

# **Mustangs and Mindfulness**

A Leadership Training Course with Spanish Mustangs

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☞ **Horse training is not just about horsemanship. It's about a way of life.** ☞



Photo by Rush Cole

Over the last thirty years and more I have been working with horses. My first horse was a horse named Moon Shadow. She was a mare. She wasn't a mustang but she was the type of alpha mare I was meant to work with, the kind I was made to work with. She provided many of my early lessons, a couple of broken bones and she knew I loved her. This horse and others have influenced my life.

I've explored the methods of other horsemen and their words and techniques have penetrated and broadened my own relationship with horses. It's difficult to talk about horses without the

shadow of their presence falling over me. I don't mind standing in the shade of these inspiring people; Buck Branneman, Emmett Brislawn, Leslie Desmond, Bill Dorrance, Tom Dorrance, Ray Hunt, Pat Parelli, and Lee Smith, among others.

The practice of mindfulness is paying close attention to the present experience, intention and purpose and the awareness and clear comprehension that arises from it. When I work with mustangs my experience is often spiritual. I can compare my connection to Spanish Mustangs to Buddhist Vipassana meditation practices.

Ven. Henepola Gunaratana states, "Buddhism as a whole is quite different from the theological religions with which Westerners are most familiar. It is a direct entrance to a spiritual or divine realm without addressing deities or other 'agents'. Its flavor is intensely clinical, much more akin to what we would call psychology than to what we would usually call religion. It is an ever-ongoing investigation of reality, a microscopic examination of the very process of perception. Its intention is to pick apart the screen of lies and delusions through which we normally view the world, and thus to reveal the face of ultimate reality. Vipassana meditation is an ancient and elegant technique for doing just that."

Working with Spanish Mustangs is an ancient and elegant way for doing just that as well.

## **Spanish Mustang Introduction**

**The Horse: Friendship without envy, Beauty without vanity, Nobility without conceit, A willing partner, yet no slave. *Author Unknown***

The Spanish Mustang Registry describes the Spanish Mustang as follows:

Size:

- Medium sized from 13 2 to 15 hands with proportional weight.

Body:

- Smooth muscled with short backs, rounded rumps with low set tails.
- Girth is deep, laid back shoulder and fairly pronounced withers.
- Spanish type head with a straight or concave forehead and a convex nose with ears that are medium to short, usually notched or curved towards each other.
- Necks are fairly well crested in mares and geldings and heavily crested in mature stallions with chests being narrow but deep.
- Front legs join the chest in an "A" shape rather than straight across.

Feet and Legs:

- Chestnuts are small or missing, particularly on rear legs with ergots are small or absent.
- Feet are extremely sound with thick walls with many having what is known as “mule feet,” which resists bruising due to the concave sole, making them less prone to injury.
- Canons are short, upper foreleg is long with the canon bone having a larger circumference than other breeds animals.

#### Gait:

- Long stride and many are gaited with a comfortable gait such as the amble, running walk or single foot.
- Some are laterally gaited and have a “paso” gait without extreme knee action.

#### Color:

- Varied because of the inheritance of the early Spanish horses that were of many colors and patterns, including dun, grulla, buckskin, overo and sabino paints and appaloosa, as well as bay, chestnut, black and white.

#### Temperment:

- They will not abide abuse and do not have the mentality of “domesticated” horses. They bond and become very attached to their human partners. They are highly intelligent with an innate sense of self-preservation. They have retained many of the instincts that led to their survival in the feral state.
- They are thinking horses and have their own opinions of things. The human partners who learn to think with them do very well with the Spanish Mustang.

## **Training Demonstration**

The connection of heart and mind between the horse and its partner reveals the healing power of horses. Horsemanship based on natural partnerships is a technique with many rewards. It can build confidence and patience that can lead to self-worth. The core curriculum for the demonstration is seven basic ground work manoeuvres with the rope that contributes to safety and communication. When ground work mastery is achieved then leadership can be the result. The ground work principles are:

- Leading
- Backing
- Turning the front end
- Disengaging the hind quarters
- Moving the shoulders
- Longing
- Pressure and Release
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## **Break for Lunch**

The spirit of the wild horse is the same after years of riding as it was before he ever felt a rope, and there's no human in the world wants to preserve that spirit in the horse like the cowboy does; he's the one what knows better than anybody else that a horse with a broken spirit is not horse at all. *Will James*

## **Connecting to Spanish Mustangs using Horsemanship, Feel, and the Quiet Mind**

The principles of successful horsemanship can be applied to all aspects of our lives. Using these techniques can open awareness, self-confidence, and leadership potential. (The word 'horse' can be changed to workplace, family, partner, son, daughter, student in the statements below.)

