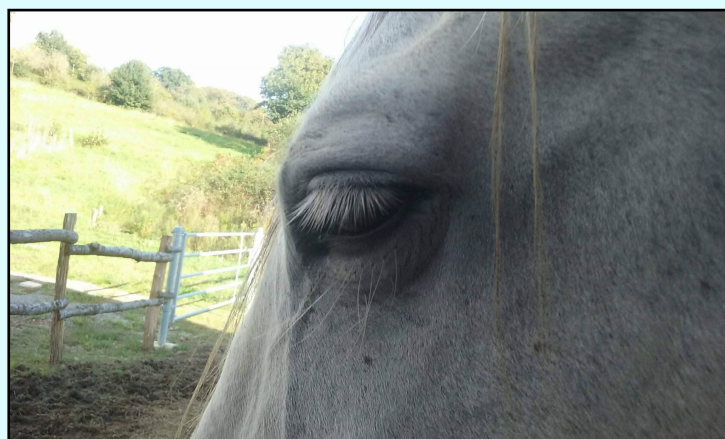
The second way engagement influences the movement is by increasing its suspension, or depth. This is what makes such an improvement in its quality. This comes from increased flexibility in the horse's joints, but it is not only that, this depth in the movement comes from accessing a whole new construction within the connective tissue. Perhaps it is the same potential that frogs tap into when they jump and dolphins use to leap through the ocean. There is a sense of transcending your physical reality when you reach this connection with a horse. It isn't about what you actually do with it, whether you are performing transitions, or passage or half-pass, it is about experiencing that feeling of being plugged in to the whole. That the Universe is coming through you and your horse. I am convinced that the horses can feel it too, and they feel liberated by it just as we do. Liberated and connected at the same time.



Imprinting The Cycle: Guidance or Domination

Each moment with a horse is a choice whether to push through a boundary or whether to support it. From a wider perspective however, this stage where you are coming off the lunge is a crucial crossroads because it is the threshold from which you can either embark on the positive postural cycle or the vicious push-pull cycle. Because the positive cycle is self-supporting and the vicious cycle is self-perpetuating, once you start out in either direction it becomes a groove that is more difficult to get out of. Horses starting out the force-free way will retain that fundamental patterning all of their lives, and even if they have forceful riding in-between, if the right conditions are presented they will come back again relatively straightforwardly. The opposite is also true, those horses started with force, who have habituated to the hopelessness of being driven into the bit, are not rehabilitated easily. There always seem to be layers of underlying tension which remain inaccessible for a long time. Nothing is impossible, and there is always a way through to release, but the value of having the opportunity to start out in a positive direction can't be overstated.

The horse has been prepared and supported up until this point to be receptive to your postural aids. The key now is to avoid any loss of balance which will put them into an unreceptive state. **Avoid putting pressure on yourself or the horse to go forward more than you can control with your posture.** Self-control is more important than direct control of the horse. Stay calm, stay aware and keep your aids in alignment with the horse's responses. Stay sensitive to when the momentum might be increasing to the point when balance will be lost and most importantly of all have faith in your postural control. Ideally you have practiced on a more experienced horse and you already know that you can influence a horse successfully with your posture. Feel your way and find out your youngster's tolerance and sensitivity. Some inexperienced horses behave as if they have already been riding horses many times in past lives and for others everything is a challenge. Make no assumptions, think of the training process as like ironing a shirt. You are looking for all the wrinkles so you can iron them out, skipping over them is not a solution because they will only fix in and cause visible cracks in the relationship later on.



Baby Navigation

You will probably just know when it is the right moment to take the lunge line off for the first time. Look for a moment when you have done some nice work already, yet there is no question of tiredness in your horse. It is a good idea for your assistant to walk around with you at first, so you both have a chance to adapt without the support from the lunge line. The lunge-line gives a lot of lateral guidance, so when it is no longer attached you need to provide the positioning support now from the reins. It is advisable during this stage to avoid having your reins attached to a bit. Ultimately you will be using your posture to guide the horse's body, but it makes it a lot easier for them to be able to respond to your postural aids if their neck and head is lined up in the direction they are going. They have already been working like this on the lunge, so it is not new in itself, but you must focus on continuing the same alignment from the beginning of work without the lunge line. The theory of positioning is described on p.61-63.

Think of positioning as guidance, but only as an introduction to the real aiding system which will connect with the horse's body. So every time you use a rein aid, you also use a leg, weight and seat aid and gradually the rein aid will become redundant. The rein aid is like leading the horse into a channel where other influences can take over. Once the horse is strong enough to stay in that channel by themselves, the positioning aids will be much more subtle. **The positioning aids for aligning the horse's head, neck and shoulders are never used in a backward direction.** They act to direct the horse where you would like them to go and also to position them to be able to go there in postural straightness. The straightness is the priority: there is no point in being able to go where you want, but in a crooked way. This is why you must not prioritise a particular direction, or destination for its own sake, until you can get there in an aligned manner.

Imagine you are moving out on the right rein, going on a circle. Your inside hand might gently draw the right rein across to the right (think right and forward direction) and the outside rein gives enough length for the horse to turn their neck to the right. If the inside rein (the right hand) has to come over sideways to encourage the horse to make their first step to the right, this is called an opening rein. Remember that you are asking the horse to go forward in a particular direction, so your hands must act in a forward attitude. Bringing the hands back towards your body in an attempt to guide the horse is an instinctive gesture, but in fact it makes no sense. **The only influence you ever want to make that is not forward with the rein, is sideways.** Even on a loose, unconnected rein, a forward aid will still influence the horse to lengthen their neck and move towards where the hand is pointing. Once the horse is pointing their head in the direction you want to go, then you can ask their body to follow. This seems obvious, but to manoeuvre the horse's body, often riders turn their horse's head *away* from the direction they want them to go. Imagine the following scenario, for example:

Say you wanted to move from your right circle back out on to the track. You wait until you get back round to where the circle meets the track, yet as you came around the circle, your weight has been gradually slipping to the outside and now the only way to guide the horse to stay on the track is to use your outside rein, which is your left rein, to direct the horse's head, and you push their body to follow, successfully quitting the circle and carrying on up the long side. In this scenario your horse is now bending left, and unfortunately you have lost your correct bend, correct weight, straightness and therefore balance and are now moving crookedly up the track.

To continue up the track straight with the correct alignment, you need to focus on keeping your weight balanced, i.e. above your inside leg enough to avoid slippage to the outside as you approach the track. Focus on asking the horse's body to yield around the pillar created by your inside leg, pelvis and torso. In this way you can stay above the horse's inside hind-leg and ask it to step forward straight up the long side. Your hands can stay respectively above and to the right of the wither, reflecting the maintenance of the correct bend on this right rein. In essence you have guided the horse's *body* rather than guiding their *mouth*, as in the first scenario. Because this is quite a difficult exercise for the baby horse, it is important from the start to choose only destinations that you can accomplish in relative balance and straightness. So in the above example, if you aren't able to be balanced enough to go up the long side, then simply stay on the circle, or change the rein. **If you always prioritise straightness you will find over time that going in any direction you want becomes easier and easier.**

The other scenario where you might find conflict between where you are aiming for and where you end up going, is when you have positioned the horse's head and neck but their body doesn't want to follow. Imagine that you are on the track going left, and you wish to begin a left circle. You successfully position the horse to the left, so they turn their neck to commence the circle, but instead of staying on the circle, their body carries on going up the track, i.e. they are jack-knifing between their neck and torso and falling sideways. In this situation, the rider has to help them follow through with their body by keeping their weight in place *above* the horse's body, and staying tall, i.e. not tipping forward and getting in front of the wave of the horse's movement. The horse must be encouraged to step through straight with their inside hind-leg and embark upon the circle.

Think about the way the hind-leg is in control of the direction of the horse's body. If it steps straight through, then it will always carry the horse's body in the direction of their neck. If the hind-leg steps sideways in a way which is not controlled by the rider's posture, then the horse's body will be disconnected and fall away from the direction in which their neck and head is going.

Having the reins connected to the young horse's nose as opposed to their mouth at this stage is better for several reasons:

Firstly the horse is already familiar with the sensation of the lunge-line connecting to their nose while lunging to help align them onto the circle. Secondly although there is theoretically less chance of the horse coming up against the rein (and hurting their mouth) when you are riding as opposed to lunging, especially with a well prepared, calm young horse, it is still quite difficult to be aware of how much (sideways) pressure is coming into the rein. There is no need to risk upsetting them and forming any negative associations. Later on, when they are responding well to your leg and weight aids and the positioning aiding is taking more of a back seat, they will be better prepared for you to connect with their mouth if you do decide to ride with a mouthpiece.

It is not of course necessary to ride with a bit at any stage, but this is a subject for another book. It is traditional in dressage training to introduce a double bridle later on. Such severe bits cause pain in the horse's mouth, mainly as a result of their powerful leverage, and they will tend to cause a horse to back off from that pain. This creates a false lightness which can be perceived as a change in balance giving 'height in front'. This is certainly a physical effect on the horse, but it is not *engagement* because the horse's mouth is blocked and there is not a forward flow of straightened movement. It is not a *dynamic* which can be strengthened, but a reaction to physical suffering which causes multiple negative consequences, both physical and psychological. Note: It is not advisable to attach the lunge line to the bit at any stage because it can transmit quite a severe pressure if the horse draws away. That pressure will cause pain or at least discomfort when it is transmitted to the horse through their mouth when the bit is pulled down hard against their tongue and bars.

Practice guiding your young horse at first on the rein they naturally favour. This is usually the concave rein, often identifiable as the side towards to which the mane lies. Make sure to stay aware of your own posture. It is easy to get so absorbed in what you are doing with your hands that you lose sight of the most important part, guiding the horse's body with your body. Tipping forward, twisting between your torso and pelvis, leaning in, leaning out, turning your head, tipping your head and raising your hands are common divergences from straightness which will weaken your navigation aids. **The reason your posture is so important is that the horse has to feel the sense of your rein aids in their body.** The rein aids are only indicators pointing to the way you want their body to move. If you indicate with your rein and your posture doesn't back it up then you will confuse the horse. Stay aware of your weight placement and use it to emphasise the rein aids. If you ask the horse to go left for example, make sure you support them through your inside pillar. If you let your weight slide to the right the horse won't be able to turn left with their shoulders and bend their body around the turn. It is possible to *displace* a horse in one direction if your weight goes the other way, but they will then be *falling* in that direction, not *turning* in balance.

Before this stage, ideally the reins have *not* been a focus of attention and their length should have reflected that, i.e. long enough not to have much influence. Now that they are taking over the role of the lunge line, they will have to be short enough to allow the rider to make the necessary navigational aids without introducing compensations in the rest of their posture. For example if the rein is too long, the rider might bring their hand back to take up some slack, and create a backward influence. Or the rider might twist their arm, bend their wrist or twist their torso to make up slack in the rein. On the other hand, if the rein is too short then there will be pressure imposed which is greater than the exact (minimal) pressure needed to connect with the horse's head. In that case there is the possibility of pushing through a boundary and forcing with the rein.

To find the perfect length of rein, start by concentrating on perfecting your posture: the evenness of your pelvis and torso laterally and longitudinally, the correctness of your weight and the orientation of your arm (elbows relaxed against your sides, straight forearm and flat wrist) and then slowly feed up the rein until you can sense exactly the pressure needed to feel through to the horse and no more. There should be no latent tension in the rein because it is not long enough. When the horse has responded by aligning their nose with the direction you are navigating, the pressure in the rein from the aid will naturally release, and the other aids (active aiding from the leg and passive aiding from the posture) follow up and bring the horse's body onto that path. The more minimal the rein aids are at this stage the better. Think of them as ultimately becoming so refined that they become absorbed into the engagement itself and are no longer a separate influence.



Introducing positioning with Totti: focusing on lengthening her spine and neck out into the rein, while encouraging her into the right bend with both longitudinal (stretching) seat aids, and lateral (weight) aids. She is beginning to pick up a more cadenced rhythm as she aligns herself into straightness and feels better balanced.



Three years later and Totti is able to engage herself in a much more advanced posture in the right bend. She can carry her shoulders higher, and the bend itself is a much more acute angle. The positioning rein aids are now integrated, so asking her body to bend brings her neck into the bend without indication with the reins.

