

Riding the Tao: An Equestrian's Reflections

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This paper is a reflection on how the forms of T'ai Chi Ch'uan and wu ji, along with the philosophy of the Tao Te Ching support the physical activity of horseback riding, as well as the spiritual sense of presence that is evoked through each of these activities. I will examine my learnings from the Integral T'ai Chi class, my experience on horseback, along with some of the thoughts put forth in the book, *The Tao of Equus: A Woman's Journey of Healing & Transformation through the Way of the Horse*.¹ I will also weave in resonances of these explorations with research on two hemispheres of the human brain, and integrated with perceptions offered from a conference on Nondual Wisdom and Psychotherapy. For some reason, I am continually surprised when the threads of the courses I am attending, the reading I am doing outside of course work, and the outside activities that I engage in, all intertwine to form a coherent whole, each informing the other. My rational mind then kicks in to state that this is because I select courses, readings, and activities by virtue of their appeal to me. Yet the particular confluence, which has formed the foundation of this paper, would not seem immediately apparent.

¹ Kohanov, Linda, *The Tao of Equus: A Woman's Journey of Healing & Transformation through the Way of the Horse* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2001), Kindle Edition

The course for which I am writing this reflection is Integral T'ai Chi, an experiential exploration of T'ai Chi Ch'uan, combined with readings in the Tao Te Ching. Shortly after the start of the semester and congruent with my daily practice of T'ai Chi, I stumbled upon the opportunity to join a small group of equestrians that will drive a herd of horses across Eastern Mongolia to their winter pasture late this coming summer. A conversation with the organizer of this trip led me to Linda Kohanov's book, *The Tao of Equus: A Woman's Journey of Healing & Transformation through the Way of the Horse*. A number of the themes examined in this book immediately echoed those explored in another book that examines the differences between the two hemispheres of the human brain which I had begun to read over the Christmas break: *The Master and his Emissary*.² And the concepts examined in that book circled back to the approach of the Tao Te Ching. Part way through the semester, I attended the Nondual Wisdom and Psychotherapy conference. I found that the approach of the nondual therapists, in their work with their clients, offered a very similar way of being with experience as the relationship with horses in *The Tao of Equus*, the qualities of being highlighted in the Tao Te Ching, and those experienced through the flow of T'ai Chi. At the same time I found I was exploring the coherence between the approach to movement and relationship as evoked in T'ai Chi and my experience of being on horseback. The way that I hold my body in each process has a resonance and mutually enhancing effect on the experience of the other.

² McGilchrist, Iain, *The Master and his Emissary*, (Padstow, Cornwall: TJ International Ltd, 2009), Kindle Edition

As always, it is difficult to know which thread to follow into an intricately woven tapestry. The whole wants to manifest itself at once, making choosing a thread to start the unraveling and revealing a challenge. So I will begin with the coherence between my experience of doing the standing postures and that of riding on horseback. Fascinatingly, another name for the standing posture of wu ji is the cowboy posture. After having practiced this relaxed, alert posture for the T'ai Chi class, I was fascinated to find, the first time I got on a horse to begin training for the Mongolian horse drive, that my body naturally wanted to take that form. The term 'cowboy posture' immediately made sense. The slight bends in the legs at the knees and hips, feet shoulder width apart, and the suspended yet relaxed upright posture of the upper body were all immediately familiar. There was only one substantial difference. Traditionally, I have focused on holding the arms near to the body when riding, elbows close to the ribcage, so when one pulls in on the reins there is a direct line of force backwards. Elbows sticking out side-wise dissipates that force. Yet I found that my body now naturally wanted to create the spaciousness under arms emphasized in the wu ji posture. I could hold this spaciousness while still maintaining a direct line of force parallel to the horse's neck. Moving my body into the wu ji posture encouraged a relaxed alertness that allowed me to tune into the movements and flow of the horse with more awareness.

