

Horsewomanship: the YIN System

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Awareness of Horses as a Whole

Horses, as a species, are a complex group of non-ruminant herbivores. They are browsers who, in a natural state of existence, munch on grasses, herbs, bark and roots for 20 hours each day. They are in constant motion, slowly seeking out food,

water, salt and shelter from severe weather. They rarely run or gallop. Moving at speed is used to escape predators and for play among youngsters in a herd.

Horses are GREGARIOUS, forming herds (groups that are their families) and forming bonds within the herd with specific individuals. Bonded equine pairs can become almost inseparable – in a feral herd or in a stable yard.

If we can learn to work *with* the Equine Nature in the care and schooling of our horses, we will have healthier, happier, better partners for life. If we ignore nature and ignore the subtle signals that our horses are always sending to us, we will face struggle, conflict and disappointment during most of our time spent with them.

A profound point was made to me early on in my career when I was starting youngsters. A teacher told me that, young horses these days live such one dimensional lives – they only understand the things that they experience and see day to day. We simply cannot get angry with them (ever) for becoming excited or frightened about some new stimulation, sight, sound or feeling. What we *can* do is present them with safe and sane *new* experiences as often as possible and help them to trust us and look to us for solace, comfort and direction. When we add more positive “drops” into the “well” of their experiences, horses will expect positive outcomes in relating to us. The opposite is true as well, with negative “drops”. If the “well” of experiences a horse has is full of pain, fear and angry people, he will expect more of the same until the negativity is replaced by an ocean of positive, nurturing, loving experiences.

This may sound easy, but often is not. We humans have a tendency to trip over our egos on a regular basis, often proclaiming that what we do is “all about the horses”. Horses force humility onto us just by being their own honest selves. We project onto them all of our expectations and fears and then, when under the scrutiny of other human beings, we believe that they are reflections of us (Actually, they ARE) and we tense up. We want them to “behave” properly, to look good and to make us look good. We forget compassion and try to force situations. The horse sees this as confusion and reacts in a confused manner. We

are humbled – sometimes humiliated. But we *create it* every time. And we *learn* from it...hopefully.

When we become aware of equine instincts, we realize that developing a relaxed and calming demeanor around them will serve us well. Because the “wild” horse usually only runs or gallops when in flight from danger or using his body in play – we realize that the whole notion of “working a horse down” to calm him by running him around at the end of a longe line or in a round pen will merely serve to “charge him up” with energy. He will be at best, playful or at worst, terrified. The longe is a place for classically schooling a horse!

Now, excess energy needs a place to go, since many of us cannot provide the ideal circumstances of 24 hour a day pasture access. Horses that are in motion, meandering for 20 hours a day *have* an outlet for energy and very healthy bodies. If your horse lives in a box stall or small paddock he will need to buck and play a little before being ridden (or at least be given the opportunity). *How* you provide this opportunity for his self expression will determine his attitude; scared or wild if he has been chased; settled and ready to work if he played joyfully on his own in a turn out.





So, our horses have PHYSICAL, EMOTIONAL and MENTAL needs that are common to all equines and unique needs that are theirs alone as individuals. To provide for our horses on a physical level means that we cover their basic needs for survival and good health; ensure that they suffer no pain from their interactions with us and are actually improved by the relationship with us. They should become more balanced, stronger and more supple in their bodies.

To provide for our horses' emotional and mental needs, we must communicate with them **clearly** and **consistently**. Our schooling can be a reward based system (horse seeks the reward) or a punishment based system (horse seeks to avoid the punishment). THE HORSEWOMAN CHOOSES THE REWARD BASED SYSTEM. The horse schooled with reward will honestly look for ways to please his human and will desire the participation that is a dance of *partners*. The horse schooled with

punishment does only the minimum that is required of him, looks for ways to avoid connection to his human and will fill with resentment or become numb and dull to avoid connecting.