Influencing the Pace With Posture

You can control the pace initially by taking advantage of the young horse's natural reluctance to rush and lose their balance. If they have been encouraged up until this point to remain in a calm and receptive state of mind then they will be moving in a steady way which is *with* you and not against you. It is important not to try and push them out of this inclination because it doesn't feel snappy enough. More subtlety and sensitivity will evolve as time goes by, whilst retaining the 'togetherness'. That 'togetherness' is the essence of your partnership, it is your link, both physically and psychologically.

If you do find yourself getting impatient because you feel there isn't enough activity this is a great opportunity to turn your focus back on to yourself. Although this is not an easy exercise, developing the ability to change both your expectations and in that, your state of being, is extremely valuable. This is because it is the only real way to comprehend the horse themselves and help them to be liberated from limitations. In other words, **if you can be in a neutral, accepting place in your mind and body, then you will be able to perceive more clearly and correctly what is necessary.** If you are feeling impatient or anxious that the horse is hanging back, then that tension in your own bodymind acts as a smokescreen, and you will lose touch with the true picture, as well as with the connection with your horse. It is natural to adapt your perceptions to your experiences and your state of mind, it is one of our survival mechanisms, but it will take control if we let it, and life is not only about sheer survival for most of us anymore. Practicing finding the neutral, accepting, tension-free state around horses is the surest way to truly get to know them.

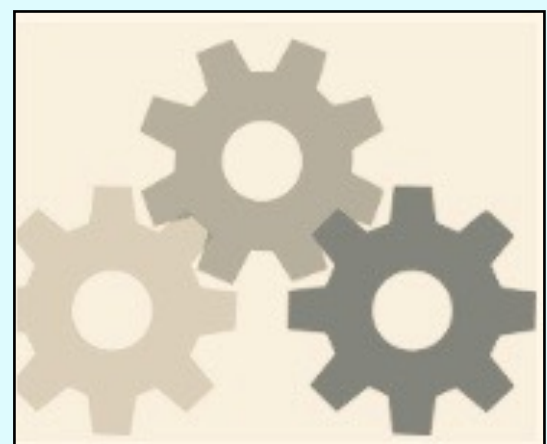
Ultimately you will use both lateral and longitudinal influences to control the pace. The lateral aspect involves bend and straightness. You can take advantage of the slow pace initially to put the right structures in place. When you want to slow down and stop, bring the horse into a circle and keep gently bending with your weight down the inside, until the movement gradually peters out. Over time you can pay more attention to connecting the hind-legs into the downward transitions with your embracing leg aids. At first look for the connection between the inside shoulder stepping in and coming into a halt. When the horse's inside shoulder steps in, the natural jack-knife is straightened out, and the horse can balance enough to stop. Eventually you will be able to feel the connection from your leg right through the horse's body to their inside hind-leg, and in doing so will be aware of the need to stay in contact with the horse's sides with your leg right through the transition into the halt.



The longitudinal aids for influencing the pace of the young horse are part of the postural leverage the rider uses to engage the horse. The aiding process is beautifully universal. Describing it in a linear way for a book can make it sound very complicated, and it is true that there is a certain order which must be adhered to, but as it all begins to fit in, and as the strength of the machine between horse and rider increases, the aids become more generic. The only thing distinguishing the different movements will be context and the source-based thought shared between horse and rider. For example if you wanted to perform a half-pass or a canter transition, the physical aiding is so similar when you are in engagement, that the horse only knows the difference through the energetic channel between you. Training is a gradual transcendence of doing into being, where energetic connection is all you need. At first when you wish to slow down, the longitudinal aiding involves slowing down your seat so it no longer follows the horse's movement. The effectiveness of this aid depends on two things:

- **The straightness, and therefore balance of the horse at that moment. If they are quite out of balance and crooked they won't be able to respond to your aid.**
- **Whether you are harnessed into the movement already through your postural leverage, (See p.47). If there is a lack of leverage then your engaging influence will be lessened, but the horse will still respond to some degree to the closing off of the movement that your seat causes when you cease to follow but remain in contact with their back.**

Imposing the full postural leverage at this stage is not appropriate. Often young horses are more sensitive to the seat than any other postural aid, so gently slowing down and stopping your following seat is likely to be all that is necessary to slow down and stop.



Postural leverage allows the rider direct collecting influence over the horse's movement, just as slowing down one cog will slow down the whole machine.

Going Forward Without Force

At this stage you will have established familiarity with your leg aiding and the responsiveness will be developing in your horse's sides. In the early stages of riding independently from the lunge line, the lunge whip handled by your assistant can still be a valuable resource. As described in detail in Part 1, **the lunge whip must be used as a *tool* in the same way as one would use an accessory for massage or acupuncture** etc. Dressage whips and lunge whips are, in the vast majority of cases, used as instruments to convey discomfort and pain to force the horse to obey. It is important to be as honest as possible about the distinction between **pressure which connects and brings comfort, and pressure which causes discomfort**. This distinction became evident for me as a result of practicing Craniosacral Therapy. Working with animals and people via their central nervous systems increased my awareness and understanding of the therapeutic effect.

Perhaps the main reason people do not tend to make this distinction is that they assume that there is no way to work with horses other than the threat of discomfort. Those people might move towards some form of positive reinforcement or away from training with horses entirely. The shift in perspective towards actively seeking to bring comfort and therapy to your horse, as opposed to seeking performance for its own sake, does open up an alternative possibility: movement in balance is therapeutic for you and your horse. Your assignment is first to create a space in which your horse and you are at ease. When you are ready you will then invite your horse to join you in enjoying and appreciating moving in balance.

This is a process of discovering how beautifully you can express yourselves as a partnership. The secret to preserving the authenticity is to respect, to revere in fact, the dialogue between you. Your role is to invite, to support and also to accept and appreciate. If you invite, and there is resistance, support that resistance in a state of open-minded allowing. If there is a shift and the resistance dissipates, that is wonderful. If there is no visible shift, then embrace the resistance and continue to listen to it. This might involve discontinuing the interaction or pursuing a different path in that moment. The only way to facilitate freely-willed interaction is to focus on, acknowledge, embrace and allow whatever is perceptible in each moment. Your intention therefore must not be to move beautifully with your horse, but to explore any resistance which arises to that. If your intention becomes moving beautifully then you will be unable to avoid pushing for this result, and in so doing, any resistances in yourself and in your horse, will become the enemy. When resistances become the enemy, then they will persist, because resistance is always a defence, a protection. The only way to relieve resistance is to become conscious of what is being protected. Then you will become the protector, and the defence is no longer needed.

Start out with your assistant on hand with the lunge whip to help you ease into being completely independent with the leg aids. Again, the whip should not signify something frightening for your horse. The threat can be a subtle influence. Just because the horse doesn't panic or shy away doesn't mean they don't perceive the whip as a threat. If you can touch them all over with it and use it as a grooming tool without them flinching or recoiling, if you can activate it appropriately and be able to trail the lash across their back and touch them sensitively in different places over their body, then there is a genuine acceptance. Be patient if this is not possible yet, especially with a horse you have not worked with from the beginning of their training. It takes time and patience, experience handling a lunge whip, as well as trust between you and your horse. If you are used to horses being frightened of the lunge whip you may not realise the extent to which you can change a horse's perception of it. It is particularly important to have a good rapport with your assistant at this point, so you can be in agreement about finding and supporting the horse's activity boundary. You are using leg aids to connect and ground the young horse, and while inviting forward movement, you are primarily exploring (supporting not challenging) any reluctance the horse may feel about going forward. (See p.18).

Too much information can be difficult for a horse to assimilate, just like a computer, so to avoid a 'crash' situation, keep your aiding patient and sensitive. Remember your aids as a rider are relatively new to the horse. Feel for tightness or hardness in the horse's sides, and sense the best way to release that with your leg aids. Remember to make your leg as comfortable as possible for the horse, or it won't become therapeutic. In facilitating a softening of the resistance in the horse's sides, which often sources from the diaphragm, you will enable them to go forward more easily. This is an indirect form of forward aiding and is something you will want to return to whenever you are not focused on something else. Be aware of constantly refining your communication. Seek the quietest possible voice with which to speak to your horse, and listen for the quietest possible response. This brings the connection between you to a higher level, even with a baby horse you can begin this way. Don't be surprised or worried if their sides feel a bit numb or wooden, this is the beginning of your sculpture. Look also for the difference from the beginning and the end of a session. When a horse physically releases and begins to breathe more deeply, their sides will soften up and become more sensitive.

If the horse is very reluctant to go forward remember to stay with the resistance. Match it with your leg aids and focus on maintaining your posture. It is easy to begin shoving a little with your seat or tipping out of place when there isn't much momentum. **Your seat can never be used to create activity because it is not influencing a part of the horse that can respond with activity.** All it will do is cause the horse to tighten and drop their back. Some riders, particularly western riders do use their seat as the main power generator.

This is only effective due to conditioning with spur aids and although it does make the horse go forward, it does not encourage or even allow postural engagement. With a very reluctant horse, it is advisable to do some research as they are more than likely to have a physical problem. The hotspots are pain in the front feet, neck restrictions, tooth (incisor) imbalance and thoracic lesions. Metabolic issues and hormonal imbalances can also cause lack of energy.

Deciding Your Programme

Just as for the previous stages, it is most constructive to continue to revert back to established work each session. At this stage you might do a few minutes of work on the lunge without the rider, then some work with a rider and finish with a few minutes off the lunge. As time unfolds you will naturally shorten the time on the lunge and lengthen the time you are riding independently. At some point it will seem right to start from the beginning without the lunge. You have to trust your intuition on this, and not allow an agenda other than what works best for your horse to creep in. Although there are conventions in terms of how long training of this kind takes, they have largely been dictated by economics, not the welfare of the horse. If you want your partnership to succeed to its fullest potential, then your only obligation is to listen to your horse's needs.

Your time riding off the lunge may start out with making a few circles and changes of rein and some walk and halt transitions. Follow the development of your straightness and receptivity together to find the next step. In other words where you go in the arena, the size of your circles and the transitions you make, are all dictated by the horse's boundary. This means that every step you take is guided by improving your mutual balance and straightness in that moment and not a programme you decided outside of that moment. For example you would not think 'I wish to work on circles today because we haven't mastered those yet' and engineer that to come about. Instead you listen without agenda to whatever is presenting itself, and you follow that thread wherever it takes you.

Over time you will notice the progress you are making. For example, you might realise one day that you have gone all the way around the arena straight. Or that you can now do several trot transitions during a session when at first you could only do one or two starts and stops. Listen only to your own inner wisdom, not to outside influences that ask you to sacrifice the quality of your connection. These are not based on the truth you find in your horse. On one level it may be true that everyone could ride better, and be in a better place at any moment so that progress could go quicker, **but you cannot force yourself to be better by forcing the horse to react more.** The responsibility stops with the rider and pushing for more does not equal achieving more.

Creation of Contact

The contact in the rein is created by the horse when they engage.

This is a fundamental truth because the rider cannot create a meaningful contact directly with their hands. The reason there is so much confusion about this subject, and that many riders believe, or are taught, that they can create a contact with their rein aids, is that the hands *can* induce a temporary softening in the horse's jaw. The hands can also insist that the horse contract their neck and 'round' it. However both of these reactions in the horse are dissociated from the rest of their body. The softening of the horse's jaw which is initiated by *any* form of pressure from the bit (the more severe the bit, the more instantaneous the reaction) is a *temporary* and *disconnected* reaction. This also applies to bit-less arrangements, where the majority of the pressure is applied to the horse's nose. This temporary release has not come through the horse's body as a result of the physiological changes that occur when the postural ring is engaged, so it will simply disappear the moment the initiating aid stops, i.e. when the pressure on the bit ceases, the horse's jaw will tighten again, usually by the next stride, and the softening will not even last from one full stride to the next. This is important to note, because one of the signs of true whole-body engagement is that it completes a full cycle of the horse's stride.