As I became accustomed to holding my body in the wu ji posture, in class, in practice at home, and exploring how it felt and informed my riding at a walk, I began to experiment more with it. I found that even as I was using my legs actively in posting at a trot, I could

maintain the upper body posture of wu ji and it helped me to retain an attitude of alert relaxedness, even at the faster pace. Maintaining this sense of wu ji, I found that another quality that we explored in class was also very useful in riding. This was the quality of 'listen and stick' that we experienced through doing forms of T'ai Chi in pairs in the classroom setting. The idea was to have one person lead a movement and the other follow while maintaining constant, consistent, light contact. I found that this sensation of 'listening and sticking' perfectly described the action of me, as rider, listening and sticking to the changing movements of the horse, following the gaits through walk, trot, and canter. And if I maintain a sense of open attention, the horse responds in kind, listening and sticking to my subtle communications as I ask him (or her) to change gaits. There is a fluid movement of give and take, with the qualities of listening and sticking, remaining open, engaged and in responsive contact with multiple senses, that flows back and forth between the horse and the rider. The concept of yin-yang, so essential to both the Tao Te Ching and T'ai Chi, is directly relevant here, the movement between the force of yang energy—the component of sticking—and the receptivity and listening of yin, with flow containing both of these elements at the same time. Instead of a relationship of dominance, an awareness of riding as collaboration and flow in both directions—from rider to horse, from horse to rider—becomes apparent.

I found that bringing the sensations and postures explored in the Tai Chi class to my riding, expanded my sense of connection, both physical and at the level of mind, with the horse. My riding then became a form of practice, especially of wu ji, that I could sense

informed my experience and development in the classroom. And the intersection of these two activities supported the attitude and postures becoming praxis, a way of being in the world, rather than just practice. The resonance between the class experience and my personal life was furthered through my reading of Linda Kohanov's book, *The Tao of Equus*. This book describes Kohanov's own journey of healing through being around horses and subsequent development of a therapeutic approach utilizing proximity to horses as a catalyst for self-exploration and healing. She grounds her perceptions of this process in the philosophy of the Tao Te Ching. Kohanov describes the choice of the title for the book as stemming from the following:

...my editor, Jason Gardner, and I felt it [the working title, *The Tao of Equus*] was ultimately the best description of the book's thesis: that horses relate to the world from a feminine or "yin" perspective. As a result, the species is a living example of the success and effectiveness of feminine values, including cooperation over competition, responsiveness over strategy, emotion and intuition over logic, process over goal, and the creative approach to life that these qualities engender.³

The qualities of the way a horse approaches the world around it balance the forceful controlling approach that has been so emphasized as a way of life in the Western world. Kohanov feels that exposure to the horse consciousness can reflect back what is going on in the human psyche and allow it to come into our awareness. Interestingly, the qualities

³ Kohanov, Linda, *The Tao of Equus*, location 307

that she ascribes to the horse are very similar to the qualities described in the interactions with clients by those therapists who ground their work in nondual wisdom. This is emphasized in John Prendergast's explanation in the introduction to *The Sacred Mirror*,⁴ where he offers the reasoning behind the title for this edited volume of writings on Nondual wisdom and psychotherapy: "The title of this book, *The Sacred Mirror*, refers to the capacity of the therapist to reflect back the essential nature of the client—that awareness that is prior to and inclusive of all thoughts, feelings, and sensations."⁵ Both Prendergast and Kohanov find that being in the presence of another being, whether human or equine, who is grounded in the experience of the present moment, without imposing judgment or the effort to control and direct experience, allows for the client to tune into his/her own "...feeling, intuition, relationship and preverbal body wisdom..." in an integrated manner.⁶ Though Kohanov compares the horse with the Taoist sage, I think that she would also see the horse as awake to nondual awareness, and agree with Prendergast when he states, "The awakening of nondual awareness also facilitates the depth and transformative power of inquiry. Discernment is significantly enhanced."⁷ It is the balance created through yin-yang that allows this enhancement. In one translation of the Tao Te Ching, two lines of the first chapter read: "Thus the constant void enables one to observe the true essence. The constant being enables one to see the outward

⁴ Fenner, Peter, Krystal, Sheila and Prendergast, John, eds., *The Sacred Mirror* (St. Paul: Paragon House. 2011), Kindle Edition

⁵ Ibid, location 177

⁶ Kohanov, Linda, *The Tao of Equus*, location 1939

⁷ Fenner et al. *The Sacred Mirror*. location 268

manifestations.”⁸ The nondual essence of awareness holds the manifest and allows it to be seen more clearly. The horse as sage, through its yin-oriented presence of open awareness in the moment, invites the rider to also drop into that open aware state. The receptive yin state allows the forms of the manifest to be seen clearly within it.

