

T'ai Chi and horses: Beautiful movement, joyful riding

Saturday, August 16, 2008

Author: Suzanne Sheppard



Good biomechanics are universal truths: they transcend not only all riding disciplines, but also all forms of movement, modern and ancient. Balance, stability, fluidity, softness in the face of adversity, and the ability to channel the energy of one's partner/opponent, changing it into something useful while using the least amount possible of one's own energy, are qualities which practitioners of Tai Chi Chuan (who refer to themselves as T'ai Chi players) cultivate. Chan San Feng, a martial artist who lived over 1,000 years ago in China (Sung Dynasty, AD 960-1279), developed T'ai Chi primarily to not only conserve Chi, or life energy, but also to cultivate more.

Chan San Feng had a problem. While he wanted to live peacefully, he was constantly being challenged by ambitious martial arts students who wanted to claim glory (and bragging rights) by defeating him. Chan's problem was not that he couldn't defend himself: it was that he didn't want to use up whatever Chi (life force) he had remaining. You see, back then in China it was believed that each person was born with a certain amount of Chi, and that, when it was all used up, they died. Our hero simply didn't want to waste his Chi on these young upstarts.

So, Chan decided to do what many monks did back then; he retreated to a remote cave to dwell on his dilemma and come up with a solution (hence the term "cave dweller"*). He meditated there for many days, and realized that he needed to develop a self defense system that not only effectively deterred all attackers with minimal effort (hence the term "no sweat!"), but also cultivated new Chi, thereby extended longevity.

Well, once he had this epiphany he meditated for many more days, but nothing came to him. So one day he decided to take a walk and clear his head. As he emerged from the cave he noticed a snake basking in the sun. It seemed oblivious to his presence as it soaked in the warmth contentedly. Just then our hero noticed a threatening shadow and looking up into the sky, he saw a crane circling, preparing to swoop down and get a tasty snake for al fresco dining. The snake seemed oblivious as the bird, gaining enormous momentum, dove down to attack. If Chan had been a betting man, he would've bet the house (or the cave) on that crane! But, much to his surprise, a split second before the bird reached his prize the snake moved just slightly to the side and the attacker hit the ground hard. Amazed, Chan watched as this scene played out again and again, each time the crane becoming more tired while the snake quietly evaded the dive bombing attacks with the least effort.

Finally, feathers ruffled and exhausted, the bird made his final attempt. As before, at the very last moment the snake moved slightly, and once again the tired, hungry bird hit the ground. Completely worn out, it lay there for a moment, gathering his strength, and suddenly the snake wrapped itself around the bird, squeezing it to death.

"Just look who is dinner now!" thought Chan with great admiration. He realized that the snake had accomplished exactly what he himself sought: to remain effective, efficient, and yet supple and soft in the face of the ultimate adversity: while defending his life. Inspired by what he had witnessed, Chan eventually developed T'ai Chi Chuan.

As equestrians and students of Centered Riding, we too seek to remain relaxed and balanced in the proper structure, to breathe properly from the dan tien (center, sea of life energy), to experience and channel the flow of energy between ourselves and our equine partners. We strive to do all of this softly,

with muscles free and extended rather than contracted, stiff and tight, even in the face of adversity (when our horses bolt, stiffen, resist, buck, you name it!). I'm sure that many of us even feel re-energized by our time with horses. Therefore riding (done properly) actually does increase our Chi, improving the quality, and perhaps even the length, of our lives.

Furthermore we can cultivate these very qualities of relaxation, balance, etc., via T'ai Chi, improving our equitation even when we can't make it to the barn! Because we can play T'ai Chi alone, we have the luxury of focusing on ourselves exclusively, becoming aware, refining and perfecting before we add the horse into the equation. This is reminiscent of a series of great lunge lessons, in which the rider can simply focus on herself while the teacher lunges/directs the horse, all in balance and fluidity.