Riders have understood that the effect from the hands does not last, so they tend to upgrade the pressure, either by more aggressive rein aiding or using a more severe mouthpiece or gadgets like draw reins. It *is* possible to force a continuance of the softening in the horse's jaw, but again it is not coming from engagement of the postural ring, so it is an artificial effect. In fact it only directly influences the horse's neck, either making it over-flexible like cooked spaghetti, and the horse will hold reciprocal tension in their body, or the neck will be held in one position, becoming more and more tight and stiff. This is because forcing horses to soften their jaw when the rest of their body does not support that softening, compels the horse to defend themselves. They defend themselves mainly from the original discomfort in their mouth. So it is a vicious circle: to keep the jaw continually soft the aids must be severe enough to cause pain and the horse defends themselves by resisting elsewhere. Occasionally a horse will continue to resist in their jaw and that is when fights can ensue. It is a spiralling of force versus resistance, and ultimately riders must realise that horses only resist out of self-defence.

The good news is that the rein contact comes beautifully and naturally from engagement of the postural ring. A consistent, elastic rein contact is actually one of the best indicators of postural engagement. When a horse expresses enough evenness in their movement dynamic, i.e. when they become straight enough (as a result of rider straightness) then, unless some physical limitation prevents them, they will raise their back, telescope their neck and soften their jaw.

All the rider has to do at that point is delicately take up the slack in the reins and connect in to that softness. Whether you take up the reins or not, the softness will still be there, because it comes from the horse's mouth and is not created by the rein. It is independent of the rein, but you can reach it through the rein. The rider has to have enough postural integrity to be able to connect with that contact without disturbing it, but of course if the rider does not have enough postural integrity to receive the contact, they will not be able to consistently create it in the first place, so it is all part of the same process.

When you have improved your mutual straightness and balance (by way of the postural aiding described already throughout the book) the rein contact will be created for you. All you have to do is recognise it. Until then, it is ideal to have the rein long enough to make sure there is no pressure exerted on the horse's mouth, and certainly no restricting of the bend from the outside rein. When the telescoping and softening begins to appear, feed the reins up and join in. It is a magical feeling and because you achieve it through the horse's body there is usually little inclination to disturb it. It seems natural by this point to connect to the elasticity, in the same way as you would take the hand of a small child. If it doesn't last then balance has been lost in the whole dynamic, and it is a case of focusing back into that and finding out what happened. Usually too much of the rider's weight has shifted to the outside or there is tipping and twisting in the rider's posture so the engagement is lost and the horse's jaw tightens. It is perfectly normal for the engagement to be inconsistent at first, and for quite some time if you have to work through your own and your horse's postural weaknesses. Celebrate it when it all comes together and remember to go back into the details to find it again.



Gabrielle and Uno, the first time the rein contact was created from engagement in trot without the lunge line.

Photographs of Rein Contact Created Through Engagement



All of the horses above overcame significant limitations, some physical and some psychological, in order to reach the blissful state of engagement. Engagement is meditation in motion. There is both transcendence of what restricts, and harnessing of what will enhance. Only by addressing the same obstacles in ourselves, and reflecting that liberation back to the horses can we achieve this in an authentic way.

Loose Rein Work

When tension is not a regular part of your training partnership and you do not rely on the reins for control, loose rein work will be your baseline. So you start out on a loose rein, then work on establishing your engagement and regularly go back to the loose rein to rest. Riding constructively on a loose rein is a skill in itself. It is more of a rest for the horse than the rider, but it still has the feeling of letting down and letting go and releasing the pressure of intense concentration. For the horse, rest periods are a crucial part of their physical training, to allow their muscles and central nervous system to recover. They can only do this when they are able to take their own time with minimal physical or psychological pressure. That means tuning down all of your aids to the minimum required to stay connected, to maintain balance and reassure the horse that you are there. The reins must be out fully to the buckle so that the horse can make a full length longitudinal stretch. This is an exercise in itself and lack of ability or willingness to stretch in the horse can be a sign of tension, mental and/or physical, lack of suppleness and sometimes weakness in the horse's postural ring.

When you are letting the reins out fully, do it in the same way as you take them up, gradually feeding them out to follow the unfolding in the horse's body as the parabola formed by the engagement lengthens out. Eventually whatever you do with the rein contact becomes simultaneous with the seat and leg aids, it is a circle after all. But the circle takes time to form, and the fact that your hands must always be receiving and following needs to be continually reestablished. **The rein length must always reflect the state of engagement of the horse.** So when you are resting, or not actively engaging, e.g. warming up in trot, then the rein must be long and certainly not causing any pressure. Make sure your actual reins are long enough, modern reins are often at least 6 inches too short to allow a buckle-length without having to push your hand forward. If that is necessary then do it, in fact it is a good exercise to push your hands right forward, both to encourage the horse to stretch, and to check out your own postural balance.

Most horses need to stretch and rest their neck every five minutes or so when they are working in engagement. As with everything related to your horse's well-being, getting to know them and being prepared to listen to them is the key. Often they will drop a hint, they will try to stretch or slow down at the gate, and I have found that it is more beneficial in the long run to respect this. Even if it seems like you are resting more time than you are working, this is the best way to reassure the horse that it is okay to keep going and trust the work. Some horses have physical issues which limit their stamina, and the only sure way to progress without causing damage, is to respect the boundaries they set for themselves. You need to trust how your horse feels in themselves and work with that. When they feel ready to give and be generous with their body, then you have genuinely earned their trust.

Photographs of Riding With A Long Rein

A long rein is invaluable in all areas of training:

While resting:



For warming up:



For long rein engagement work:



When cooling down:



Sometimes it might feel right for you to *support* the resistance in your horse to carrying on with the work. In this case stay deeply tuned in to the feeling of the need to stop, and embrace that with your physical aids. Feel that you are allowing it to unfold by giving it attention. It might feel right to maintain your resonance with working, as a suggestion rather than a demand, and listen to the horse's response. Or you may encourage the horse to rest, stay focused on the impulse in the horse to do so and support that pattern. Use tension as your most reliable compass, if that feeling of separation and bottled energy starts to creep in, then rest is necessary. If a horse leans on the reins they are usually exhausted in the neck. Horses who tug on the reins often have spinal issues (cervical and thoracic) and it is a delicate task to feel what level of work will strengthen them without pushing too hard and making more problems. Work on growing your sensitivity and willingness to hear the resistance and this will give you the path you need to unpick physical issues which might arise.

Time To Engage

Now that you are liberated from the 'training wheels' and truly setting out as an independent partnership, engagement becomes the next framework in which to facilitate the therapeutic process. All the way along you have been developing the horse's postural ring to be ready for this stage, so that when you finally sat on your horse there were no defensive postural mechanisms to overcome. When you do get to this point however, it does not necessarily just click into place. You have to discover it all over again: the longitudinal stretch, the bend, the straightness and the self carriage. This is because the context is different. In a sense everything is different when a horse has a rider, and although the preparation is crucial, it only goes so far. The rest is the chemistry between horse and rider, the biomechanical dynamic that is unique to that horse and that rider. Engaging a horse is similar to cooking, you have to prepare all of the ingredients and bring them all together in the right way. It doesn't really matter how long that takes you, and you will discover your own portals - as long as they are authentic and not quick fixes.

The best way to 'discover' engagement is to focus on each of the aspects of your posture, and their application until it happens. Even if it only happens for a few strides and you feel it, that will alter your physiology and make it more possible. It is an exercise in concentration to keep your mind on your posture and make corrections relative to the dynamic you are in with the horse in each stride. Some people struggle more than others, but it is easy for anyone to just tune out after a while. A good way to keep things channeled is to say out loud the changes you are making, something like this...

Rolling back on to the back of my seat-bones and feeling the tuck in my pelvis...flattening my back as if I was leaning against a wall...thinking of my pelvis sitting like a box, flat on both sides of the horse's spine...

feeling for the swing to the outside on the bend and resisting it...remembering to soften and yield my hands forward... relaxing my neck and straightening my head...thinking of the rectangle between my pelvis and ribcage, keeping it regular and strong.....feeling into the horse's sides and sensing the tightness...stretching my legs under me, turning the whole leg in, knees and toes...re-tucking my pelvis and sitting up again...seeking more connection into the horse's back, softening my seat and feeling deeper at the same time...perceiving how the horse is moving their body and how I can bring it straighter...remembering to keep my hands in the direction we are going...

The dialogue can continue like this, going from different parts of your posture and then focusing more on the horse (p.65) and back again throughout the whole session. It is actually a very effective way to train yourself to stay present with what is happening in each moment, and help you not to lose yourself in all the sensory information. There is so much to feel and be aware of that it is easy to end up narrowing it all down to nothing. Every now and then it is a good idea to go larger and feel the whole dynamic, then go back to the specifics. Our brain is so adapted to prioritising, it is important to keep checking the filters.

A possible framework for engagement:

Practice in walk at first, starting with a buckle length rein. **Cultivate a nice connection with the horse's sides, massaging with your leg in a sensitive way.** You are seeking the feeling that your leg is accepted by the horse, and the natural outcome of that acceptance is more sensitivity between you. As you achieve that sensitivity, you **begin to use it to stimulate enough activity to fuel your progress.** So you do need some forward movement in order to bring about the straightness dynamic. It must be tension-free or you lose your connection which allows you to influence the horse towards straightness. For that reason you must gently feed the horse forward when there is receptivity. The quality of your engagement depends on the quality of your connection process from the start. Once there is enough forward movement to feel like you and the horse are moving easily together, then you can **begin to slow down by restricting the following (longitudinal) swing of your seat.** Think of it that you had to get all the cylinders charged up equally and create this fusion between you which comes from movement flowing through the horse to you, and now that you have the engine running smoothly, you can lower the revs again.

It is much easier to alter a horse's straightness at a slower pace. This is because the postural movements you wish to change are happening over a longer period of time. However, if you try to alter the straightness before you have established the generation of movement from your leg aiding, then you will not have the same network of connections set up, mainly with the horse's hind-quarters (the engine). Think about it as turning on a tap before you straighten out the hose, the water will help to facilitate and shape the straightening of the hose.

Movement is always the fuel of the dynamic, but it has to be managed enough to allow the straightness to be achieved. Once you have established a slow enough walk to be able to feel the lateral swing through the horse's ribcage, focus on resisting that swing with your body. Use mainly your pelvic stability and the pillar through the inside of your body created through the alignment of your torso, pelvis and lower leg. Keep checking that you don't lose longitudinal alignment by tipping forward, lifting your seat out forward or un-tucking your pelvis. Imagine bringing the horse's ribcage upright under you so that it no longer leans to the outside like a page in a book falling over. Think of bringing enough weight into the inside of your body to counteract your whole body shifting to the outside. Make sure your outside rein is giving enough space to allow the horse to come on to the bend. Check where your weight is by using your hand 'compass' and then correct your hand position (inside hand to the inside, outside hand above the wither) and use that to help align yourself and the horse.

Remember to maintain your own postural evenness so that you can maintain the straightness shift you are initiating. When you succeed, the horse will tell you by walking in a more balanced way. They will feel like they are upright and able to step around a corner rather than flattening against it. They will begin to stretch forward with their whole top-line, and you will be able to gently take the reins up and connect with their mouth or nose. At this point gently ask for more forward strides again so you can consolidate the straightness by flowing the movement through it. This will help you to maintain the engagement.

You might get moments at first and then lose it again. Keep focusing back on to your posture and find where you lost it. Remember there is always some part of your own body you can improve. It is difficult to believe just how much the horse reflects their rider. Gradually you and the horse will strengthen up and you will feel how you can maintain the engagement over a longer period of time. You will also figure out most of your weak areas if you put energy into looking for them and listening to how you are influencing the horse. As things start to come together in walk, you will find that the trot is being influenced in a positive way. There will be more energy flowing through and the transitions will become easier. When your engagement is established to the point where it is raising your horse's activity without tension, this is when you are ready to trot. The trot will seem to arrive by itself. Once the engagement 'memory' is there, it is actually easier in trot because there is more momentum and your transmission system does not have to modify the movement so much.



One of the participants at a clinic already establishing engagement on the first day.