Deepening the resonance between the Integral T'ai Chi course and the volume I came upon through my involvement with the Mongolian horse drive, one of the chapters in Kohanov's book is entitled "Wu Wei."⁹ We had talked about this concept in class before I came across it in the book. In this chapter, Kohanov emphasizes the importance of wu wei, which she identifies as the concept of 'doing nothing.' In the model of using horses therapeutically, this creates a quality of open presence, where the client is not trying to do anything, change anything. She is simply being with the horse, noting her own internal experience and opening to what is going on with horse. If the client is tense, this is immediately reflected in the horse's behavior, through pulling away and moving into a fight/flight posture of hollowed back with the head raised. If this is happening, then Kohanov requests that the client focus on standing in the wu ji posture, with its relaxed open alertness, which when combined with deep breathing, helps dissipate the tension in the client. The horse then reflects that back by allowing itself to relax. The equivalent posture in the horse takes the form of a rounded back with the head lowered. In this posture the horse is relaxed, present, and alert without the hyper-alertness of a tensed fight/flight posture. This Taoist inspired state of alert, effortless presence is of particular

⁸ www.with.org/tao_te_ching_en.pdf

⁹ Kohanov, Linda, location 960

importance to a rider. As Kohanov states, “To be effective, riders must develop an alert yet meditative state of mind, creative approaches to problem solving, and an ability to set long-term goals without lapsing into impatience with the challenges that arise or an attachment to preconceived notions of how success will be attained.”¹⁰ In the process of becoming an effective rider, who is alert and sensitive to what the horse is reflecting back to her, the rider can also become more aware of her own internal states and how that affects her presence in the world around her. It again brings to mind the concept of ‘listen and stick,’ with the yin sense of receptive listening and the yang sense of responsive action. The listening appears to occur in the openness of the nondual ground. In describing the most effective and talented trainers of horses that she knows Kohanov says, “I’ve come to realize that it is this openness to nuance, sensory awareness, and nonverbal communication — not any particular method or form of tack — that creates the level of interspecies rapport associated with the most efficient and successful trainers.”¹¹ A feedback loop forms between trainer or rider and horse as they each listen deeply to the nuances that the other is communicating, flowing between receptiveness and action, back and forth.

Returning to the relationship between the experiential exploration of T’ai Chi Ch’uan and how it informs the experience of riding and communion with the horse, practicing the forms of Tai Chi encourages one to develop awareness of the body, where it is in space,

¹⁰ Ibid, location 6115

¹¹ Ibid, location 3175

how both energy and chi flow through the body, and to the space around it. This awareness is a core aspect of the rider/horse relationship. Kohanov observes “A mind tuned to embrace the entire body—while connecting sociosensually with the body-mind of the horse—is the key to equine success.”¹² The practice of Tai Chi becomes praxis as I commune with the horse, allowing it to carry me, and directing and pacing its flow, listening and sticking.

The final thread I am weaving into this exploration has already been surfacing in the concept of yin-yang, receptivity and action, and the flow between the two in T'ai Chi Ch'uan. This is where my reading of the tome *The Master and his Emissary*¹³ becomes relevant. *The Master and his Emissary* is an examination of the differences of the functioning and processing of information of the left and right hemispheres of the human brain. The basic thesis of this book is that both hemispheres of our brains process the same information but do so in a different manner. The right hemisphere exhibits the yin qualities of holistic, intuitional processing. The left hemisphere has the yang qualities of focus, direction and will. Our modern world has emphasized the importance of the qualities of focus and analysis that are integral to the left hemispheric processing. For our species to survive, Iain McGilchrist feels we need to use both ways of processing the world—the yang of the left hemisphere and the yin of the right—in a balanced fashion.

