



Centered Riding® Inc.

Mind • Body • Horse

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## A Centered Riding Glossary

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**Centered Riding:** A method of teaching, learning and applying riding developed by Sally Swift (author of the *Centered Riding* books and videos), employing the mind-body connection and functional anatomy concepts from the Alexander Technique and the oriental martial arts. Centered Riding is not a different discipline, seat or style of riding; instead, it helps riders, teachers, students, trainers and competitors of all disciplines, levels and riding interests use their bodies more efficiently, communicate better, and ride in harmony and balance with their horses. In short, Centered Riding is about how the rider's mind affects the body, and how both mind and body interact with the horse.

### Sally Swift's original "Four Basics:"

**Soft Eyes:** use of eyes that are relaxed and open, with wide-angle vision rather than narrowly focused on one spot. Soft eyes allows you to see more and be aware of more around you because you use your peripheral vision, and also opens up your other senses awareness to increase your ability to feel your horse. The opposite of soft eyes is "**hard eyes**," which are over-focused and fixed on a point, often looking downward. Hard eyes give the effect of trying too hard; they cause stiffness and inhibit "feel" and free movement. While a horse cannot see hard or soft eyes, he can feel the resulting stiffness or lack of it in the rider's body and reacts accordingly.

**Breathing:** deep, full and natural breathing, using the diaphragm rather than breathing high & tight in the chest. Good breathing affects the whole body and the horse as well, helping centering, relaxation and "feel" and releasing excess tension. It also enhances communication with the horse.

**Centering:** becoming aware of our center of balance, movement and control, which is located in the lower body below and behind the navel. Centering enhances balance, security and a coordinated, effortless use of the body as a whole; it can also calm and direct the mind.

**Balance:** finding the balance of the body and all its parts. Balance is sometimes described as "stacking up" the parts of the body vertically so that it is balanced with the feet underneath the center. When a rider rides in a forward balance or jumping seat, the angles of the body are balanced. Only when the rider's body is in balance can the joints be free to allow the body to absorb and follow the horse's motion; if the rider's body is out of balance, it will have to stiffen as it resists the effect of gravity.

### Two additional important basic Centered Riding concepts are:

**Grounding:** experiencing our connection to the earth and gravity, which gives us balance, security and the ability to engage our joints as springs. The two major points in the body where we experience grounding are the seat bones (when seated) and the feet, especially the balance point of the foot.

**Clear Intent:** making a clear mental decision organizes the body and mind and enables you to communicate clearly with your horse, your body and with others. It uses ideokinesis (your mind affects your body) to give direction to the body (and to the horse) without having to consciously apply muscular effort. Clear intent is essential for control and clarity in riding and handling horses.

**Alexander Technique:** A method of re-educating the body and mind toward greater balance and integration, with special reference to posture, movement and "use of self," founded by F. M. Alexander.

**Allowing:** we must cultivate the ability to feel, observe, and allow or let go, understanding that correct, natural movement and use of the body will occur if we do not interfere by trying to control everything all the time. This applies to working with horses as well as with out bodies.

**Atlas or Atlanto-Occipital joint:** The joint between the atlas (1<sup>st</sup> cervical vertebra) and two condyles at the bottom of the skull (also called the atlanto-occipital joint). It is the spot where the skull rests on the top bone of the neck, located approximately between the ears. This joint allows a small amount of gliding movement.

**Awareness:** we need to become quiet, open and attentive to ourselves, in order to become aware of the inner activity of our own bodies, that of our horse, and when teaching, that of our student.

**Balance:** Balance in riding is the true balance of your body over the center of gravity of the horse, resulting in horse and rider becoming united in balance in motion. Balance in riding (and driving) is always a dynamic balance; a balance in motion, rather than a static balance. In order to ride in balance, a rider's body must first be in balance.

**Biomechanics:** the study of the body and how it moves, as applied to human and/or equine anatomy and movement.

**Bodywork:** non-invasive techniques that involve touching, supporting or gently manipulating the body in order to enhance awareness, release excess tension and improve balance and use of the body. When doing bodywork, the instructor's own "use of self" is paramount.

**Bodywork modalities:** there are several systems of bodywork that can be helpful in developing body awareness and improving use of self, balance and freedom of movement, especially with long-standing patterns, old injuries or chronic conditions. Some are the Alexander Technique, Feldenkrais work ("Awareness through movement"), Rolfing ("Structural Integration"), the Franklin Method and others. Yoga, Pilates, Balimo and Franklin Method are also helpful to many riders. Any bodywork modality must be suitable for the individual, body workers properly qualified, and should never be applied in a forceful way.

**"Bubbling Spring:** Also known as the natural balance point of the foot; a reflex point located on the sole of the foot, near (usually behind) the ball of the foot. It can be felt as a sensitive spot which, when tapped from below, gives a sensation that travels upward. This spot should be supported by the stirrup; it is the point where the body's balance reflexes initiate, and it engages the joints for balance and spring. In Tai Chi, this spot is considered to be the point at which energy from the earth enters the body, flowing upward; hence it is called "the bubbling spring."

**Center and Grow:** As you find your center and ground yourself in your feet and/or seat bones, you allow your spine to briefly lengthen and release in both directions, upward and downward. This results in a feeling of power with elasticity. It is a way to re-balance and energize the rider's body and can do the same for the horse.

**Comparable parts:** The principle that whatever happens in the rider's body is reflected by the horse in the corresponding part of his anatomy. For example, if a rider is stiff in the lower back, the horse will be stiff in his loin and lumbar spine; tight hip joints in the rider result in short, restricted strides from the horse's hind legs. When a rider releases tension or improves the use of his body, the horse responds in the same way.