Make Lateral Work For You

Why It Is Valuable

For it to be of most assistance, lateral work must be incorporated as a tool, as opposed to representing a goal in itself. Lateral work is a straightening tool because it places the horse's body in a different configuration under the rider, this has several benefits:

- **Suppling the joints because they are articulating in different ways.**

The value of lateral work is in *sophisticating* the control over the articulation between horse and rider. If a horse goes sideways because they are sliding back into their natural crookedness there is no gymnastic value because it is merely accentuating the crookedness pattern. Many riders produce 'lateral work' by taking advantage of the ease with which a horse will reclaim their crookedness. This falling sideways is only for spectators, as it (hopefully) feels disconnected and unbalanced for the rider! The authentic aim of lateral work is to improve the horse and human gymnastic ability. This can only happen when the horse is actually making *original* steps, i.e. moving in a dynamic they have never performed previously. This will trigger a whole new patterning in the central nervous system, and the horse's body will respond and further develop straightness and balance.

- **Bringing the horse into a diagonal orientation brings the inside hind-leg into a more 'available' position.**

This allows the rider to 'reach' the hind-leg more easily, and initiate a stronger nervous connection between their leg and seat and the horse's hind-leg. It is essentially shifting the horse out of their habitual movement dynamic, their 'groove', and it gives the rider more of a window to encourage a new dynamic which is patterned from their postural straightness.

- **As a result of increased straightness, overall balance is improved.**

Although it sounds a bit complicated, the new feeling of balance that correct lateral work brings to a horse's movement is immediate, and when you have achieved it a few times, it becomes easy to distinguish it from falling sideways. So much of riding a horse successfully is about establishing enough alignment, so that new patterns can form.



Gabrielle and Kafa in shoulder-in

When to Begin

A horse is ready to start working on some lateral movement when your partnership is developing the following:

- You can both orientate yourselves reasonably well around the arena on the bend of whichever rein you are on, for example having no difficulty liberating yourselves from the bottom corner of the arena *without* losing the bend.
- Your horse has developed enough (genuine) forward sensitivity that you feel there is a little bit 'left in the tank'. If it seems as if you need to make a big effort just to get going forward relatively straight, the horse will not be ready to respond to your leg and move laterally.
- You can achieve a reasonably consistent longitudinal stretch as a result of your mutual postural engagement. As you will be using the lateral work as a tool to improve the horse's suppleness, straightness and balance you obviously can't expect to have a perfect engagement before you attempt it. It will help to be able to produce some strides of longitudinal stretch however, otherwise the horse is unlikely to have the strength to manage, and might become frustrated and tense and nothing beneficial will be accomplished.
- You are able to adjust the horse's pace through successful collection of the movement as a result of postural control and not restricting the horse with the reins. If the horse is forced into producing lateral work by use of the reins, the work will have little gymnastic value because it is accomplished by the horse's defensive manoeuvres rather than from true postural effort.

Remember not to fixate on achieving the exercise you are working on if it begins to upset the horse. The only benefit of any exercise is in improving the well-being of the horse.

When enough ability to balance has been generated, there is stretch in the stride, an extra moment in which you can choose for the angle of your seat to remain in place and ask the inside hind-leg to step across and under to propel you both sideways. This extra opportunity comes from the way you are both connecting for longer throughout the whole stride, and trying to create this moment before it arrives is likely to result in weight against the horse's mouth and resistance.



Uno demonstrating enough balance and straightness to reveal the moment of the stride in which lateral work can be invited.

Dependence Versus Independence

Lateral work is often introduced to horses by closing the door to their forward movement with the bit, and jabbing or tapping their body and legs to move across with leg aids, spurs or the whip. Although the horse might seem to move across correctly with this approach, because they are being blocked at their mouth, **they are not using *their own* postural muscles to maintain a balanced, collected pace while their legs cross to carry them sideways, and so it is a *dependent* dynamic.** It might be argued that a dependent dynamic such as this is a stepping stone towards independence, or self-carriage; that if a (forced) structure such as this is not created, the horse will never be able to do it independently.

My opinion which comes from practical experience alone, is that some horses, as a result of their conformation, do struggle to be able to offer the steps themselves, and if they are not forced, their progress is fairly minimal. Forcing them however, is not a solution as it often causes them physical damage. I genuinely believe that horses know how much they are capable of, and just as not all humans are capable of advanced gymnastics, or even basic gymnastics, not all horses are capable of higher-level dressage movements. If lateral work is genuinely introduced as *part of the therapeutic development* of any horse, and if it is to be of benefit to that horse, then the right moment will arrive without boxing the horse in and forcing them.

Riding Sideways: The Theory

Travelling Against The Bend

The simplest lateral movement goes 'against' the bend, i.e. the horse is bending in the opposite direction to which they are moving. So, for example, if you are on the left rein with a left bend, you will ask for sideways steps to the right. This is called '**shoulder-in**'. It is ridden on three tracks so that the inside hind-leg moves on the same track as the outside fore-leg, and the inside fore-leg and outside hind-leg move on separate tracks of their own.

Often reference is made to 'leg-yielding' which is supposed to be simple sideways/forward steps against the direction the horse is going in, but without a bend. That doesn't make a lot of sense (to me) because if there is no alignment on to the bend appropriate to the rein direction you are traveling sideways on, the horse cannot be moving straight. The correct (straightening and collecting) way to perform that movement would have to be a shoulder-in on the diagonal. Leg-yielding is supposed to be an elementary way of introducing lateral work to a young horse, but it is important, as described above, not to fall into the trap of simply falling crookedly across the school just because that is easier. Starting with a few steps of a genuine shoulder-in is the best way to avoid this.

There are two aspects to be aware of when performing lateral work: angle and bend. Angle is the angle of the horse's spine in relation to the side of the arena, and bend is the degree of bend through their body. To begin, think of establishing a correct alignment on the circle, or on the quarter line, and bear in mind that the less bend and the less angle you begin with, the easier *maintaining* the sideways steps will be for your horse. It does require more postural strength in the horse to minimise the angle at the beginning of the exercise, than to allow them to turn in too much before they start stepping across. If you are not successful in keeping the angle shallow, the horse will struggle to continue stepping sideways after one or two strides, because the demand to maintain a large angle becomes too difficult. The greater the angle the horse has to hold, the larger the steps sideways have to be to maintain the line. Having to abort the exercise because of this is clearly less beneficial than staying at a minimal angle and completing the exercise more balanced and straighter than at the beginning.

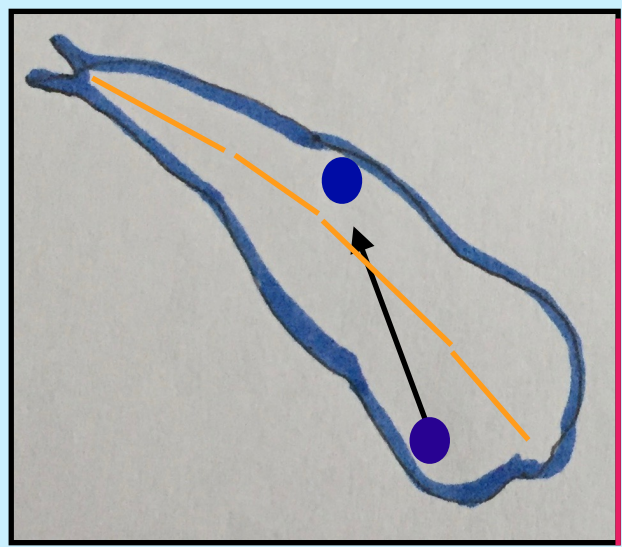
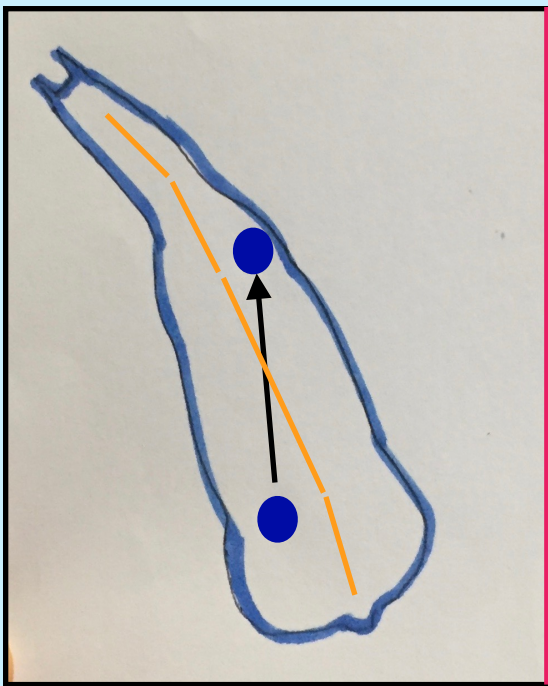
Key for diagrams: Horse depicted from above:

Blue circles indicate the horse's **footfalls**.

Black arrows indicate the **direction** of step hindleg to foreleg.

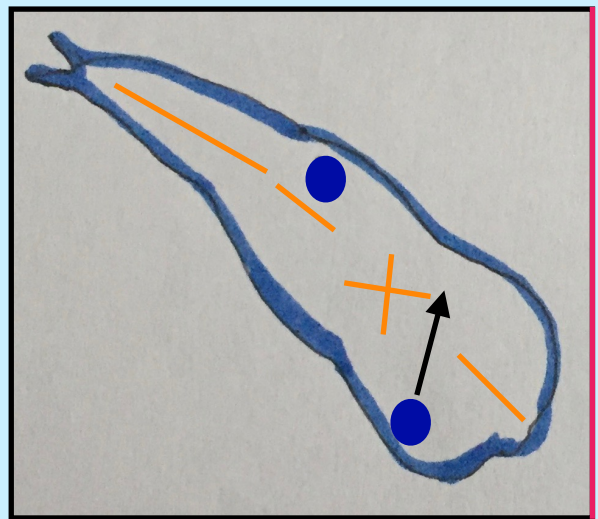
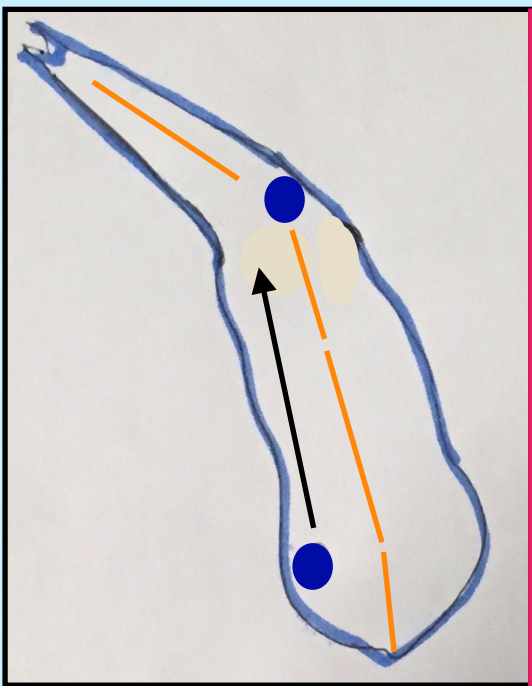
Orange lines show approximate **alignment** of the horse's body.

Red lines represent the right hand **side of the arena**.



Shallow angle in shoulder-in, moving **against** the bend (bend is left, direction is right.) This angle is more difficult to initiate because the horse's body is straighter and less inclined to travel across, but it is also easier to maintain because the bend is less acute through the horse's body.

Deep angle in shoulder-in, moving **against** the bend (bend is left, direction is right). This is an easier angle from which to ask for the first sideways steps in that the horse's body (on the circle) easily comes into such a sideways position relative to the side of the arena, but it requires a steeper angled step to stay straight, which needs greater strength to maintain the line for several steps.



The most common failure in producing a shoulder-in happens when the alignment is broken and the horse's body carries on forward while their neck alone bends to the inside. This results in a lack of sideways stepping from the hind-leg, as shown by the black arrow.

The other major error is when the horse is asked to overstep sideways without the forwardness in the stride which connects the horse's body in straightness. This is common in western riding (side pass) where the original value of lateral work to help straighten and supple the horse has been lost. In this case the lack of alignment is most visible in the way the horse becomes a 'leg mover' where their body is separated from their legs and the engagement is blocked.

