

Yoga, a Quarter Horse and Me

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I have practiced Yoga for 25 years, much longer than I have been riding but not as long as I have loved horses. As a middle aged beginner I believe the practice of Iyengar Yoga has been instrumental in my ongoing development as an equestrian and a first time horse owner.

I bought my first horse at 51 in mid-life as the fulfillment of a lifelong dream. Murphy was 3 years old when I got him and now, 4 years into this adventure I am still moving forward. Murphy is a quarter horse gelding, a bit on the lazy side but willing to put in effort when asked correctly. Like most quarter horses he is even tempered. He is also intelligent, clever and can be stubborn when he feels the need. We have come a long way in our time together and I do credit much of our growth to a combination of consistent training of horse and rider as well as to a consistent Yoga practice.

Yoga is a centuries old philosophy. It is the study of the self and a path of transformation. It is a practical philosophy that, as outlined in the "Yoga Sutras of Patanjali", describes not only what gets in our way in this study but also outlines specific practices that when followed aid in this transformation. These practices, or the Astanga (8-limbed) path include ethics, daily disciplines, movement, and breath work which direct a practitioner towards the inner experiences of meditation and eventually union with the Divine.

Ethical disciplines or Yamas in Yoga philosophy are relative to how we relate to the world around us to include humans, animals and all that exists in the natural world. Ahimsa or non-violence is the first of five principles (Yamas) outlined. It is a large definition of non-violence to include thoughts, words and deeds. I have found this especially important when working with a large, unpredictable animal that does think for itself. Certainly horses have been worked with violently over the time of their association with humankind but it doesn't have to be. This has been an important principle in training Murphy on the ground and in the saddle. Our trainer has shown me how to work with Murphy in a firm but clear way that is more in line with horse whispering techniques, with his language and not just mine. These have been effective and have helped me to develop sensitivity to my horse. In my desire to be non-violent with him I have also had to address my fears as well as ignorance in working with another

"For awhile people may....want to hurt the horse instead of letting him come into his own pressure. Sometimes people think punishment is the way to discipline the horse."

*Tom Dorrance, "True Unity",
pg.13*

species who's actions I sometimes misinterpret. Through this process I think I have developed a bond with my horse as his trust in me and mine in him grows. It is thrilling when I walk into the pasture or turnout, call his name and he comes to me, walking side by side with me until we come to the gate.

The second limb are Niyamas or daily practices to cultivate that will enhance and support the ethical practices and further support positive change. Like the Yamas there are 5. One that comes to mind with regard to riding is Santosha or contentment which is always my state of mind around horses. The worst day of riding, is as good as the best day doing something else. This contentment, happiness and joy make the next Niyama, Tapas seem like it would be easy. Tapas means zeal or burning desire which is an essential quality to move forward in any endeavor. Murphy is not a spirited horse that bucks and has hissy fits at every little thing but he is a horse, he does startle and he has spooked more than once when I have been riding. Once, out on the trail at our first stable some teenagers, about 40 of them were screaming and waving their arms in the air to encourage the rest of the members of their cross country team to finish the training run. Murphy paused, ears up head up and then cut and ran—up one hill and down another, steeper one. Being a lazy horse the effort to get away from the horror overcame him so he stopped before I had an opportunity to fall off. This has to have been the most terrifying experience riding and it took a lot to go back out on the trail, one of my favorite places to ride. And it was scary to get back on Murphy after this. I was thankful that we got back safely but being fully conscious that it could have gone differently. My desire to do better and to be with my horse took me forward as I worked with him more diligently in the arena and continued with my training lessons. Without this passion, this experience and others like it could have put the damper on living this dream.

“The Whole Body Breathes”----B.K.S. Iyengar

Focus on breathing is essential during any physical activity as well as during our day to day waking and sleeping moments. This is our thread of life. Patanjali lists regulation of breath or Pranayama as the fourth limb, or practice. In the system of Yoga I study, Iyengar Yoga, it is introduced as an individual practice. This means that even though I must breathe ALWAYS the techniques of breathing are taught and practiced separate from movement. I have noticed time and time again that when I ride, when things are getting tense with Murphy, I pull up into my chest out of my seat and stop breathing. Murphy is the kind of horse that constantly is looking at his surroundings, even though it is the same arena every day! It is as if he doesn't want to miss a thing that may or may not occur. Sometimes his response is fear, real which is expected in a horse or imagined as a way to get out of a phase of work. In these instances fear takes hold of me as well and I stop breathing. This does have an impact on the horse and I have been cultivating the habit of breath awareness in every phase of my time with Murphy. Breathing before, during and after every exercise I practice with Murphy has become an integral part of my improvement. I have observed how much more relaxed I am physically and

mentally. I begin to notice him breathing and attempt to breathe with him. I am more able to respond in the present moment rather than the past and in my case feeble attempts to anticipate possible future responses to something that may or may not happen.