Horsewomanship is a philosophy and application of communication principles that enhance the wellbeing of our horses in particular and of all horses in general. Our horses learn *self* discipline (so do we) and will actually appreciate being shown *humanely* what was incorrect. They will comply with our requests when we HELP them understand the signals.

An experience in my life that brought this whole point *home* for me was starting Jazz Dance classes at the age of 40. My brother is a dancer and, for my birthday, he gave me lessons at the studio where he danced. Do something like this and you will have much more empathy for your horses. Standing in line with a dozen teenage girls, facing walls of mirrors and trying to match their movements, maintain rhythm and be graceful was a truly enlightening experience for me. I had never taken dance. I loved it. It helped my riding. It made me appreciate my horses. They are much more aware, forgiving and able than I, myself, am!

My motto “Compassion Not Compulsion” refers specifically to the goal of gaining a horse’s understanding and cooperation instead of brutalizing him into submission. We look for the *reasons* behind a lack of cooperation and encourage the use of natural, sane solutions and therapies to restore balance on all levels.

Only when you APPRECIATE horses do you even *begin* to learn about them. “Right” and “wrong” with horses is quite subjective. My “rule” is: if it *helps* the horse it is right – if it *hurts* the horse it is wrong, period.

And horses are individuals. Horses are aware, feeling, thinking, and loving beings. The horse appreciates the *intension* of caring for and about him. The act itself is of use because that concern has an energy and an effect.

Horsepersons who really watch horses regularly see the variety and intensity of their emotions, expressions and interactions with others. The human that is aware and compassionate will recognize fear, doubt, pain or anger as well as

happiness, harmony and relaxation in any equine. Horses can be open books to us.

I had caring, empathetic teachers in my Jazz class (thank goodness). They helped me get over that initial need to do things correctly right from the start and let me learn to “just move”. You can build your whole Dressage future from a foundation of “just moving”.

We learned steps and put them together. We danced with partners. Every time I turned, stepped or moved my hips I thought about my horses working so hard to do a leg yield for me, or a canter depart on the inside lead... I was humbled. At that time, I had ridden Dressage and Evented for literally decades. Yet, this Jazz thing was intimidating, and exciting. I had grown up in the '60's and '70's dancing to rock and roll (kind of like running around in the pasture, I suppose) and the *discipline* of dance from a perspective similar to a horse's was new to me.

We need to, all of us, have an experience that provides this perspective and be aware of it in this way.

I also must say that, years ago, I taught a beautiful young woman to ride who had danced all of her life but had never been near a horse. It was very difficult for her to get control of her body when mounted. Her relationship to those physical forces that influence us all was completely different from the relationship that *riders* have with gravity, centrifugal force and reaction. The most edifying thing about her lessons was seeing how my school horses helped her and taught her.

So, our horses need to have OUR ATTENTION. They need for us to recognize when they are confused or frightened or in pain. Only by paying attention to them can we serve them well. Only by serving their needs can we expect to have them fulfill our dreams. But, when WE do, they do.

All horses' bodies need to be warmed up and supple before they start working. Whether you are a dressage rider or your horse takes you down the trail, or pulls a cart – his body must loosen up before activity.

You can do leg stretches with him before or after tacking up. Simply lift a foreleg, bring it *straight* forward supporting the fetlock in your hand and LET the horse stretch as he is comfortable. Bring the hind leg *straight* back from the body, supporting the fetlock and let the horse stretch himself. Do both sides of his body equally. Only do these if your horse is quiet about it! Do not risk injury (to you).

You can massage his large muscles in the neck, chest, shoulder and haunch (not over the loins) with a tennis ball! Just roll it with light to medium pressure (he will let you know what he likes) with the palm of one hand over the horse's muscles. Always keep your free hand on him to sense if he starts to move or gets worried. You can use "carrot stretches" for loosening his neck. While standing still, he reaches around on each side (his head comes to his shoulder first and, later, over time, he reaches to his hip) to get a piece of treat that you hold in your hand to direct him. You can have him stretch for the carrot down with the neck to between his front legs.