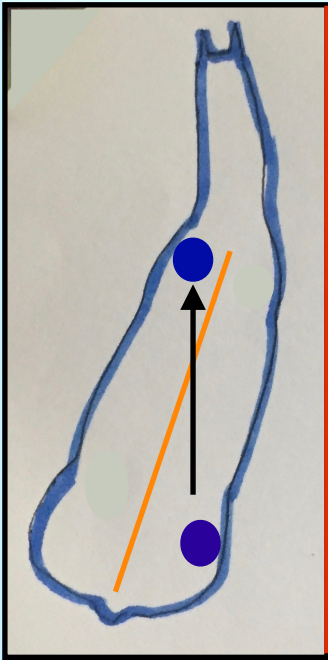
Travelling With The Bend

Moving sideways in the same direction, or 'with' the bend is the next level of advancement in lateral work. Moving across the *diagonal* with the bend is called a **half-pass**, and moving along a *straight line* with the bend facing the inside of the arena is called a **travers** or **haunches-in**. Moving along a straight line facing the arena wall is called a **renvers** or **haunches-out**. There is no actual difference between these movements other than their orientation within the arena. After all, a diagonal line is still a straight line, it just cuts across the arena rather than going straight down it. It can help to remember this if you ever develop an issue with one particular movement. For example it might help to realise that half-pass is the same as a travers on the diagonal line. On the other hand, the orientation does seem to make a difference to the horse. They need to be given time to adjust and become familiar with any different situation, such as facing towards the outside wall as demanded in the renvers. They may be more reluctant if they feel more trapped against the wall, or a particular orientation of their body might cause them greater difficulty with their balance.

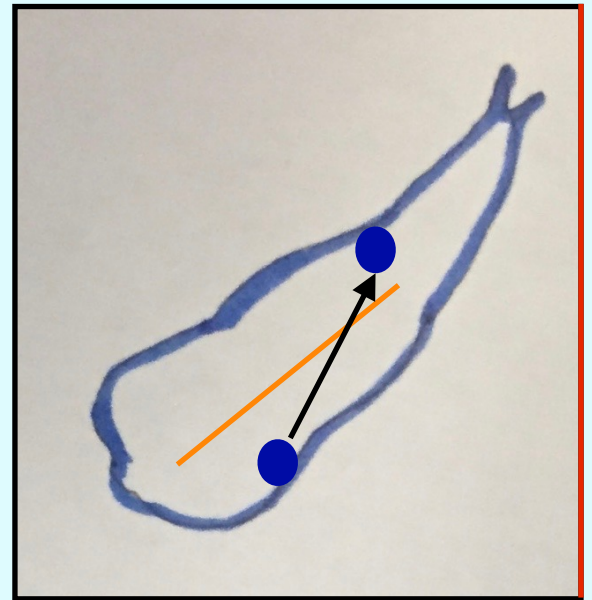
Horses are not usually confident to enter into situations that will ask them for more than they can deliver. As riders we have to try and put ourselves into the horse's body and imagine how much stress we are putting in their mind and on their joints at any time. Above all we need to remember that they will tell us: when they resist it is for a reason. There has to be an element of persuasion because it is a gymnastising process and it takes effort and stamina, but when the balance tips over into force (as is inevitable when riding with spurs or severe bits) then we cannot know how much damage we are inflicting. Horses are very stoical and will not always react violently when they are being damaged. In my experience it is only under severe duress that they become 'dangerous'.

Developing a completely new pattern of movement, such as authentic lateral work, requires engagement of the horse's postural muscles. Because of the cyclical nature of gymnastic training, you can use the engagement you have already developed in a horse to facilitate the lateral work, or you can use the lateral work to develop the engagement. The latter approach would be more appropriate as a quick means of achieving engagement within a session, when the horse is already able to engage and go sideways. Lateral work can also be used occasionally as a different route to encourage a horse to come on to their postural muscles if they have a deeply engrained crookedness, and they have never used their postural muscles under a rider. This is definitely a short cut, and should be done carefully if at all.





The left drawing shows the horse stepping laterally **with** the bend on a minimal angle. On a slight angle like this it is easier to maintain three clear tracks because the bend required is not so demanding. In the right side drawing, the angle is much greater, and the horse will require an advanced bend through their body to step across in three tracks and not four.



Riding Sideways In Practice

Against The Bend

Start by developing your ability to feel your orientation in the arena, and your speed. Sensing your orientation (bend) and your trajectory (straightness) is crucial, so that you can feel the difference when you attempt to go sideways. Your ability to sense the trajectory of the movement you are describing as a horse-human unit will also improve your perception of the straightness of the horse's body. Then, ultimately, you will feel where the horse's legs are at any one time, and how their activity is. At first you can look at the trail of hoof prints your horse is leaving. Be aware of where you are in relation to the sides of the arena, and most importantly of all keep tuning in to the horse's body. If the horse is going too fast then there is much more chance of them 'running past' their postural ring and sliding into crookedness. On the other hand, the collection required cannot come from restricting the horse with the reins. It must come from the horse's own postural strength. Developing and implementing this is a case of combining **alignment aiding from the straightness in your body with modification of the horse's stride with your seat** as follows:

1. **Gradually increasing the pelvic tuck and allowing your seat to move less with the horse's movement, while resisting the push of the horse's ribcage to the outside and keeping enough weight in the inside seat-bone and hip-joint as ballast, will slow the horse enough to give you a moment in the stride when the horse is more susceptible to stepping sideways.**

It is important to understand that displacing a horse laterally is about moving the whole horse in a 'diagonal format'.

Whether you are moving with or against the bend, and whether you are going down the long side or across the diagonal, the horse's body itself when performing lateral work moves diagonally sideways not straight sideways. To move diagonally sideways there is both a forward and a sideways aspect to the stride. If the forward part outweighs the sideways, then your movement will have less angle. If the degree of sideways in the stride outweighs the forward movement then it will have more angle. The slighter the angle, the easier it is for the horse, because it demands less sideways-moving effort, which requires more postural strength than moving forward. At first, therefore, it is best to concentrate on keeping the angle to a minimum. The rider dictates the degree of angle of the sideways movement by the angle at which they hold their whole body. Make sure to think of the angle presented to the horse as coming from your whole body, including your pelvis and upper body. If a rider tries to influence the horse with their torso alone, because the torso turns easily and the pelvis is stuck to the horse, they will most likely introduce a twist which has no power to influence the horse. Think of the screw-driver analogy, the shaft and the handle of the screw driver (rider pelvis and torso) must act together to transmit power through to the screw (the horse's body).

2. At the moment when the horse is balanced in the right way to step sideways, turn the horse onto the diagonal angle you wish to assume. Make sure that your whole body is vertically aligned, then, when you wish to turn the horse in preparation for stepping sideways, you turn *everything*, including the horse, and ask the horse with your inside leg to step their inside hind-leg across under their body.

The only way to maintain your effectiveness as a rider, whatever exercise you are performing, is to stay in the same alignment with yourself and the horse. The 'horse-human' unit might go forward, sideways or backwards, but the alignment between horse and human never changes. Your leg supports and encourages the movement itself, but it is your posture that initiates and controls the sideways direction.

3. Once you are locked into the turn and you you feel the horse is stepping under themselves and displacing their body across, make sure to hold yourself in place against the force pushing you over to the outside again.

The forces pushing you out come from the horse's natural crookedness attempting to re-establish itself, as well as some inertia from the fact that you are moving sideways and your body wants to continue moving in that direction. If you can stay in place you will maintain the leverage you need to continue asking the horse to move across. This is the time when it is imperative not to start holding on with the reins. It is more beneficial in the long run to accomplish a few steps only, and prepare again, than to allow yourself to start manipulating the horse with the reins. You can even practice with long reins to begin with.

4. **Start with a few strides only, and focus on maintaining the new balance you have generated as you come out of the diagonal position into straightness again.** It is easier to come out of the sideways dynamic on to a circle or a corner because the horse is already bending, and you only have to ask the inside hind-leg to step straight. To bring the horse back on to a straight line you also have to straighten out the bend through the horse's body and you will need extra 'inside-pillar' weight to help displace the horse across.
5. **As your balance and suppleness as a horse-human unit improves you will be able to maintain the sideways steps for longer.** Quality is always more constructive than quantity. Remind yourself every time that you are using the lateral movement to improve your overall straightness and engagement rather than performing the movement for its own sake. This way you will only seek the benefit it can give you and be able to sense in the horse when to introduce it, for how long, and to what degree of angle in the bend.



Trot shoulder-in on the right rein on a relatively shallow angle. Zouzou is not being compressed with the rein to keep him on the line, but is beginning to alter his balance and sit a bit deeper and raise his forehead so that he can step across with his right hind-leg. The rein contact is created by his postural ring and I am focusing on maintaining my weight pillar down the inside and my postural leverage (lower leg balancing upper body). I want to feel that my hands are pushing forward during the shoulder-in, and that is accomplished here.

As your horse begins to step sideways under their body, you must concentrate on staying evenly above them with your weight. This means not being shifted to the outside. You can see in this photograph how powerful the connection is when Gabrielle's weight stays evenly on both sides of Lulu's spine, helping him to step across and shift his whole body sideways.

This is the magic of lateral work: the consolidating of the mutual horse-human engagement machine through testing the straightness in a change of orientation.



With the Bend

Lateral work which displaces the horse in the *same* direction as they are bending is more challenging for the horse and rider, mainly because there is no opt-out clause. As discussed, when moving sideways *away* from the bend, the horse can jack-knife between the neck and shoulder, and fall sideways, essentially rejoining their crookedness rut. There isn't a similar crooked 'easy option' when moving sideways with the bend, so horses can find getting started quite formidable. There is an easy option for the rider which must be avoided if the quality of the exercise is to be maintained, and that is displacing the horse across by putting your own weight to the outside, so the horse moves across *away* from you, but not underneath you. It is common to see riders leaning to the outside when performing a half-pass, but the horse is no longer truly underneath them, and the vertical alignment, and therefore authentic control, is lost.

1. When you find that you quite often use sideways steps against the bend to sophisticate your straightness and balance, and it feels beneficial in your mutual engagement, you are ready to explore moving sideways into the bend. Remember it is only an option to improve your connection, not a box to tick.
2. **Only start asking when you have established a good quality bend in walk**, for example coming out of a corner or within a circle. Ideally you are looking for when moving this way begins to feel as if a doorway has opened up that you want to explore. Maybe you have even begun to think about it and how it feels when you are not riding.
3. **Familiarise the horse to the feeling of your outside leg coming a little bit further back than usual.** You will need it to sit at the back of the horse's rib-cage on the outside to have enough leverage to cause the horse's hind-quarters to step towards the inside. At the same time concentrate on maintaining your weight in place. Bringing your outside leg back naturally draws your weight to the outside, add that to the swing in the horse's stride displacing you, and you can end up falling out, losing the bend and being further away from a true lateral step towards the bend.
4. **Create a pause in the forward movement with your seat, bring your hands further across towards the inside of the wither, and within the moment when the horse is collecting themselves, use your inner-pillar weight and your outside leg aids to lever the horse across.** Your leg aid will already be particular to your horse, but think along the lines of a slow, starting gentle but persistent, weight-yielding pressure. Imagine you are embracing the horse's whole body with your leg, melting into their muscle until you are carrying their body, and then shift them sensitively but inevitably across.

