

Quieting the Mind and Expanding Awareness for Better Communication

This is an Article written for the June, 2011 issue of Dressage Today Due to space constraints, a shortened version was published in the magazine, but the original appears here.

Q: When I'm riding I often let outside thoughts clutter my mind and find it hard to concentrate on the task at hand. How can I quiet those extraneous thoughts so I can communicate better with my horse?

Name withheld

Gail Hoff-Carmona

A: Dressage encourages us to strive to develop the utmost in subtle, non-verbal communication skills with another being, but in order to do so, we need to not only learn how to control our bodies, but also our minds. This enables us to be relaxed and open to listening to the horse, and communicate effectively with him.

To illustrate this point, a pianist once told me that he could easily play almost anything he chose when he was relaxed and by himself. He did not know or think about what notes were being played. He just played. However, if someone showed up and asked him to play a song, he sometimes got stressed and could not think of the proper keys to touch. His conscious (thinking) mind blocked his subconscious mind and prevented him from playing the song. Then one day he asked himself, "Hey, why are you (conscious mind) getting nervous when you are not the one playing anyway?" Realizing that his thinking mind was blocking his ability to play the piano well, he was able to quiet his mind and become present with the piano. The music then came forth effortlessly. 'I can't concentrate when I am thinking' is a quote I love that is attributed to Yogi Berra.

Being present is like being "as one" with the horse. To be present, we must learn to leave behind our "monkey mind." That is the mind that constantly chatters to us and reminds us of our fears, stresses and emotions, things we should or should not be doing. It is the judgmental and controlling mind that can cook up an excuse or reason for nearly anything. The "monkey mind" is so busy thinking; it can override our ability to know what we do know and feel what we feel. For those reasons, the thinking mind often cannot communicate effectively with a horse.

We need to learn to listen through our sense of touch and feeling to the horse without judgment, emotion, stress, extraneous thoughts or fear. We need to learn to clear our mind so that we can “hear” the horse through our other senses; especially the sense of touch. Of course, we first do need to learn body control and techniques of riding so that we are not consciously thinking about how to apply aids and so that we can create awareness in our bodies. It is that physical awareness that then allows us to communicate with the horse.

There are many ways that help us to better control our mental state. Learning to meditate, do yoga, qigong or the martial arts are all great methods to learning to quiet our minds. There are many schools and teachers for those interested in learning to quiet their minds, which can take considerable practice. But here are a couple of other methods that can help a busy rider relax more in a short amount of time:

1. Exercise with mindfulness:

a. Stand straight with top of head pointing up, chin tucked in, shoulders slightly rounded forward with arms dropping down on each side of your body, legs slightly parted, knees slightly bent and weight of body distributed about 80 percent on the balls of the feet and 20 percent on the heels. Relax the tongue, letting it fall on the bottom of the mouth with the tip of the tongue touching the roof of the mouth where the teeth meet the gum line, drop the lower jaw, and relax the neck. Relax and think of only happy things in your life. See yourself happy and well. Do not focus on any pain or problem you might have. Close your eyes. Relax and simply stand for a minute. Then contract the abdominal muscles and breathe in through the nose at the same time. Exhale through the nose. Repeat breathing at least 3 times. Relax and let go.

b. Place your hands on your hips with your thumb touching the last rib and slowly rotate your head in a circle to the left 8 times. Then rotate it to the right 8 times.

c. Move your hands to in front of your chest without touching it and rotate the shoulders in a circle forward 8 times. Then rotate them backward 8 times.

d. Place your hands on your hips and rotate your pelvis in a circle to the left 8 times and then to the right 8 times.

e. Stamp the ball of your right foot on the ground 8 times. Repeat with the left foot.

f. Let your arms drop comfortably to your sides. Take 3 more deep breaths as in the first exercise.

2. Give your Monkey Mind a Job

- a. In your mind's eye, build a big, strong box.
- b. Take all of your troubles, fears, stresses, emotions, judgments – everything that will not serve you as a rider and put them in the box.
- c. Close the lid, lock the box and ask your monkey mind to guard the box while you go riding. Everything will be there for you when you return. Just let it all stay safe in the box while you spend time with your horse. If something does jump out of the box while you are riding, ask it to return to the box and be safe. Quiet your mind.

3. Meridian Tapping

If you feel stressed or have pain, you can often energetically release your problem and get relief with this simple tapping exercise since our bodies reflect our mental and emotional well being. This method is especially beneficial if done daily.

- a. Close your eyes and try to observe what emotions, thoughts or feelings arise as you repeat out loud 3 times:
Even though (fill in the blank with what is bothering you) I completely and totally accept and love myself. (As an example: Even though my lower back feels stiff and sore and is not serving me well in the sitting trot, I still completely and totally accept and love myself.) If other negative emotions and feelings arise, you can make additional statements to help clear them as well.
- b. While you are repeating your statement, use your fingers to tap the following points on your body:
 1. Side of your hand between the base of the little finger and the heel of the hand.
 2. Top of the head
 3. Between the eyebrows
 4. Side of eyes where there is a small indentation
 5. Top of cheek bone under eyes
 6. On upper lip just under the nose
 7. On indentation between lower lip and chin
 8. Indentations on bottom side of collarbones directly below sides of neck.
 9. Nape of neck
 10. Under arms at nipple level

By applying such exercises, in the end, you might find that riding itself becomes a moving meditation for you and helps you to expand your own awareness.