To keep your horse's back sound and avoid injury, **always mount from a mounting block and mount and dismount from both sides equally** (the near and off – or left and right). Chiropractors are finding that horses that have only been mounted from the left (near) side for years have reflex responses of a defensive nature within their muscles and are often hurting on the right (off) side of their backs. The saddle panel has bruised the muscles along the spine and sometimes the vertebrae have subluxated – become out of alignment from severe pressures.

After you have mounted your horse, walk him on a loose rein for awhile to relax his mind and his body. He should warm up SLOWLY on a long rein and relax at all 3 gaits before his schooling or work begins. This is an opportunity for you, while in safe surroundings, to close your eyes or soften your vision and become aware of the horse's swinging back, pushing hind legs and stretching spine. As a rider, you must concentrate on your horse's *engine* – his haunches, instead of on his front end. It is so easy to LOOK at the forehand and become fixated on it – trying to correct things "up front" with your hands and your reins. The truth is that you correct things with your seat and legs and the most "important" part of the horse is the part you don't see riding – the back and haunches. So, as you warm up your

horse's body and his mind, you can become deeply connected to his back, his engine and his motion without trying to influence it at all. You just **follow** and **allow** while he loosens up.

It is equally important to “warm down” or “cool down” your horse after his work or schooling. He should be walking on a long or loose rein while his body temperature cools, his heart rate and respiration return to normal/at rest. This relaxes both of you and makes it safe to put him away in his stall or paddock.

When you dismount, loosen the girth or cinch, one hole at a time to gradually relieve the pressure from his back. This allows the blood flow to return SLOWLY to the muscles under the saddle. If you just ungirth and pull off the saddle the moment that you dismount, the blood will rush to his muscles and create swelling and pain. Also, look for pressure points from the saddle (dry spots within the sweaty contact areas) or scuffed areas along the spine.

And, just as you release girth pressure gradually, you **MUST** always tighten the girth in stages to avoid hurting the horse.

Horses need to know when they are successful and are pleasing us. We often let them know when they are “wrong” but forget to tell them when they are “right”. Elaborate praise isn't necessary every time. A simple pat or touch on the neck conveys our approval and even the cessation of an aid will be perceived as a reward. And when your horse offers something brilliant and awesome – hug, praise, treat and kiss him and hop off for the day. He will really remember what pleased you so!

The methods and principles we are exploring here so far apply to the horse that has been raised around people. He has been handled all his life. His INSTINCTS are overcome by his conditioning by humans and his faith in those human beings. This horse will look to you for direction and reassurance in all but the most frightening of situations. Even then, he will be less at the mercy of fear than would be his cousin who has never seen a human or, worse yet, has faced abuse at the hands of a person.

A horse from a totally feral state of existence has his own “language” that he has learned and practiced only with other horses. Our horses from human homes have learned our “languages” as well and can read us in most cases, understanding what we mean to communicate. The wild horse placed into human hands must feel as if he has been dropped onto Neptune or Saturn and is being shouted at in some incomprehensible tongue. Time (often years), patience and compassion are required to gain the trust and cooperation of such a horse. If you are working with a WILD horse, you need to learn as much “horse language” as you can so that you can approach him just as a herd member or his dam would. This will help override the immediate switch to instinct and “fight or flight” that happens with these equines when human contact is made.

If a horse has suffered at the hands of a person, it is an even longer road to recover the trust and desire to please. But, when you have become **trustworthy** in the eyes of such a horse and he realizes what love, health, comfort and security feel like – he can become your dedicated ally for life.

No matter what your horse’s background; no matter what your goals are for him and for yourself... take things one step at a time. It is the PROCESS, not the destination that matters in Horsemanship. If you build a strong foundation with your schooling, you will be able to return to it (to those *basics*) whenever you encounter problems. If you have trouble at one jump, simplify it (lower it) and approach at a trot to show your horse exactly where the base is. If you are struggling with trot shoulder-in, go back to walk shoulder-in and practice 20 meter circles at the trot for awhile. Use your foundation to explain to and prepare your horse for each step within his schooling.