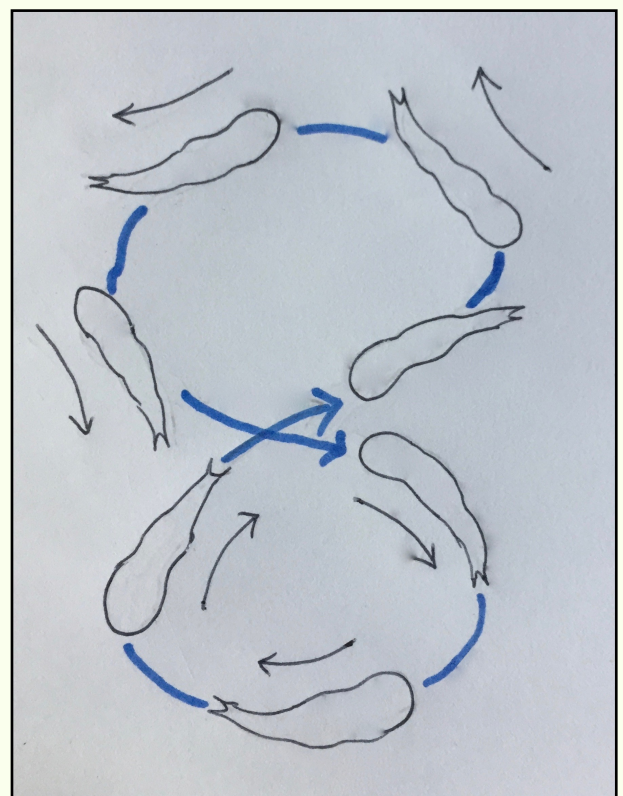
5. **Reward even the hint of a step in the right direction by backing off and offering the horse a rest.** This movement is counter-intuitive for the horse in comparison to lateral work against the bend. If the horse feels cornered they might react by making a half-rear or a spin. Once that channel is opened in their minds, it can begin to override your aids. Be aware of trying to manipulate the result with your hands, losing your weight to the outside and twisting your upper body in any way.
6. **Set up with as little bend as possible so that the horse doesn't feel overwhelmed.** The more acute the bend, the more weight the horse has to carry and push off their hind-legs to manoeuvre their body across and the more pressure there is on the rider to stay in place.

Exercise 5: Going Sideways

Against The Bend: Special Figure of Eight

Start on the horse's most straightforward rein and make the first loop concentrating on establishing a correct bend and having your weight and your legs where you can really maintain that bend. **When you start out on the next loop, stay on the same bend as the first loop.** So you are now bending in the opposite way to your direction. Use lateral stepping to help you stay on the circle and not wander off out of the bend and see if you can maintain it all the way back to the original loop. This is a great exercise to break horse and rider out of crookedness patterning.

Starting in the bottom circle, when you change reins to describe the upper circle, you stay on the same bend, which is the right bend in this case. In order to stay on the circle, the horse will have to make sideways steps against the bend. This can be quite challenging at first, so stay vigilant about not attempting to control the direction with your reins. You can practice as often as you like until the full circle becomes possible. The feeling of balance and validation of your bend when you do manage to go all the way round and rejoin the bottom circle is amazing. This exercise will improve both your partnership's manoeuvrability and the flexibility of your mutual perception. Carry on to the other rein when you are ready.

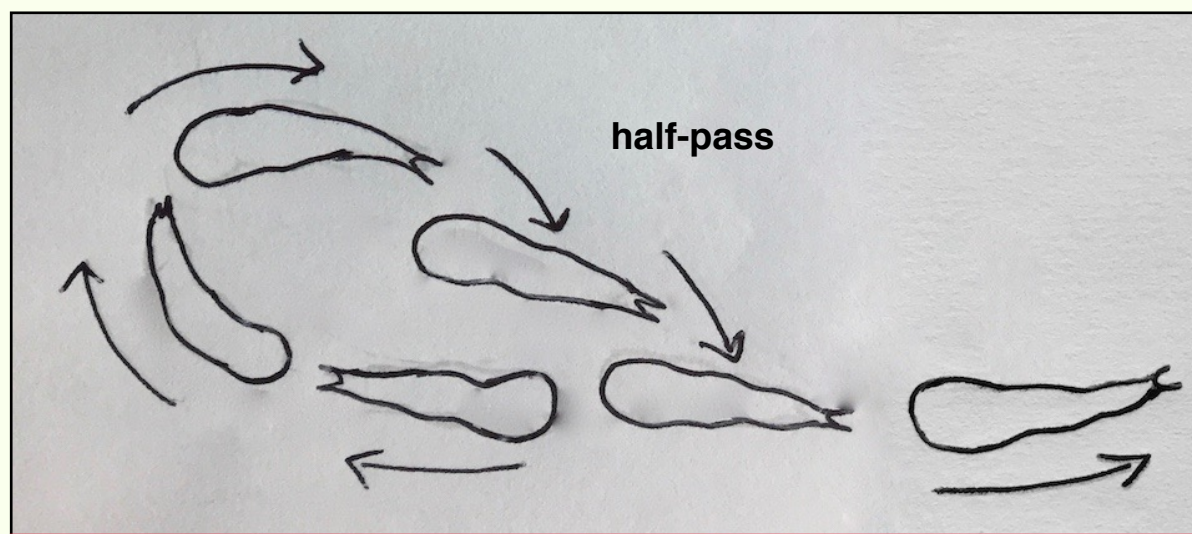


With The Bend: Loop off the track

Ride down the long side and somewhere between the two quarter markers turn off the track to create as small a loop as you can. Remember to form the loop with your leg and weight aids, and turn the horse with your whole body alignment. As you are coming back to the track, bring your outside leg back and ask for the last few strides in half-pass. Success will depend on how well you can keep your weight down the inside (the right side in the diagram) and your hands positioned towards the track. Your hands may want to travel backwards to try to replace your leg aids, rather than push forwards and sideways towards the destination. To successfully correct this you might have to focus only on them a few times and make yourself keep them in place.

start

finish



Hope had quite serious damage in her sacroiliac joints, so once she was ready physically, working in engagement helped to strengthen her enormously. Working on our half-pass was especially powerful as it helped to bring her pelvis and hind-legs together into harmony. She loved the work, but I had to be careful as she would give more than she was really capable of in her body. This was remarkable as she started out extremely defensive. The defensiveness was entirely related to lack of balance and strength.



Re-training the natural inclination of your hands, when riding, is one of the biggest challenges for riders, and one that is least successfully accomplished.

Cultivating Quality

Like all exercises with a horse there is a positive cycle, so that the straighter a horse is moving, the easier it is for them to step sideways and when they can step sideways that will bring them even straighter. How do you foster the positive cycle and avoid the negative one?

1. Remember that **preparation is the key**, continue to work towards alignment and balance and collection until the sideways steps seem to create themselves.
2. Always **ride in context**, so however the horse is feeling that day you work from there and only introduce lateral work when it is the natural next step.
3. **Incorporate lateral work into your session as a tool** in the same way as changing the rein or making a transition. It doesn't have to be practiced as a separate exercise, but can be just a couple of steps or part of a transition or another exercise.

Where Does The Half Halt Fit In?

The half halt is another tool the rider can use to both facilitate and sophisticate engagement. There is some confusion around it which may be attributable to the confusion around engagement itself. The intention behind any exercise is always to improve balance in order to improve straightness and therefore engagement, or to improve straightness and therefore balance and ultimately engagement. Straightness and balance are like rivers which intertwine and run into the same sea. They feed the mechanism of engagement. The function of the half halt is to influence the horse's balance. It is a brief recalibration which transforms some of the kinetic energy back into potential energy, essentially encouraging the horse to sit a little bit deeper for a stride or two, usually as a preparation for a transition or another exercise. It is also helpful for improving the paces in general, to prevent rushing, or asking for a step up in quality. It will become more and more integral, so that it is almost indistinguishable from the general development.

Making a half halt is quite similar to dropping down a gear when you are driving. It engages the horse's postural mechanism and slows the horse down by bringing more weight back into their haunches. In this way they are in a position of greater balance and readiness to spring into the next movement. Skilled drivers will use the transmission of the car to control the pace, rather than the brakes, because stepping on the brakes brings more weight to the front and reduces control. Braking is similar to using the reins to stop a horse. In the horse's case the reins will stop them as a result of pain in their mouth, and there is also a transfer of weight from back to front because of momentum.

How To Ride a Half Halt

Riding a half-halt, as the name suggests, is simply a less definitive action than the halt. In order to slow down, you use your postural leverage, which is always there as potential in the orientation of your lower leg, seat and upper body (See p.47). With the influence your postural leverage is already creating in engaging the horse, you gradually slow down the 'following' movement in your seat, while staying tall and controlling your upper body weight, preventing it from falling forward. You will also use your leg to maintain the connection with the horse's hind-legs, and bring them under. If you are successful in bringing the horse's movement into greater collection, and their bodyweight slides back a little, then you will *not* feel a heavy, momentum-orientated weight come into the reins. This is a development however, and it is unlikely to be perfect from the start. The main thing is not to hold on or block with the rein contact. **Remember that you always create balance through forward flow and even when you are collecting the movement, it is still forward movement.** The better you can tune into this approach to riding with your direct perception, the less you will succumb to the false promises of rein control. Be aware of keeping weight out of the rein with your postural control in every moment you are riding, and stay willing to let your hands go forward. The half halt is accomplished when you can sense *any influence at all* in the horse's forward movement, towards collecting (carrying) themselves more. Being able to acknowledge the slightest physical validation of the dynamic between you and the horse will encourage it to grow, like germinating a seed. If you feel *any shift at all*, reward yourselves with a mutual appreciation, or a rest, or simply to carry on and enjoy the new balance you have created.

As in every other part of the training process, feel for the therapeutic value. Not as an after thought, but as the driving force of everything you are doing. The main therapeutic value of developing the horse's ability to balance better and better under the rider is empowerment. Their paces will transform, becoming elastic and floating, and they will feel a majesty coming into their body. If you can genuinely come to the partnership with the intention of revealing this power within your horse, then you can avoid (for the most part) the ego related agenda tied up with control, ambition and greed which will cause you to lose sight of the dialogue. The dialogue between you is your guidebook. It will show you how you can be of service. How you can help your horse feel safer, stronger and even more beautiful.



Introducing Canter

The canter stride is a different shape from the trot. It is triangular as opposed to rectangular, and is therefore less regular in terms of footfalls. In the trot the two diagonal pairs match each other, whereas in the canter the outside hind-leg pushes off, followed by the diagonal formed by the inside hind and outside fore, and then the inside fore-leg completes the stride. The canter stride is a leap, where all four legs leave the ground, bouncing from one stride to the next, whereas the trot swings from one diagonal to the next. In maximising the quality and expression of the paces, the trot will become more buoyant and the canter will develop more swing. This is the integration of the paces into one, whole floating stream of movement.



Preserving the Balance

The primary challenge in cantering with a young or inexperienced horse is in developing the balance while preventing tension from becoming associated with the attempts. This seems to be more of an issue with canter than trot for most horse and rider partnerships. It is most likely to be so because a balanced canter requires even more postural strength than a balanced trot. Canter is often introduced too early and too insistently. There are two ways to approach introducing canter where you can encourage enough activity from your horse to strengthen them, and therefore progress, yet not enough to trigger tension:

- 1. Focusing on the transition itself.**
- 2. Riding outside the arena.**

Focusing on the transition

First realise that the canter transition is a gateway, and the way that you master that gateway defines the quality of the canter itself. This is quite a different perspective than thinking that you just need to get into canter and then everything else can be worked on from there. Initiating a quality transition is the same as the way the trot transition was introduced, essentially this is *allowing the canter to create itself through preparation* as the horse develops postural strength and therefore balance and straightness.

One day the horse will have the ability to store enough potential energy without tension to slide into canter relatively easily. When this happens the rider must focus on maintaining their own balance and supporting the new canter rhythm for as many strides as is possible without losing straightness and therefore balance and finally activity. The rider achieves this by keeping their inside pillar in place and maintaining the positioning of the bend, so that the horse is able to drop from a balanced canter stride to a trot stride which is balanced enough to come gently back without any interference from the reins.

Over time as the horse's stamina and confidence build up, the canter itself will last longer, and eventually the rider will be in a position to ask for the canter to continue, and it will. Until this feels quite possible however, it is not the focus, and is not recommended. The focus is to prepare the smoothest, calmest transition, perform it, and then focus on producing the smoothest and calmest down transition as soon as you are in the canter itself. In fact the focus is on maintaining straightness at all times, which will balance the canter.

This approach is not often taken because trainers often believe that nothing happens unless it is demanded from the horse. Unfortunately if you never deviate from this plan of action you will never discover the possibilities of another route. Quality creates more quality, and returning to our initial intention of bringing a therapeutic influence only, the *number* of circles you can canter is not relevant. The *effect cantering has on the horse* is highly relevant, and when it involves the careful, sensitive exploration of a new way of moving, it will certainly inject energy and perspective into the work, and the trot is instantly transformed into a more expansive, energised movement.



Totti's post canter trot early on was infused with a very buoyant energy.