**First pupil/second pupil:** when teaching, doing bodywork, or even when riding, we should be our own "first pupil," with approximately 75% of our awareness directed to our own balance, breathing and use of ourselves. The horse or student is our "second pupil," with about 25% of our awareness on how our technique is working for them.

**"Fixing, making, doing":** The inclination to "fix" things physically, especially by force, is a powerful one in our culture but works against centering, awareness and harmony. As riders are often inclined to force their horses to assume a position that is deemed "correct" but results in stiffness, frustration and resistance, so too do we often try to force our bodies to stand, move or ride in a certain way, with similar results. Whether in riding, teaching or bodywork, "aware, inhibit (old habit patterns) and allow" is a better way to achieve balance, freedom and harmony.

**Following seat:** the rider's ability to "go with the motion" and allow his joints to absorb and follow the horse's movement. A true following seat is much more comfortable for both horse and rider, and enables the horse to use his body and especially his back freely and athletically.

**Flow:** The feeling of free forward motion (not speed), which gives grace and freedom to the movement of horse and rider.

**End gaining:** Goal seeking; being so fixed on obtaining a goal that we are willing to do anything, including striving in negative ways, to achieve that goal. End gaining can result in becoming so driven that the joy of riding and life is lost.

**Process or “means whereby”:** If we become immersed in the process (also called “the means whereby”) through which we proceed toward our goal, we pay attention to each step and to the process. This is often more rewarding and can result in a more positive overall experience. It also helps in breaking down the process into smaller increments, which may remove blocks to progress and bring us closer to achieving our goals.

**Groundwork:** dismounted exercises to facilitate body awareness and understanding of centered riding techniques.

**Half-halt:** a momentary call for attention, rebalancing and increased engagement of the hind legs. In Centered Riding, this is accomplished primarily by the rider’s “center and grow.”

**Impulsion:** Thrust, energy and the ability to go forward with springy steps and an elastic, swinging back. Impulsion is not to be confused with speed or anxiety; instead it depends on balance, rhythm, flow and the absence of blocking tension.

**Inhibit:** to pause for a moment, saying, “Wait,” to oneself, instead of acting quickly and proceeding in our normal unconscious habitual pattern of how we use our bodies. Inhibition in this sense can give us time to be aware of what we are doing and if we choose, to allow our body to do it a different way.

**Left brain / right brain:** The left hemisphere of the brain deals with logic, verbal skills, critical thinking, conscious directions and evaluation; it performs tasks in a succession of details. The right side of the brain uses visual input and relates to rhythm, movement, and “feel;” it experiences and performs holistically; tasks become “automatic.” “Hard eyes” relate to the left side of the brain; “soft eyes” help engage the right side of the brain. While both aspects of the brain are important, many riders are frustrated by an over-emphasis on the left brain in their riding and learning.

**Mental imagery or ideokinesis:** the use of mental images can be a powerful tool for effecting positive change in the body; it’s a proven technique in sport psychology. When we use a mental image or “mind picture,” the body automatically responds in its own way without conscious direction or overuse of the muscles. However, in order to be effective, mental images must be tailored to the needs and learning style of each individual.

**On the bit:** When a horse is on the bit, he is round, engaged, balanced and connected to his rider, working “through his back” with his entire circle of muscles working in harmony. His hind legs engage or reach forward under his body, sending energy forward through his spine, back and poll in a “rainbow” arc. His back is lifted, long, wide and elastic, belly muscles engaged, and his neck lightly arched with his head hanging softly from the poll. His overall carriage may be higher or lower, depending on his degree of training, but his poll is the highest point of his neck. He accepts the rider’s contact confidently, softly chewing the bit and relaxing in his jaw, poll and the joints of his body and allowing his rider’s aids to affect his entire body without stiffness or resistance.

**Primary control:** From the Alexander technique: “Free the neck, to allow the top of the head to go forward and up, and the back to lengthen and widen.”

**Release:** releasing or letting go of excess tension. To “release” is not the same as completely relaxing; it simply means letting go of the unnecessary tension that causes stiffness, discomfort, and blocks movement and feeling.

**Rhythm and tempo:** Rhythm is the consistent, repeated pattern of footfalls within a gait (i.e, the 4 beats of a walk, 2 beats in trot, etc.). Tempo refers to how quickly, slowly and/or consistently the horse repeats the rhythm (i.e, a tempo can be quick or slow, steady or inconsistent). Rhythm and tempo are properties of a rider’s center, and can be influenced through breathing, counting, singing, humming or speaking. Finding a horse’s best working tempo within a gait makes him relaxed, consistent and much easier to ride.

**Self:** Our body and mind, together.

**Skeletal alignment (“Ride your bones”):** The bones are the core of the body; if you can balance and align the skeleton (“ride your bones”), the body will work in balance and freedom without the need to “muscle” the body or its parts into position.

**Tai Chi:** ancient oriental art of self-defense, also practiced for health, grace, balance and flexibility. It is sometimes described as a “moving meditation.” Many of the concepts of Centered Riding are based in the principles of Tai Chi.

**Use of self:** refers to the balance, freedom, grace and awareness with which an individual uses his/her body, whether in riding, teaching, bodywork or in everyday life. A horse is said to “use himself well” when he uses his body beautifully and athletically; humans also may “use themselves” well or poorly. Most of the time we are unconscious of our “use of self,” in which case our unconscious habit patterns (“habitual patterns of use”) tend to take over.