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Taijiquan

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Riding the Horse

Chen Weiming on Taijiquan

Letting Go of Shoulder Tension



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The Taiji Horse Riding Form

Michael Stenson

The softest overcomes the hardest
like a rider tames a galloping steed.

—Daodejing

Illustration: Xu Beihong

Imagine pushing hands with a world-class athlete who outweighs you ten-to-one and who has an innate ability to hone in on your center as unwaveringly as a compass points north. That's what happened when we were at Ray's Colt Starting Clinic in Colorado. Most of the horses were green—they'd never been ridden. In fact, a number of the riders, too, were green. They were in over their heads and at least a couple would certainly wind up with a snoot full of dirt or worse before the day was over.

"First I feel for the horse. Then I feel for the horse feeling back for me," said the instructor, Ray Hunt, a world-famous horseman. "It's a feel following a feel. Make your horse soft, so soft he's weightless," Ray explained. Is this about horses or taiji, I wondered?

Fine taiji push hands and fine riding have many things in common. Both are fundamentally about "riding" qi. Both are about timing, balance, and feel. Both are about fulfilling one's own self partially in and through another being. The lessons learned are equally profound and just as humbling. Refinement of each art is equally infinite.

Many riders have read in equine magazines that taiji can enhance their riding ability. However, these articles tend to characterize taiji as being little more than isometric calisthenics; they give no sense whatsoever of taiji's true value to riders.

On the other hand, very few taiji players realize how much horse riding could enhance their art. Horsemanship can be another taiji form, just like the solo exercise, push hands, *dalü*, or weapons. In fact, I've often joked that I continue to ride because of how much it improves my push hands. The truth is that, just like taiji, I love riding so much I couldn't quit.

Michael Stenson, along with his wife Sara, teach taiji for horsemen clinics in Colorado and have made a video on that subject.

Riding is communication entirely without words. It is at a neural, almost subliminal level; it is visceral, raw, and unpretentious, energy-to-energy, in the realm of essence. Qi is the thread that connects—it is the coin of the realm. Riding, however, is also a partnership between two different species. Riding offers the unique opportunity to blend with another being in ways that can expand and enhance your character, mind, spirit, and art.

A Subtle Touch

Ray was quietly sitting astride his horse in the middle of the arena. "Ride the horse from the inside out," he said. "Bring up the life in him, then operate the life in his body, to his legs, to his feet, through his mind. Watch. First I'll get his left eye and then his ear."

Sure enough, the horse glanced left and turned his ear to Ray. Slowly his weight shifted to his hindquarters and just as Ray said, "Watch his left front," his left front leg slowly rose, hesitated an instant and then descended just as slowly and deliberately as a step into a seventy-thirty. Then the right came up. The hind legs remained in place. The tempo of the rising front legs increased smoothly until Ray's horse was dancing rhythmically in place. Then, just as smoothly, his prancing subsided until he stood quietly at ease once again. The whole thing lasted about a minute and during that entire time I did not see Ray move. It was just as subtle and refined as a one-inch push. Everything had come from the inside of Ray to the inside of his horse: qi-to-qi, being-to-being, life-to-life.

The parallels with taiji are endless. One of Ray's colorful phrases, "on the teeters" means to get your horse to reach through his back to your *dantian* for direction. Good riders understand that "feel" is reciprocal. A riders' ability to draw out these characteristics in a horse is commensurate

to their ability to manifest them in their own body. Quality riding is never about controlling or forcing a horse. It's about absorbing and directing qi. Chase him and he'll run. Pull him and he'll resist. Invite him and he'll oblige.

How to Sit

Ray is a Western horseman. There are also many fine English horse trainers and, although I'm most at home with the Western mentality, I prefer the relatively close contact of an English saddle. English trainers speak of getting the horse to offer you his back, riding from the back versus the face, cultivating relaxation, collection, impulsion, and alacrity. Regardless of the shape of the leather, fine riding, like fine taiji, comes down to being centered, balanced, supple, and in the middle of the move.

English riding begins just like the taiji form with the equivalent of Raise Hands. The three treasures are aligned, shoulders over hips, pelvis in neutral, feet parallel. The horse's legs become your own as you root in your seat bones. Cultivating a deep seat means that the pelvis must absorb, interpret, and direct the movement of the horse. The lower back and abdomen must be relaxed while engaging without running from or resisting the energy. Bracing or collapsing in the pelvis or back will cause a horse to hollow his back to protect himself from the impact of a bouncing rider. Riders must not sit too heavily upon a horse and must carry themselves with the same quality of light agility displayed in taiji sword play. The seat must also be independent of the legs, upper torso, and arms

according to the principle of separating yin and yang.