Starting to canter outside the arena

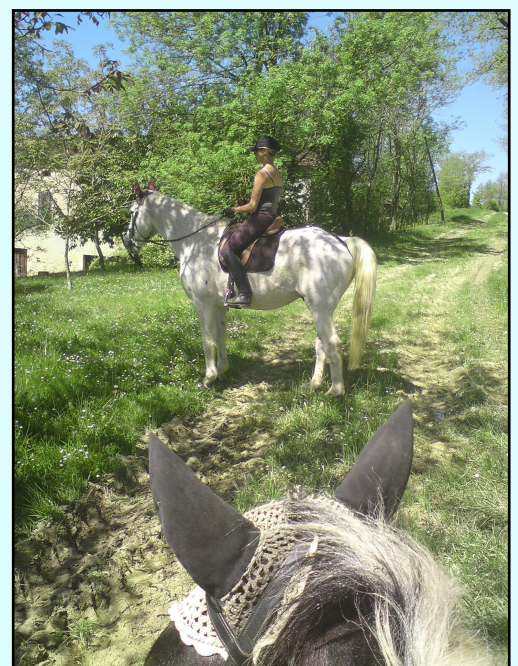
This is another way to familiarise the horse with the shift of rhythm and the way the rider feels on their back. The main advantage of doing this is the extra space available. Within an arena, unless it is enormous, you are always approaching a corner, and this makes it difficult to get into your stride. If you have a nice long track, or a suitable field, and ideally another experienced, *calm* horse-human partnership to ride out with, then you can arrange a nice gentle introduction.

If you do decide to introduce canter in this way, in order to benefit from the advantage of extra space without introducing tension, there must be a similar careful evolution in riding outside as has been outlined for riding in the arena. The horse must already be familiar with riding outside in walk, and established in their trot work so that they are gymnastically ready to canter. (See p.198).

Because trotting is your springboard to canter, you need to be able to easily initiate and return to it, so that you can (gently and calmly) encourage your horse to step up a pace into canter. You can do this in a less collected way, going into a forward seat if you wish, to allow the horse to canter as unhindered by weight shifting and rein contact as possible. Focus on the quality of your trot, primarily that it has an even rhythm, and there is acceptance of your leg in the horse's sides, and a relaxed feeling in the reins. The best way is not to insist, but like the approach in the arena, offer the opportunity and if the horse doesn't go through, gently re-balance a little and carry on in trot. This will give the horse plenty of time to prepare for the moment they do decide to go.

The more balanced you are as a rider, and the more patient, the sooner the horse will be inclined to try. Forcing at this stage can lead to problems later on, because a horse will always respond if they feel able to. Imagine your young horse does not feel strong enough to leap into canter with a rider yet, and yet they are pushed to do so. This will build up anxiety associated with the transition in their mind, as well as what might seem to be an over-reaction: leaping into canter due to having to muster enough strength to do so. In the future the canter transition will be an issue, and this horse may explode every time they are asked for it, even when they might be more able, and it takes much longer to smooth out the wrinkle of fear associated with such forcing than avoiding it altogether.

Riding Totti out with
Octavia, an
experienced and calm
companion



The Challenge of Canter

The most holistic way to introduce the canter is to follow your own intuition, adapt to your circumstances and be willing to do a little of everything. **Above all you don't have to do it because it is a requirement, you do it because it is an expression of the expansion of your beautiful partnership.** It will become possible when you are both ready. As with the walk and the trot, the canter transition is all about preparation. There is more potential for tension arising in association with this transition, than with the trot transition, because it is a more abrupt depart into the jump every stride, which requires more effort and better balance. Your first priority is to remain in a (mutually) tranquil state of mind. This is why introducing canter can be challenging, it can present a threat to your valuable tranquility for the following reasons:

- **Cantering can become a burden in your mind.**
- **Being asked to canter can become a threat for your horse.**
- **Weakness in your horse can make tension necessary to get you into canter.**
- **Physical issues (in either of you) make cantering uncomfortable.**
- **Your postural inadequacy can unbalance your horse and result in tension.**
- **Negative associations from the past around cantering can be triggered.**

The solution to limiting the tension which may well arise in association with cantering is in *acknowledgment*: being prepared to listen, both to yourself and to your horse, and to allow every stage of the process to unfold as it needs to. For example, listen to your anxieties, and allow yourself to examine them. Not necessarily in an intellectual way, but in allowing the feelings to be felt. When you embrace how you feel, you are allowing a flow to take place, in effect, a purification; and you can reach a more balanced, calmer place. Sometimes the feelings seem illogical or unrelated to what is actually happening now with your horse. They still exist however, and telling yourself they are illogical will not allow them to release. Listening to them will. Maybe they are logical, if your horse explodes when you ask for canter, it feels dangerous and is worrying. Allow yourself to process the feelings and you may come to an understanding, an insight which will help you both to progress. Maybe you are pushing too soon, allowing an agenda to insert itself. Maybe you are scared to acknowledge your horse has a physical issue because it might be serious or unresolvable. This is when you can remember that having faith in your journey itself is what matters, and not the endgame. When you are able to listen, you will see that all the solutions arrive at the right time. You may not recognise them as solutions at first, but they will reveal themselves. Remember that there are no rules for your evolution as a partnership. Some horses have a conformation which makes cantering a struggle, and it may take a long time, if ever, to develop it without damaging your harmony. That is okay. This is not failure. Developing harmony is the success.

Riding the Canter Transition

The best way to know you are ready to introduce cantering is when it begins to feel possible. The potential for making the leap up begins to whisper itself in those moments when your trot takes on extra precision, or an infusion of extra power. If, however, your trot still feels a little ragged, arrhythmic and especially if it feels reluctant, then you do not even need to think about cantering. Follow your horse and follow yourself. **This is what becomes so inspiring about your training journey, that it is rooted in reality. What you do is as a result of *what is*.** You don't need to aspire to what others achieve or read about what it should be and superimpose that on what you already have. All you have to do is stay as attuned as possible to what is already there. When you begin to do that your progress can be surprising.

When you are experiencing these little hints, these moments when it seems like you could jump up into canter, there will be an exact moment of the stride when it is perfect to ask. This is the moment (in trot) just before the horse is bringing the diagonal of the outside hind-leg and the inside fore-leg through. It is the outside hind-leg which pushes off the canter stride, so you need to embrace that hind-leg and ask it just at that moment before it lands, to convert a trot stride into a canter stride. In practical terms, the way to maintain as seamless a connection as possible so that you can truly slide into the canter, is to use your outside leg, slightly further back than usual, to stay in touch with the hind-leg in a continuous contact. This will contain the hind-quarters on a straight, channeled line. The aid for the canter itself will come from a combination of your inside leg and inside seat-bone.

Think of when you are trotting: most of your activating aiding comes from your inside leg. The outside leg is more of a guardian. It helps to align the horse by providing an outside 'wall'. For cantering, this guardian leg simply comes deeper into that role. It comes slightly further back to harness the hind-quarters in the same way as in lateral work. This also has the effect of accentuating the bend which helps you to bring the horse into canter on the correct lead. **The guardian leg must not surprise or worry the horse, so be aware of introducing it carefully until it is safely accepted and ready.** At this stage any of your trot strides can be lifted into canter with the action of the more active aids from the inside of your body. The form of the active aids is not set in stone, just as none of the aids are.

What is described here is a universal suggestion derived from intuitive experience of how the horse's body responds and functions. The whole stride happens relatively synchronously. So as you are capturing the outside hind leg just before it pushes off, you ask the horse's body to leap off the ground and almost simultaneously as the leap is happening, you are asking with your inside leg and seat-bone pressing and turning slightly to the inside, and now you raise your torso to counterbalance the downward swing as the inside hind leg and outside foreleg come back in to land together, and finally the horse's inside foreleg swings through. The transition happens so instantaneously that it could seem as if your entire aid is focused simply on asking the inside foreleg to swing through as it leads the stride onto the rein you are on, and for the rider, this is the only visible part of the canter stride.

If, however, you become too fixated on the inside shoulder and foreleg part of the strike-off, you will not be aware of the real origin of the stride in the outside hindleg, and your canter transition may be front-heavy and balanced downhill. **Always feel for the hind leg take-off, capture the hindquarters and encourage the horse to lift up into the canter rather than fall down into it.**



First Canter Attempts with Totti

Feeling for the moment when Totti is balanced enough and ready to strike off.

This is the stride before, when she is about to take the right hindleg trot diagonal through, just after that her left hindleg will come through again, and that will be the first push up into canter.

By this point I need to be connected with her left side and harnessing her left hind leg with my left leg.



Next stride and we are off! The right side of my upper body and seat have moved forward from the previous stride. This bringing forward of the right seat-bone, in alignment with my torso both initiates the transition, and goes with Totti's shift in posture. This is the secret to influencing with your seat, you must be so connected (stuck on) that when you move, the horse moves with you. Notice how all her weight is on one foot, this takes extra strength.



Now her right hindleg diagonal with left foreleg comes through, as in trot they touch the ground together. If the canter is corrupted (usually by blocking the horse in front to force collection before the horse is ready) then this diagonal will no longer land as one, but in two foot falls, and there will be a four-beat canter. Horses only do this naturally when they gallop and their body is able to extend.



This is the next part of the canter stride when the inside foreleg takes over from the diagonal pair, and again, all of Totti's weight is on this single foreleg. It is essential to maintain your posture at this point and not fall forward into the hole that seems to open up when the horse is momentarily lower in front and higher behind. Developing enough postural strength to stay upright in canter takes time and effort. As does the strength of belief that it is possible.

It is clear from these photographs just how much the canter demands of the young horse physically. Although horses do not always have a naturally talented canter which lends itself to collection with a rider, unless they have spinal damage already, they are highly likely to be able to canter in three clear beats and form a bascule. Preserving this wholeness, and developing overall postural strength in your horse is more important than pushing for balance and straightness in the canter itself. In my experience being patient does not diminish the likelihood of developing the canter, nor does focusing on trot until you sense the portal opening up. If you are not managing to genuinely develop straightness however, your work may plateau because, inadvertently, you are fixing the crookedness in deeper.

Planning Your Session

Of course there is no plan! This is the most important message you can take from this book. The session will unfold in the present moment exactly as it needs to. Your guide is the well-being of your horse, your own well-being. Of course there will be a process of learning how to listen to your horse, and interpreting what you hear. Learning how to listen to yourself, understanding your authentic self, and in so doing, educating your intuition. This is all part of the journey. The magic of this approach is multidimensional:

- **It is inspiring because there is such potential. You never know what you might learn and experience.**
- **You can relax because you know you are not being controlled by preconceptions or abstract rules.**
- **Following the well-being trail is deeply fulfilling, and disengages you gently from everything that is limiting you.**

Riding Out

If you are able to ride outside of an arena it will bring your whole partnership into greater perspective. Not having access to an arena is the other end of the spectrum, and in that case finding a flat, relatively enclosed area to work in is a wonderful opportunity for different reasons. The benefit of arena work is the reduction of outside stimuli that allows you to focus fully on the dialogue between you and your horse. To facilitate this you are riding on a relatively level surface, without obstructions or obstacles. You are reducing distractions to a minimum, and you are working in an enclosed space. In this safe space, apart from other horse human partnerships, there is only you and the horse. In this environment you have a full window between you both to develop your interaction. Think of it as similar to going into a church, or a meditation room, so you can let go of any other demands and focus on your mind, or consciousness, alone. Once you have experienced this resource, it can become deeply fulfilling, and you will greatly appreciate what it offers.

Riding outside of an arena is a very different experience, and this will be reflected in your dialogue. Instead of focusing within, on the dialogue between you, there is a shift. Now you are *both* focusing on what is happening outside of your partnership. Here I am describing the extreme of either circumstance, of course there are elements of each, and degrees, but the primary focus does change. Because you are both going somewhere, you are on a different kind of journey. The journey in the arena is to dive deeply into the therapeutic process, and explore the process into greater harmony by way of engagement. The journey you go on a trail ride is a straightforward physical A to B. You can still approach this with therapeutic intent, and this will be your habit when you discover the nature of doing that and it becomes your deepest intent. In fact when you can develop therapeutic intent as your principal guide, it will ensure that your riding out experience remains beneficial to the partnership.