¹² Kohanov, Linda, *The Tao of Equus*, location 3184

¹³ McGilchrist, Iain, *The Master and his Emissary*

The approach of the right hemisphere is more global, less specific, seeing things as a whole. The left hemisphere approaches the same information analytically, assessing its parts, categorizing and sorting. McGilchrist proposes that our culture has come to allow the left hemispheric approach to dominate, drowning out what our right hemisphere has to communicate through its ability to see things in a holistic, global manner. The left hemisphere is described as archetypically masculine, with its focus being directed, precise and analytical, with the yang qualities of force, will, and action. The right hemisphere processes information in both a more subtle and holistic manner, using multiple senses. It holds the yin qualities of receptivity and openness, archetypically considered feminine. Perhaps because the left hemisphere holds the language centers of our brains, it has come to dominate our awareness as we came to rely more and more on language, verbal and written for communication. For this reason, McGilchrist identifies it as the master. The right hemisphere is the emissary, who brings information through other types of awareness that the left hemisphere can then process. Rather than seeing our two hemispheres as collaborating, McGilchrist describes them as competing, which interestingly, seems like a left hemispheric view of the functioning of our brains. The holistic approach of the right hemisphere would not experience them as incompatible.

In looking at the relevance of this parsing out of the approaches of the hemispheres of the brain, the discussion we had in class where the Tao was identified as a qualified nondualism resonates with McGilchrist's perception of the right hemispheric approach: "...this going 'through' a thing to find its opposite is an aspect of the right-hemisphere world, in which 'opposites' are not incompatible, an aspect of its roundness, rather than

linearity.”¹⁴ This sense of wholeness and roundness rather than linearity also applies to the different ways the hemispheres perceive and experience time. McGilchrist notes: “duration belongs to the right hemisphere, while sequencing... belongs to the left.”¹⁵ Kohanov describes working with a trainer as she learned to commune more effectively with her horse. The trainer told her to keep her body fully in the present, and then used this beautiful, hard to grasp phrase, “...and your mind in the recent future.”¹⁶ Kohanov then later states, “The black horse had indeed led me to one of the lost keys of paradise; the door to a vista outside linear time had been unlocked.”¹⁷ The experience of being present to the yin qualities of being of the equine awareness changed Kohanov’s sense of time, bringing to the fore the right-hemispheric experience of time.

The Tao, nondual wisdom, and the equine experience of the world all evoke the qualities of the experience of the right-hemisphere. Chapter forty-one of the Tao describes those high in virtue as resembling a vale. One translation reads “A man of superior virtue is like an empty, receptive valley.”¹⁸ This is a highly feminine, right-hemispheric image. It is also the image of the horse as sage, and of the therapist who is grounded in nondual awareness. An integrated, relational sense of being in the world in balance comes to the fore through holding both the qualities of yin and the qualities of yang in awareness as a

¹⁴ McGilchrist, Iain, *The Master and his Emissary*, location 2171

¹⁵ Ibid, location 2186

¹⁶ Kohanov, Linda, location 665

¹⁷ Ibid, location 680

¹⁸ www.with.org/tao_te_ching_en.pdf

whole. The flow between yin and yang that one practices in doing the forms of T'ai Chi Ch'uan reinforce the experience of this awareness: of receptivity and action, listening and sticking, the ground of being and the manifestations that it holds. The way of experiencing the world of the right hemisphere is brought back into balance with the analytical, focused way of being of the left hemisphere. Riding and working with horses, practicing T'ai Chi Chuan, contemplating the wisdom of the Tao Te Ching and of nondual awareness—all of these ways of being the world can help me experience the world through a more integrated and integral sense of being. Each reinforces the others with heightened awareness of the ways in which they resonate and echo each other.

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The Tao Te Ching. www.with.org/tao_te_ching_en.pdf accessed 4/1/2014