Think of your aids as a **language** with him. Take the time to prepare him for every instruction and **keep the dialog going**. Don’t just drop him into a vacuum after each movement and then expect his undivided attention when you grab the reins for his next “command”! Envision a FLOW of conversation and energy that “dances” the two of you from one movement to the next.

All horses need to be clearly told what it is that we expect from them – moment to moment – day by day. They need CONSISTENCY in all aspects of their lives

because they are creatures of habit and routine. They just want to understand us and participate with us.

When your horse has no concern about whether or not he will be able to survive or if he will be treated with kindness – **then** he can truly focus on you and the partnership.

The Art of Horsemanship

When you feel certain that your horse's environment promotes his comfort and wellbeing and avoids causing him pain, you, too can focus upon your communication and the relationship that will develop between you.

When you ride, you can work to enhance your horse's gaits and help him to express the qualities of movement that make us all stop to watch the equine out freely moving in the pasture. The horseperson seeking to ride in **Harmony** with the horse is practicing "Dressage".

The philosophy and application of **Dressage Principles** encompasses a way of communicating with and enhancing the balance of one's horse when being ridden that brings to him the kind of dance he expresses while moving freely without the burden of a rider. The horse becomes a participant in this dance and is influenced by a *logical system* of aids (body language!) with the goal of gaining his understanding and *enthusiasm*.

When you **walk** your horse, be sure you do not interfere with its 4 beat, evenly spaced step rhythm. To encourage a long, swinging walk stride, take your horse out on the trails or across pastures. Walk up and down hills – first gradual slopes, then build up to trappy country. The walk begins with a hind leg and is propelled by the hind end. Keep your inside calves against his sides and let your legs *breathe* with the movement of his belly. Keep your hips loose and allow each side to follow the motion of the horse's back. Line up your ear, shoulder, hip and heel and just relax into the walk breathing deeply.

All horses should have this evenly spaced, 4 beat rhythm at the walk regardless of training or breed.

Most horses **trot**. Even the laterally gaited breeds such as Tennessee Walkers can break into a trot when they need that diagonal leg stability – like on a tiny circle or sharp turn.

The trot is the gait you can use to determine lameness, find one-sidedness, teach your horse where the base of the jump is (where to “take off”), correct deviations of his bend and/or flexion in lateral (“two track”) work and help him learn to swing and relax his back as he thinks FORWARD.

This is because of the trot’s even, 2 beat rhythm and the use of the legs in diagonal pairs as “pillars of support”. Yet the trot can also be where riders pick at or fuss with their horses in an attempt to *force or coerce* them into looking “beautiful”.

Beauty, grace, rhythm and impulsion cannot be forced. The *illusion* can be, but the real thing (in any of these cases) has to be offered by the horse.

Since the idea behind DRESSAGE is to bring the horse to a place where he moves under saddle with the same qualities he presents moving freely, the rider must try to be as balanced and quiet an influence as possible. The more we struggle, the less we accomplish in our Dressage.

Compassion and **Self-Mastery** are Buddhist concepts that can help the horse lover. These principles will support the encouragement of your equine companion to participate with you showing respect and affection instead of fear and - indifference to you.

When you connect your pelvis (hips), doing with it what you want the horse to do with his (engage), then you give him the example to follow. When your hips open, your sitting bones press forward, your lower back relaxes and your abdomen stretches up and forward – so does your horse’s body open, press forward, relax and stretch from behind (his “engine”). Giving him **a long rein with stretched contact** allows his entire back to elongate and stretch, improving his suppleness

and forwardness. If he “falls” onto the forehand, you are not engaging the haunches with seat and legs. In this case do not try to “hold” or “pull” him up with the reins; DRIVE him forward from behind, give half-halts to keep him from setting against your hand.