“The balance of one grouping of bones above another, all up and down the body, as well as the articulation of the joints of the skeleton, must be correct to produce a balanced and coordinated rider” ---Sally Swift

I have practiced various exercises in the saddle that I have learned from my trainer and from various books on riding. Many of these exercises are similar to what you would see in Yoga Asana, the third limb described by Patanjali, the Yoga exercises. I had studied ballet as a child, continued with it in high school and majored in dance in college. I worked in the fitness industry in various capacities in my career so it was no surprise that Yoga Asana piqued my interest. I came into the practice for physical reasons and through the years have developed an appreciation for the full study and practice of Yoga. The study of Iyengar Yoga in particular has offered a progressive, challenging and intelligent approach to this aspect of practice. I practice asana daily incorporating standing poses, twists, backbends, inversions, forward bends and arm balances on a weekly basis. All these develop strength, flexibility, agility and coordination are necessary for equestrian activities as basic fitness and athletic ability are essential to ride well. These asana are also taught with an awareness of the balance of the skeletal frame as well as an intelligence in bringing the parts back into alignment.

I do not do a full blown asana practice on Murphy's back for reasons of safety as I can depend on him to do the unexpected from time to time. I may do simple things like extending my arms overhead, a simple twist in the saddle, a forward bend or an abdominal exercise. In the saddle I will sometimes do this in response to a tension or weakness that I notice. I don't consider this asana practice. My asana

Tadasana, or mountain pose is a fundamental standing pose. Focus is on the foundation in the feet, legs and pelvis while the torso extends upwards. Below is a picture of B.K.S. Iyengar in Tadasana





B.K.S. Iyengar in Utkatasana, fierce pose. In this pose the heels press down into the floor, the legs bend and the arms extend upwards to fully extend the torso. This pose is recommended for horsemen. (Light on Yoga

practice I do on the ground daily and it does translate into improving my riding.

Murphy is a big horse. At almost 7 years old he stands at 16.1 hands and perhaps even a little bigger. There were no mounting blocks at our first riding facility so getting on him required flexibility to get my foot in the stirrup then strength and agility to hoist myself up on his back. Riding fundamentals of developing a good seat and the ability to use my legs are practiced over and over again on the ground in standing asana. I wanted a big horse but there are times when I feel like I am perched on top of a mountain, not secure in the saddle with a good seat. I have come off him a couple of times so I know how far off the ground I am. Both times, having a better seat could have saved me. In Tadasana, the mountain pose, the object is to ground down into the feet as the legs are repositioned for a better transference of energy related to the flow of gravity. Other adjustments are made to bring core awareness as the upper body extends. The foundation in the Mountain Pose is in the feet, the legs and the pelvis as it is in the saddle. I use this information, which is consistent with the instructions my trainer gives me to develop a more secure seat.

Because of my background in movement science I pay attention to the impact of physical activity. With regard to hot, new exercise classes it is always a good rule of thumb to see what sorts of injuries come out of it. I had some concerns when I began riding of not developing bad habits that could lead to musculo-skeletal injuries such as in my knees and my back as it is usually the progressive kinds of misalignments coupled with repetitive movement that cause damage. I have found with good riding mechanics based in

movement science there has not been any discomfort or injury in common areas. The movement mechanics taught in Iyengar Yoga are consistent with what I am learning under saddle. I think the two have worked together to keep me sound.

When I fell off of Murphy in the arena my trainer said that she was surprised that it hadn't happened sooner. I guess this is an unfortunate aspect of the equestrian learning curve. I came off Murphy when he was at a fast trot. Thankfully, I was not seriously injured but did have some residual effects with sciatic pain that persisted for about three weeks after the fall. I adjusted my Asana practice to address this. I even continued to ride. In riding and the asana practice I did not have sciatic pain and was able to enjoy both while on the mend.

“A good rider can hear his horse speak to him. A great rider can hear his horse whisper” ---Author unknown

Because I was practicing and teaching Yoga before I moved into the world of horseback riding I was able to see that one practice supported the other. I knew that the asana work that I did would help but oddly had not considered the other practices in Yoga such as breath work, ethics and meditation. In reflecting on the similarities between these two activities, Yoga and horseback riding, I am reminded of something I read from a book by Tom Dorrance about getting a feel for the horse. In his book, “True Unity” there is a chapter “Responsive and Right On” which considers the concept of instinct for the rider in relationship to that of the horse. Horses have instincts that they are asked to suppress to work effectively with humans. Many riders do not understand that instinct cuts both ways. I have discovered through years of teaching movement, not just Yoga, that many people have suppressed their instincts certainly for movement but in many other areas as well. I have found that the practice of Yoga has begun to open the door to responsiveness, a more instinctual way of being in the world that reflects into my time with Murphy. Over the course of time instead of responding with anger, fear, frustration or blaming my ‘rotten’ horse when he acts like one I am able to respond better.

My trainer has taught me numerous exercises to work with Murphy. It has taken repetition and time to improve my understanding how to choose what will work in the moment. I am just now seeing an awakening of an instinctual response to what comes up while in the saddle. Like in my Yoga practice I am seeing a gradual transformation in my time with my horse. I continue to be more able to respond to Murphy with a perception of his communication, his behavior and am seeing more success as we both learn to be effective together. As I continue to grow into an Equestrian through continuous training I am grateful that I have a Yoga practice supporting my enduring dream of a life with horses.