

When you apply yoga principles to horsemanship, and vice versa, you start to see similarities such as balance, physical and mental strength, living in harmony with nature and being guided with an open heart. I hesitate you use the term “natural horsemanship”, because there are so many different ways to interpret the concept. To me, the term implies the use of gentle methods that present stimuli to a horse in the way he understands and would do naturally, which will reduce resistance and build confidence. My entire life revolves around respecting nature; from my holistic lifestyle rooted in yoga principles to the way I handle horses and livestock in a low-stress manner. I advocate horsemanship and safety, but I also honor a horse’s natural instincts and life. That’s why I believe in maintaining the horse’s curiosity, energy and spirit.

Horsemanship is about being in confident and in harmony with your horse. You must understand how your horse thinks and reacts, and then figure out how to accommodate his and your needs. For example, if your horse won’t stand still, he’s probably signaling that he feels threatened. When a horse senses danger, his instinct is to flee so he starts moving his feet. Your job is to find a way to contain his energy so that he doesn’t move faster than you can ride, yet he can still move away from the stimuli.

Slower is faster. Each time you are with your horse, it’s important to be aware of what is happening. Live in the moment and be flexible, even if that means letting go of your own agenda. If you’re in a hurry on the way to ride or spend time with your horse, simply doing deep breathing can bring you to a state of calmness and awareness. This, in turn, will maximize the time you spend with your horse. Your horse can sense your state of being from your respiration patterns and will react accordingly. Slow, deep, regular breathing conveys relaxation and peace, while shallow, fast, erratic breathing or holding your breath transmits stress and anxiety.

Create a positive presence and approach with confidence. After breathing and before approaching your horse set a mental affirmation. Because your thoughts can affect you on a subconscious level, it is important that they are thoughts that boost your confidence and focus, and also empower you physically and emotionally to achieve your goal. Before you walk up to

your horse, honestly assess your personality. Are you a bold, confident person around a horse? Or are you fearful and timid? Your attitude influences your energy and how you present yourself to your horse, whether he is alone or in a herd. A horse knows when you know, and knows when you don't know. That's why the moment you start walking toward your horse you need to be armed with confidence and the skills necessary to set up a successful training session for him as well as for every other horse around you.

Use the vitamin C approach. Being aware of what your horse is telling you with his body language enables you to position yourself in a way to support the movement you want. This is the preventive, vitamin C approach. Fixing a problem after the fact is discipline, or the penicillin approach. The vitamin C approach builds your horse's confidence; penicillin or discipline causes the horse to be more unsure. For example, catching a horse is about encouraging him to stand still and want to be caught. You'll know your horse is ready to be caught when he has equal weight on his front feet, and as a result, stands still. If he has weight on only on foot, that's a sign he's getting ready to leave you. If you see him lighten a foot and turn away from you, slow down and encourage him to focus on you. He'll shift his weight on both front feet, making the choice to be caught. Taking this extra time to positively influence your horse will build trust and confidence.

Less is more. You want to do as little as necessary and as much as it takes to accomplish a task with your horse. The more you communicate with subtle, energetic messages, the more sensitive you and your horse become. As this sensitivity develops between you, each communication becomes clearer and simpler. So that eventually you will be able to send a communication by gently touching the reins with your baby fingers, rather than pulling hard on the reins with your hands. As flight animals, horses have highly developed sensitivity and will respond to your increased ability to send subtle messages.

Mind before movement. You start training your horse and any others around him from the moment you step into his environment. Depending on your approach you could be teaching horses to recognize and respect you, or to disregard your presence and leave. Like in Yoga, when you're in tune with yourself, your horse and nature, your intentions will be focused. You'll be mentally and physically present in the moment, and recognize that each situation is an opportunity to build on your horse's training and refine his responsiveness. For example, when your horse is haltered and you are ready to lead him, take a moment to relax, breathe deeply, focus on the present and forget everything that is bothering you. Set an affirmation that increases your confidence and empowers you physically and emotionally for this time with your horse.

Use subtle energy to communicate. The ultimate level of communication with a horse is to perform any maneuver on him bridle-less, using subtle energy and body language to move him in any direction. Riding with a bridle is safer for most people, so I believe in simulating that you're riding without a bridle, refining yours and your horse's balance and communication, while having the safety and support of your bridle if you need it. When you and your horse are balanced, he can perform any maneuver comfortably.

Honor the edge. We've all heard about pushing the edge; no pain, no gain, push, push, push!

In Yoga, it's honoring the edge. How far can we go before we start to feel strain? That's when we stop and come back just a bit. The next time, the edge is a little farther out there- just like it is with horse training. The trainer says that a rider wants his horse to learn, so he pushes the edge, taking the horse to the limits of his comfort zone. But if the rider goes too far, the horse loses his confidence. When a horse locks up or throws a fit, it's nothing personal; he really doesn't understand. Back off and give him time. He can and will come out of the experience with no hard feelings. Then you know where that edge is and when to back off and give your horse some relief or a release the next time you're in a similar situation. Then he will learn.

Horsemanship is a never-ending journey. It is a continual process of putting the ego aside and carefully sifting through all the available information to find what works for you and your horse. An effective rider is a confident rider. Confidence starts with being honest with yourself about your skills, what you're ready for and if you can achieve your goals alone or if you need help. If you don't have the skills to correctly guide and support your horse, resistance will follow. Like Yoga, horsemanship isn't a competition, and as you take the time to learn what's natural for your horse, you'll quickly move further on your journey toward achieving harmony with him. You will know that each activity with your horse is a training opportunity and you will be riding with lightness, intuitiveness and purpose.