As your horse begins to trot on “long and low”, with his poll lower than his withers (or at least even with them), he will find his own shoulder swinging and back loosening with every stride. You can begin to put him **on the aids** (not “on the bit”) by gathering one rein slightly, then the other, back and forth to a comfortable place of contact on a shortened rein. All the while, you must think and ride from behind forward, using the leg each time before the use of the rein.

Think of inspiring your horse’s **energy** into manifestation and then shaping **IT**; don’t try to shape his big body with struggle and force, it won’t work.

When you have your horse on the aids, keep your hands in their **base position**, fingers wrapped around the reins properly. Your horse must be able to *find you*. You must ride from a consistent, predictable place/position. Whether on a loose rein, long rein or short contact when collecting or when extending stride – *you* have to be consistent with clarity of position and application of your natural aids. Without this BASE POSITION that is maintained (and returned to quickly after a deviation during an emergency or lapse of concentration) at all gaits, your horse will have to *find you* before he can *understand you*.

You want to cultivate this desire to think forward in your horse and in yourself before you work on lateral and longitudinal flexions. Even though the lateral (“two track”) work and the lengthening and shortening stride in the trot will increase the range of his stride. Without the FORWARD habit, other movements will become a struggle. If it feels like you are forcing every stride, holding the horse up, carrying *him*; then a return to simple trot forward relaxation exercises is needed to build a foundation for the horse’s own self carriage.

If your horse's trot feels "disconnected", without energy or rhythm, use **TRANSITIONS** to create the energy needed to connect the horse *tail to nose* and establish rhythm. Transitions (walk to trot to halt to canter, etc. and from collected to extended within the gait) always build **energy**.

Ride the lethargic horse forward onto very large figures or straight lines.

Ride the quick or nervous horse on small, looping figures (circles, figure 8's, and serpentines) and use lateral work (leg yields, shoulder in, shoulder out, Travers, renvers, half pass) to GIVE THE ENERGY SOMETHING TO DO... somewhere to "go". Shape and USE the excess energy.

Trot up and down gradual hills to improve your horse's balance. Riding a large circle on sloping ground with the goal of maintaining the same rhythm, tempo and outline of your horse's body is an amazing exercise for the trot.

THE LATERALLY GAITED HORSE or *Gaited horse* has an intermediate gait (between the "flat walk" and canter) in which the legs work in lateral unison. This means that the left foreleg and left hind leg move together and the right foreleg and right hind leg move together. This gait can be of 2 beats or of 4 beats depending upon your horse's natural tendencies.

If your goal is to enjoy time spent riding your horse and to help *him* enjoy the process as well, developing the type of gait he is most **comfortable** using is recommended over trying to force him into something that is unnatural to his own body.

Mounted exercises can increase his *flexibility, strength and balance* while refining his awareness and response to your aids.

The horse that trots is able to perform tight turns within small figures because of the "pillars of support" effect offered by the diagonal leg placement.

Your gaited horse can do very small figures and circles at the *flat walk* (the regular walk all horses do naturally) and quite small figures at the canter if there is a degree of collection. But you cannot expect tight, deep bending of your horse's body in a lateral gait, be it Pace, Running Walk, Rack or even Fox Trot. Lateral-

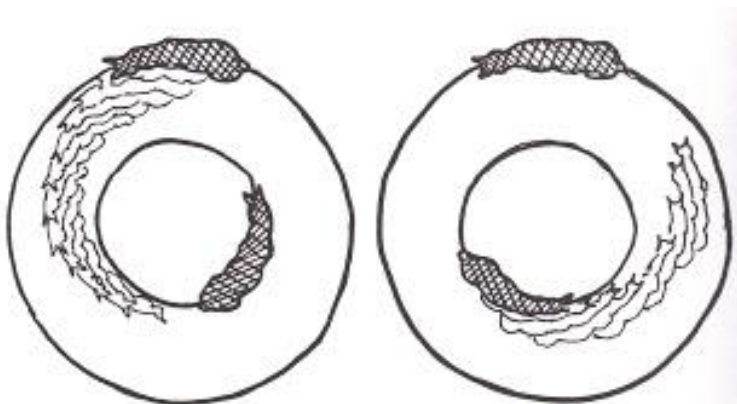
ness influences balance in turns because of the one-sided support that can feel to your horse as if his inside legs have collapsed out from under him.

