

Use of Self

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In recognition of the three primary ways of learning – auditory, visual and kinesthetic (the sense of muscular effort), I always recommend using words, pictures and sensations when teaching. When I was teaching, I would explain, use a model skeleton and drawings, and demonstrate and help people to feel, sometimes through the use of my hands and sometimes by positioning people and letting them learn through the motion of the horse.

These three ways of learning combine to create an improved use of self. Of course, the way you use your body is vitally important in everyday life and in any athletic venture, including riding, however, the concept of use of self extends beyond the function of physical use of your body and includes the idea of an interactive mind-body relationship. Improvement in the performance of a physical activity, such as riding, or even something like simply getting out of a chair, can best be achieved by first fully understanding all of the facets of that activity and then consciously avoiding focusing on the difficulties so that the right skills can develop. In my book *Centered Riding 2: Further Explorations*, I tell readers to think of good use of self as “educated body language with intent.” Good use of self results in efficiency of movement, which in turn allows fluid grace in all that you do.

In my book, I give some suggested exercises to help readers learn a little better use of self first in an awareness session on the ground and then on your horse. For the best use of self you need to have learned the Four basics – centering, breathing, soft eyes and building blocks, and you need to be well grounded and allow the feeling of a free, growing and open body.

You may feel that you are stuck in your body and that learning a new way of using it will be hopelessly difficult. As you know, I was a child with scoliosis and worked with Mabel Todd, who developed her own method of physical and occupational therapy after injuring herself falling down the stairs sleepwalking during a dream that she was flying! Mabel Todd taught me about the anatomy and breathing, as well as muscle development through exercises. In my fifties, I worked with Jean Gibson who helped me learn to release blocked sections of my body and to redevelop muscles that I had been using improperly for years.

In my later years, I worked with Peter Payne, who taught me the Alexander Technique. The Alexander Technique is a method of re-educating the mind and body toward greater balanced and integration, with special reference to posture and movement. With the help of these methods of body control, combined with my own discovery of the power of centering, I am much more able to use my body in an efficient way.

F. M. Alexander, who developed the Alexander Technique, was originally an actor striving for improved efficiency and body control. His premise stated that the body innately likes to be correct, but that we tend to develop habits which ultimately distort our carriage and movement. Often, we are not even aware of our “bad habits” because the familiar feels correct. In acquiring better use of self, Mr. Alexander developed a sequence that can be applied to everything you learn in *Centered Riding*. First you need to develop an awareness of your body and its movement. You can do this on your own, however, an instructor can also help you recognize habits which are inhibiting your free body movement.

One example might be something as simple as holding your breath when you ride. If you can then experience, even if only briefly at first, the sensation of a NEW way of movement, such as following the motion of your horse’s back while continuing to breathe into your lower back, you will be able to compare the old way with the new way. As soon as you make this comparison, you will realize that you have a choice. You can stay on the old route or you can take the new one! Actually taking a moment to consciously make this decision will substantially help you to progress and to make the results of your efforts clear-cut. Habits can be very strong and persistent, so you may actually have to make a

concerted effort to leave an old habit behind, wait, and then allow the body to function in the new way.

The more you can work with your sensations, the more accurate and effective your riding will become. If you ride most of the time with consciousness of self, you will find that you use your aids more effectively, simply and clearly. Your horse will become your partner more completely than you have ever found before. When you ride with this good use of self and your horse comes into balance, you will find that you and your horse begin to dance in harmony together.