Riding out can be of great benefit, and it can also cause great harm. It can consolidate your partnership in a way being together in the arena will never do and yet it can also pull apart the ties of trust you have carefully been constructing. The reason it will help you is that when you go together on this journey, the opportunity is there for you both to become a team, confronting the challenges in the world together. You will pull together in mutual trust. You may find that there is less opportunity to focus on each other, i.e. on your own posture, and your horse's physical responses. On the other hand there will be more opportunity to focus on your mutual response to the outside world. Indeed it is helpful to use this opportunity to bond. You can feel that your horse is protecting you, and that you are protecting your horse. If you forget to listen to your horse and begin to focus on how far you want to go, or where you want to go instead of the complicity between you, your actions will become a threat to the horse and trust between you will be greatly compromised.

The Riding Out Process

First of all it is helpful to see your plan to begin riding out as a process. Even with a horse who is older and more experienced, expecting to take your horse away from the herd or stables, get ready and ride off down the road, all in one day, will only bring you headfirst into resistance. Every step must unfold within the well-being dialogue, so that both you and your horse are in a state of mutual trust. If your horse feels frightened that they are being taken away from where they feel safe, then they will begin to associate both you, and going out, with feeling frightened. When this happens, even if there are no challenges on the journey, the horse will still be in an anxious state, and will perceive challenges. This is why people joke about their horse being frightened of a leaf, they are not in fact frightened of leaves, but of being separated from where they feel safe. The rider in these situations is not a safe place for this horse. A human being becoming a safe place for a horse, uniquely, without any other horses, is a rare accomplishment. It is so often confused with the kind of acceptance displayed by horses that have had their spirit broken, so they no longer feel anything about what they are doing. Many horse guardians do not recognise this state in a horse simply because it is so common and taken for granted. The traditional ways of training have developed to promote convenience for humans, and adaptability in what a horse will be prepared to do. This is very different from nurturing the relationship itself.

Developing mutual trust with a horse is greatly simplified by including the herd as much as possible in the process. Especially at first, until your bond becomes strong enough that it can withstand being autonomous. This is also true of working in the arena. Including another horse, especially a friend, by letting them be there in or near the arena will reduce the separation until it is no longer important. This is one of the fundamental concepts in working with a horse: promoting a lower threat, higher comfort environment will make it easier to transition into higher threat situations. This is because you are strengthening your mutual dependence, not weakening it. So if you can begin the riding out process with an equine companion, you are less likely to trigger defensive reactions.



Going out for a walk with Quaramba accompanied by Marie, one of her friends in the herd.

Unfolding The Process

Every situation is different, and using your imagination is part of the process. Remember you are finding *your unique* answers to whatever your horse is talking to you about, not instituting a plan you thought up earlier. **The focus is always to strengthen your partnership and not to mind how that manifests itself.** First you connect within the herd, or alternatively in the horse's stable or paddock. At this stage you can introduce your idea of going out together, as extending an invitation. You might invite the horse to be with you for a few minutes. Perhaps you introduce the head-collar and invite the horse to come with you. This can be a short distance from the others within the field, it can be just outside of the gate or a walk. Every stage depends on what the horse is communicating to you. You may even feel a barrier as soon as you step out of your car, or out of your front door. This must be acknowledged and accepted until it changes, if it changes. You may feel welcome right up until you produce a head-collar, if resistance arises, back off, listen, ask again... and remember that there are always new ways to introduce the horse to your ideas which may be acceptable to them. This approach requires great flexibility on your part, which is the perfect way to disengage from narrow-minded, fear-based dependencies. It is a challenge not to become attached to a result. To help with this you can write notes about the progress you are making within the partnership: in what way your mutual trust is developing, how it feels to be together, what you are learning about your horse's personality. This will help you to avoid fixating on abstract values such as how far you went or how easily you got the bridle on.

As long as you are genuinely reading your horse, and not pushing through resistances, you will always be growing your connection. Remember that resistance in a horse starts out very subtle. You will have a feeling that they are not comfortable with the situation. It can be a certain stance, a little frozen, a refusal to investigate, a fixed stare. It is very easy to ride over the first boundary a horse gives you, but you will see when the resistance grows and you can begin to identify it earlier and earlier. Sometimes the next stages of resistance are a kind of lethargy, a heaviness or stiffness and an unwillingness to move. Sometimes they are more demonstrative, an attempt to escape, throwing the head up, half rears or plunging about. By the time you get here clearly several signals have been ignored. If this happens ask yourself *why* you are ignoring the horse's communication. Remember that you are not trying to make the horse do something as cooperatively as possible, you are inviting your horse to enjoy a therapeutic experience. Consider what this means and let it sink into your subconscious as deeply as possible. Read the behaviour, yet always sense what lies beneath. A horse who is happy with the situation will generally feel soft in their outlook. They may be curious and willing to investigate. They will rarely make abrupt movements or attempt to escape. You will feel cooperation and a sense of solidarity in whatever you are doing.



This photograph shows demonstrating how to introduce the saddle at a clinic. In this moment, this young mare was demonstrating that she was not comfortable with me coming any closer. It was a subtle behaviour, but her energy is clear. She is looking away, and projecting a low level of anxiety. This was the perfect opportunity to bond with her by listening, and waiting.



After a while, she began to relax and breathe and take in her surroundings. The initial rejection upon sighting the saddle faded when she realised I was not going to ignore her feelings. She became more curious and I felt I could approach closer and offer her the saddle to investigate. In this way, through dialogue, she was eventually comfortable with me putting the saddle on her back, although that was not the goal, only the framework.

The added value of introducing riding out with another herd member is that you can follow along without having to be too specific with your aids. Travelling makes sense for a herd, and you can use this natural instinct as support. Over time your partnership can become more independent, taking the lead or going alongside. This will happen organically as your confidence increases.

If you cannot organise a herd mate to help you grow your independence, this can be an opportunity, not an obstacle. It will help you to remember that it is not the completion of the physical journey that represents success. Success is the generation of the mutual bond of trust between you. This will guide your practical progress. Go where you both feel safe to go. Whether this is no further than the field, perhaps around the yard, maybe a few hundred metres, this is perfect. Your guide is your connection, and there is no better way to become aware of this connection than in asking such a simple question. How far can we go together, in mutual trust and comfort? Again, the success is not measured by distance, but by your ability to communicate with your horse, and your ability to listen and dialogue. You are exploring what will bring you closer, allow this to be the guide and you may discover new and magical things.

Ella's Story

Ella is an ex racehorse with a history of troubled relationships with people. Over the last seven years or so she has been slowly and surely rehabilitating in a herd, without any pressure. When I started working with her, the first thing we did was work with the idea of putting the head-collar on. Although she did have a head-collar put on her occasionally, we were working on her associations with it becoming entirely free of threat. Then we followed the process for going into the arena and having a bridle on. She had some profound physical issues which had made it impossible for her to be comfortable working in the past, so she had no idea how to bend or balance, and it became obvious that she had, in the past, used wild spooking moves to escape this feeling. It was difficult to predict when she would suddenly leap and spin, sometimes towards and into me. We found the therapeutic solution at the time was that I walk very close with her, and very slowly, and we focused on softening ourselves and breathing. Ella's feet had also been weak and cracked for a long time, and since she had been getting a more natural trim the cracks became wider and more superficial, as if the feet were opening out and healing from within. Feeling happier on her feet also helped her to relax.

This particular day she was comfortable to have the saddle on and I did up the girth. This was the first time we had done this together, and although at first she was calm, she started getting a bit tense and went to the field gate. Instead of ignoring her or trying to persuade her to calm down, we went with her idea, and rejoined the herd. I was following her wishes, and she wanted to go and stand in the barn. We did that for while, and then I had the idea to get up on the straw bale that sits in the corner. She was so calm and sleepy I asked her to come alongside and leaned over her, and when she didn't move I got on. We stood like that for a while. She told one of the other mares, Quisse to get out of her space (Quisse was fascinated that I was sitting on Ella) but that was all she did. She felt absolutely relaxed. After a while I got off and took the tack off. It felt good to have followed what she wanted to do and that she was able to let the tension go completely.

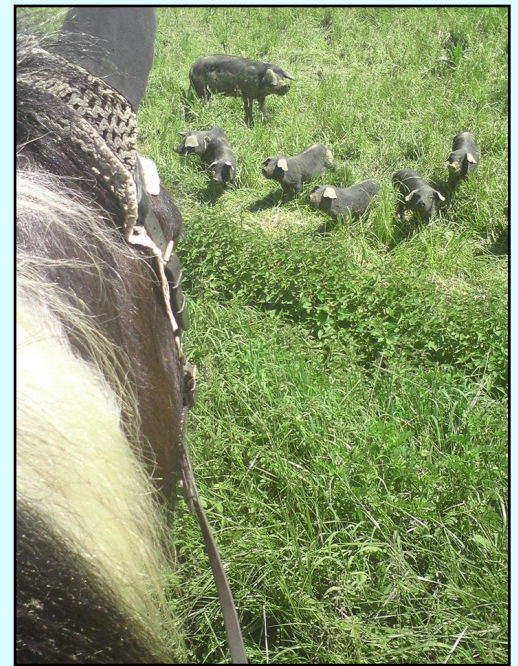


Ella suddenly panicking in the early days of our work together.



First rides out with Totti and Xas, who was very experienced in going out. Totti was very bold at first. But it felt important not to assume she was as confident as she seemed. There was a sense of pressure she was putting on herself to go ahead and make discoveries, and afterwards there might be a repercussion of anxiety. We didn't go too far, or accumulate the new experiences too fast until I could sense an underlying release, like her letting go of a long held breath, and she was able to properly relax.

Meeting the piglets was very exciting! Totti tended to store up her feelings inside and very rarely express them overtly. She would feel more and more like a statue, and less and less responsive when she got tense. The best way to help her with this was to become as gentle and embracing as possible, like surrounding her with a large, down pillow, adding as few extra stimuli as possible and just being supportively patient. Eventually, like a big block of ice, she would gradually unfreeze, and come back to life. Because I stayed with her, and she did not have to defend herself from me during the experience, this made us one being, affronting the challenges together.



Always be willing to go back a step in whatever attempts you are making physically. Progress rarely lies in doing, or repetition, but in finding the source of any turbulence. True courage lies in developing the ability to stop and listen, to unravel the wrinkles of past carelessness, or ride the waves as they are forming right now. When you discover this capacity in yourself, you will experience a connection with your horse that is beyond question, beyond thought. It is a phenomenon that happens when your boundaries no longer separate you, but engage you together. A merging of awareness where you can both rest in a sea of peace and love. I have experienced this while trimming horses feet, sitting with them in meditation, doing groundwork and when riding. It is not a function of doing, but an expression of being. It is not a daydream or a wish, but a very real and mutual rapport. As such it cannot be forced or controlled, only invited. Sometimes it seems to evade you and other times it arrives out of nowhere. I feel very much at the beginning of understanding it, and perhaps this will always be the case. Every time I experience it, I feel a deep and powerful wish to share it far and wide.

The Ultimate Intention

Although I have attempted to offer step by step guidance and as complete a reference as possible in training a horse without force, that was not the ultimate intention of this book. In offering detail and so many suggestions, my wish was to create as whole a picture as possible of an approach.. a perspective that can be developed in the presence of horses. This approach is not limited to the time you spend with these magnificent animals. When you begin to develop it within you, it will spill into every area of your life.

The most precious message I have remembered as a result of my relationship with horses, is to perceive the perfection that is there in each moment. Perceive it, receive it, and give it back, all in one beautiful flow. We are still at the beginning of this authentic alliance, horse and human, and yet it is perfect just as it is. There are no limitations, nothing you cannot explore or believe, and it is when you set yourself free from thoughts, that you are able to hear the wisdom which is inherent in every part of this planet.

You are as valuable as every other expression of energy, and the deeper you can accept this, the clearer you will see beyond separation. Your courage will grow so that you can look with unfiltered eyes at your intentions. Your experience of the present will expand, as the mists of anxiety clear, and you will be able to listen both to your Self and to your horse. The relationship is formed together, in dialogue which judges neither party lacking. This is the mutual reverence which generates joy, delight and endless possibility.



Contact Information And Helpful Links

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