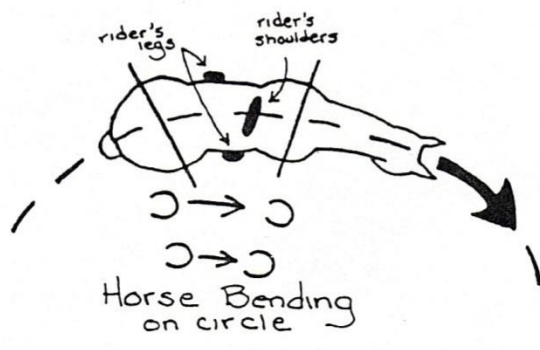
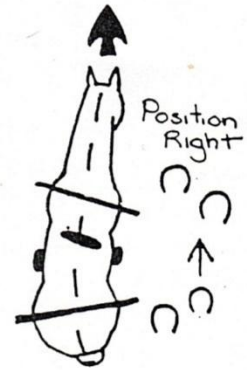
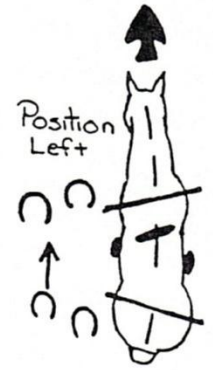
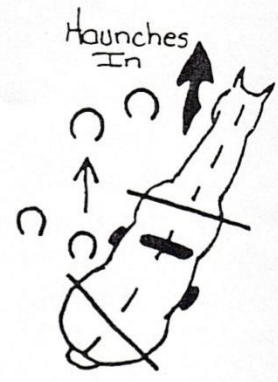
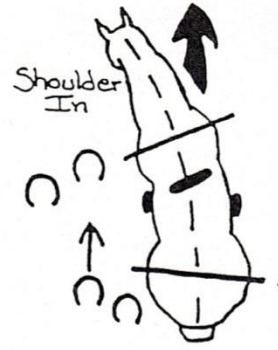
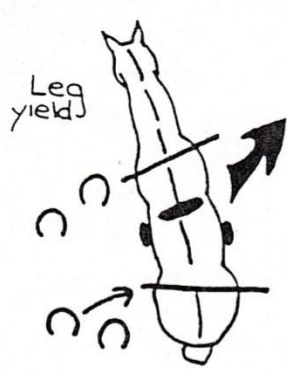
Improvement of his balance, bend, collection and lightness can be achieved through movements at the flat walk. These, in turn will help the horse master the canter. Many laterally gaited horses *cannot* canter. The balancing movements used in Dressage can actually teach a horse how to canter from work done at the flat walk.

The first exercise to help balance the Gaited horse is the **SPIRAL**. By spiraling in and out of a circle, you ask your horse to step equally sideways and forward into his bend (spiral in) and away from his flexion (spiral out). The SPIRAL is done at the flat walk and canter only. Horses that trot can trot spirals.

Starting in the flat walk, establish your base circle of about 60 to 70 feet in diameter. You can use cones to mark the area and place a safe object (like a soft plastic ball or rolled up bandage) at the center point of the circle. Walk around the outside of the cones for your large, base circle creating the roundness by bending your horse's body from his poll to his tail. Think of wrapping him around your inside leg while you keep your inside shoulder back and your outside leg back this aligns your shoulder with the position you want his shoulder to assume and your hips with the position his hips should take).

You create the size and shape of the circle with the amount of bend you create in the horse's body – not by pulling his head around and expecting the rest of him to follow.