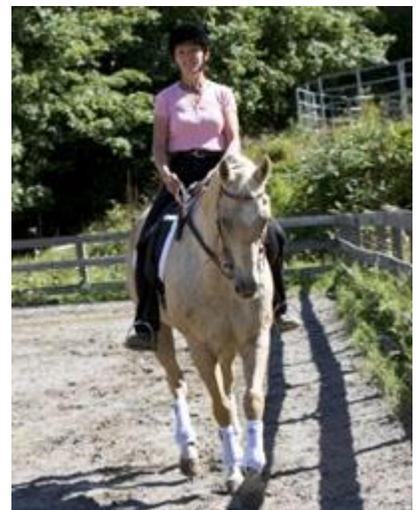
Additionally the very practice of T'ai Chi greatly enhances the "comparable parts" factor, by which we influence the horse's movement, emotions and attitude through the conscious use our own body and mind. For example, through the study of T'ai Chi, as the equestrian becomes more grounded, soft and fluid, the more grounded, soft and fluid the horse becomes. Truly the potential we have to influence the horse simply by embodying the qualities we seek, or "leading by example" is profound and thrilling! If you'd like to experiment with a simple T'ai Chi exercise just put on some loose, comfortable clothes, stand on a level floor in sneakers or barefoot, put on some tranquil music if you'd like, and give the exercise below a try.

A Simple Grounding Exercise

When we stand, being grounded feels secure, connected to the earth. When mounted we feel stable and confident in our effortless balance, as if we are sitting in the horse rather than on top of the horse. The following simple movements can be practiced on the ground, and then applied when mounted.

1. Stand with feet shoulders' width apart, parallel to each other. Pelvis is neutral, eyes forward and soft, breathing deeply into center, knees are soft, heavy from the waist down, tall and light from the waist up.
2. Notice the degree of weight supported by the right foot compared to the left. Even out the weight so that 50% is in the right leg and 50% is in the left leg.
3. Notice how your body weight is distributed across your feet: for our T'ai Chi purposes 70% should be in the ball of the feet, 20% in the heels and 10% in the toes. Readjust accordingly.
4. Done correctly, this simple posture, "horse stance", is the equivalent of the line of perfect balance for equestrians: ears over shoulders, shoulders over hips and hips over ankles.
5. Imagine that your legs are hollow and filled about half way up with gorgeous tropical sand (like an hourglass). Inhale at center, and then as you exhale fully shift 100% of your weight (or sand) into your right leg, emptying your left leg. Stand tall, shifting weight without leaning over. Then, as you inhale deeply shift back to Center so that the weight is equal in both legs (50% of the sand is in the left and 50% is in the right), and follow with an exhale while you fill your left leg with 100% of your weight as you empty all "sand" from your right leg.
6. Continue shifting your weight fluidly from one leg, through the center and into your other leg, synchronizing your weight shifts with your breathing. After about 10-12 weight shift come back to center. Relish how deeply grounded you are, how effortlessly you stand in symmetry and balance. Wouldn't it be great to feel that stable whenever you ride? If your answer is yes, do this exercise daily.
7. Then go to the barn, mount up and become aware of your seatbones. Do the same weight shifting exercise on your horse, but rather than focusing on your legs, shift weight from one seat bone to the other. Begin at the halt, then at the walk, trot and canter once you feel comfortable. If you feel safe, practice with your feet out of the stirrups to get an even deeper, more grounded connection with your horse.

There are many, many more exciting ways in which T'ai Chi can be a vehicle for improving equitation. If you're looking for a new way to become a better rider, feel good and have fun doing it, all while reducing stress, I highly recommend this beautiful martial art. And because, like Chan San Feng, Sally Swift's creative genius led her to learn about the



world around her and develop the entirely new system of equitation we all love, I suggest an honorable new moniker for our fearless leader: Chan San Sally!

* Probably not historically accurate!

Photos: **Top** - Centered Riding Clinician Suzanne Sheppard performs the T'ai Chi Sword Form at Two as One Ranch **Bottom**: Suzanne Sheppard and Tigger Tuff - Photo by Geert Teuwen

© Suzanne Sheppard, July 2008.