Timing and rhythm are regulated by the *dantian*. Three separate gaits—walk, trot, and canter—require radically different adaptations by the rider to sustain the correct qualities in the pelvis and the increased challenges with the amplitude and rhythm of energy that must be absorbed and directed. In taiji parlance this is listening energy—sensing the quality and intention of movement with the *dantian*.

Aligned just as in the horse stance, the rider's legs are draped like a wet towel over the horse so that there is good contact and feel of the horse's sides. The rider's thighs, calves, and feet must also be independent. They must be separate from one another so that each is free to give gentle indications to the horse for how fast to go, where to head, and where to place their feet. Improper technique in riding leads to problems. Clamping with the thighs pushes a rider up out of the saddle.



Photo courtesy of Michael and Sara Stenson

Holding on with the calves when riding is just as ineffective as grabbing the floor with your toes in taiji, and only makes a horse numb to listening to your leg. The heels must be down and remain supple and elastic, not by pushing through them, but by relaxing from the groin. If the heels are forced down, the legs push the foot in front of the shoulder and tilt the rider back behind the movement of the horse, just like teetering back onto the heels in a taiji move. If the toes drop below the heels, it's like teetering forward: the rider's center of balance is in front of the movement. Toes must also point forward to avoid shutting down the horse with the seat bones. There should be a very light, equal feel of both stirrups, which are placed directly under the Bubbling Well points on the sole of your feet.

Arms and Hands

In riding, the arms hang loosely from the shoulders, bending at the elbows. They form a straight line from the elbow through the equivalent of "Beautiful Lady's Wrist" along the reins to the bit. The hands are closed around the reins exactly as a taiji fist is formed—snug without clenching. Hands must be steady and maintain a sensitive contact without pulling or banging on the horse's mouth, with exactly the same quality as taiji sensing hands. One of my teachers describes the proper feel as just like holding hands with a loved one. When "talking through the reins," riders should never pull back or attempt to lead the horse with them but rather use gentle squeezing to softly block and release the horse's energy. One rein is used to encourage lateral flexion to round the horse from side to side and the other rein to support longitudinal flexion over the top line of the horse's back just like softening a taiji player's sacrum downward. Both seek the curve within the straight.

Riding always come from the bottom up through your body to your hands in the same spirit as the taiji maxim, "Energy enters the body through the feet, develops in the legs, is directed by the hips, and delivered by the hands."

Equine Push Hands

A horse is the most honest push hands partner and one of the clearest reflections of your mind that you will ever encounter. Horses have taught me to notice the weight, speed, and intention of each leg so that I know whether they *can* kick, buck, or respond before they do. A really good rider will sense a line of resistance developing when it's still just an idea and "talk" the horse out of it before a wreck develops. A fair rider will figure this out with the first manifestation of physical resistance—a quick step, leaning against the rider, pulling on the reins, the flick of an ear, a sudden hollowing—and redirect the intention without making much of it even if there's a few bucks thrown in. This is the same as understanding energy in taiji push hands.

On the ground or in the saddle, when a fourteen-hundred-pound animal gathers himself to take aim at you, not letting your qi come up is the issue. "Never let the horse see the end to your patience" is how a great-grandad of horsemen, Tom Dorrance, puts it. Just as in push hands, a rider must work from all resistance being internal, invest in loss, let movement follow momentum, and let energy follow thought. Difficult horses have taught me that when trouble comes it doesn't matter how big the whammy is if it can't get a bead on you.

Horses are frequently more tuned in than are riders. They are always aware of how the rider is feeling, and then mirror the rider's frame of mind with their own level of comfort. Ray says that the horse "must believe you could ride him up a pole or down a hole. Of course, you wouldn't. But he must believe you could."

The same principles of movement that apply to taiji apply to riding. Of course, there are many riders who do not approach riding in this way, just as there are innumerable taiji players who do not practice from principles. In fact, finding a qualified riding instructor is about as difficult as finding a qualified taiji teacher. Like Tom Dorrance says, "You don't have to do it this way. It's just such a waste of how [well] it could turn out for both of you." 