Imagine that your center marker is a person with a rope tied to your waist. To spiral in, visualize that person taking up her rope and bringing you and your horse into the middle very gradually. Sit on your inside sitting bone (just a little extra weight, don't lean to the side!) because that is the direction you want the horse's energy to travel. Make your leg that moves the horse sideways (your outside leg) active and kneading and use your inside leg to support the body and the energy. Use an active, spongy inside hand to maintain the horse's bend (gently massage the inside rein/horse's mouth) and keep the connection to the outside rein to keep him from just turning and walking straight to the center. Throughout all spiral work, moving in or out, you should be able to just see the horse's inside eye.

Spiral your horse to the inside of your cones. When he understands the exercise, you can *walk* spirals down to very small circles. As the circle becomes smaller, your horse's bend becomes tighter from head to tail and you bring your inside shoulder farther back and your outside leg back more.

To spiral out, pretend the person standing in the center has a pole attached to your waist and she is pushing you and your horse outward. You shift a bit to your outside seat bone, make the inside leg active, keep the inside bend of the horse with your active inside rein, support the outside shoulder with your stretched outside rein and keep the impulsion (energy forward) with your outside leg. When your horse steps across (think that half his energy goes forward, half his energy goes sideways), he increases **the range of motion** in his hips, shoulders and all the joints in his legs. Be certain to work him equally in both directions.

Because the **canter** can sometimes be sticky for the Gaited horse, spirals can be used to set him up for canter departs from the flat walk that will allow the mechanics of the canter to roll on naturally. When you have nice flat walk spirals to the left and to the right, teach your horse the canter depart by spiraling in at the walk, then start the spiral out and ask for the canter *while* spiraling out. The only difference in the canter work on the spiral is that you must stay on your inside sitting bone for the inside lead, even when moving outwards. If you shift to the outside sitting bone during the canter, your horse will shift to his intermediate gait or even trot or stop.

At first just be content with a few strides of canter (2 or 3). Use of this exercise will help you get a couple more strides, then a couple more, then more until, finally, you are spiraling in and out at the canter.

The **serpentine** is the exercise you can do at the flat walk and at the intermediate, laterally supported gaits. It is simply the riding of connected half circles, bending the whole horse to the right, then to the left, etc., looping a figure like a serpent. In this movement, your horse's hind hooves should follow the same track left by his front hooves – he does not step sideways. You sit on your inside sitting bone (the shifting of your body and aids indicates the new direction of travel at each

loop) , look in the direction of travel, support with outside aids and soften with massaging inside aids.

For canter work of the laterally gaited horse, you may find that a plain ring snaffle bit without leverage helps your horse. You are able to maintain contact and support with this bit.

For the intermediate gaits, a curb, with its added leverage can often help the horse position his forehead and release his jaw. This can allow better balance for the lateral work.

Some horses will step forward better into a sidepull or bosal type hackamore. Just remember to stay flexible and seek the mildest equipment possible to convey your messages. Use the movements and exercises to **SHAPE YOUR HORSE**, do not **USE** your horse to perform the movement. Then your horse can dance with you no matter how he moves his legs.

The **canter** is a 3 beat gait. To be balanced the horse should usually canter on the *inside lead*. The leg sequence is: outside hind leg, then inside hind leg and outside foreleg in unison, then the inside foreleg. Then there is a moment of suspension and it repeats.



A **cross canter** (or disunited canter) has one lead on the front legs and the other lead on the hind legs – it is not good. The **gallop** is faster than the canter and the diagonal leg pair become separated, making 4 beats.

- Horses teach us empathy, patience, responsibility, how to be loving, quiet, honest, how to have courage, composure, strength and focus.
- Horses built our civilizations, fought our battles, carried our burdens, transported us and transmuted us through every facet of our existence and continue to do so, generously, wisely, openly without complaint.
- When we assume **authority** over an equine, we have to assume **responsibility** for that equine's wellbeing.
- Remember that the FEMININE NURTURES and horses respond to nurturing.