- In the wilderness there are predator and prey animals. Our relationship with horses is based on the prey – predator process. We are the predator animal and the horse is the prey animal. We almost never think about our being predators but horses think about it all the time.
- Like meditation, communication through silence begins with quieting the mind.
- Developing a quiet mind isn't something you do only in meditation or when you get on a horse, it's something you can do all the time and bring to your horse.
- The place to be is a place where the horse's mind is quiet, along with yours.
- The idea is to quiet the mind so that you can see everything for what it is, what it really is, not what you perceive it to be.
- When the road to mental chatter slows, perception of a horse or oneself becomes clearer.
- One of the most powerful things a person can do for themselves is to quiet the mental chatter, then we begin to access the inner wisdom that is always speaking to us but we tend to ignore. It also enables us to have more clarity in seeing the truth.
- The human is challenged to think in the moment and live in the present. We can appreciate that horses have provided us with an opportunity to live in the present.
- What's happening for a horse is happening right now and that's the most relevant thing in their lives.
- Communication among horses is constant and clear but rarely verbal. More often than not the message is revealed by a gesture as subtle as the flick of an ear or the tilt of a head.
- A horseman needs to be awake and alive and alert all the time.
- The feel of horsemanship comes through your fingertips, your seat, your hands and feet and most importantly your mind.
- True horsemanship comes through feel. It's all about feel. What I know and have learned from Bill Dorrance is that feel is the king of the intangibles.

## **Pressure and Release**

- One of the things to be aware of while working with a horse is that before a horse does something, anything, he gets ready to do it. You want to be where the horse is right when he's getting ready. Be right there in the moment. Be prepared and ready to respond. It means you have to be aware and watch for what is about to happen not what has just happened. That is where we want to be.
- When teaching a new movement to a green horse start with the lightest pressure, but also prepare yourself to go to a higher level of pressure. But when you ask again you must start at the lightest pressure again or they won't understand what you want and learn to respond to the lightest touch.
- Think of pressure at ten different levels. Level one is the lightest pressure. Most amateurs begin with a pressure level of five.
- The instant the horse responds to pressure, release the pressure and give the horse a reward.
- If you don't have his attention, don't try to direct it.
- When giving direction to a horse make your point and then move on. It's a process of pressure and release. Without the release the pressure just becomes nagging. Make your point and then move on.

**The one best precept...the golden rule in dealing with a horse---is never to approach him angrily. Anger is so devoid of forethought that it will often drive a man to do things which in a calmer mood he will regret. *Xenophon, On Horsemanship***

## **Horsemanship, Power and Respect**

- If you are not in charge, the horse will be in charge.
- Every time you walk into the corral the horses all look up and take a quick vote on whether you are at the top of the pecking order or at the bottom of the pecking order.
- You want them to know you are in charge when you walk in the corral. You don't want them testing you to find out.
- Horses know when you know and they know when you don't know.
- If you are am nervous they will know it and it will make them nervous.
- No one bites the head mare. So if you get bitten you are definitely not the head mare and you need to do something about that.

## **Discipline and Direction**

- You need to understand the difference between discipline and punishment. Horses understand it better than you do.
- The horse doesn't need correction; but direction. He doesn't need punishment, but discipline. What the horse does is a direct result of you.
- Adjust yourself to fit the situation.
- When a horse cannot move his feet, his mind shuts down. The best way to get a horse to relax and stand still is to allow them to freely move their feet.

### **Confidence and Training**

- You are either training or un-training.
- Speed is the enemy of working with horses.
- Animals in nature are full of confidence. They must be confident to survive. They must be totally confident in their particular way of living. Horses in the wild are confident. Horses in the presence of humans can lose that confidence and it is our responsibility to show them a trust that will bring it back.
- Horses know more about being horses than you do.
- Whenever you make a breakthrough your horse is always there waiting for you.
- You are not trying to impress people; you are trying to impress the horses.
- You want the horses to think you are good.

### **Horsemanship and Self-development**

- You are not working on your horse, you are working on yourself.
- What horsemanship and self-development is about – what nature, communication, horses and mindfulness are about – is a commitment and a re-commitment on a regular basis – moment by moment, day by day.
- A person's relationship with himself is the most important relationship one has.
- If you do not hide from yourself you will not hide from your horse, or others.
- You have to honestly ask, "Am I myself?" If you are not yourself you are not free. If you're not free you can't see what you're doing.
- We all know there is something different and special about horses, but perhaps it is really that there is something different and special about us when we are with them.
- No one becomes involved with horses to make themselves a better human being or find greater meaning in life or to make the world a better place, but sometimes that's exactly what can happen when you get involved with horses.

### **Connections between Humans, Horses and Spirit**

**Far back, far back in our dark soul the horse prances ... The horse, the horse! The symbol of surging potency and power of movement, of action ... *D.H. Lawrence***

- In Mongolia the equivalent of our mustangs are called Tarke, which means spirit.
- Horses have a profound effect on people. They lift the spirits, quiet the mind and sooth the soul.
- Communication is often through silence.
- We are spiritual beings having a human experience. Horses are spiritual beings having a horse experience.
- To know horses on their terms is to be transformed.
- What people think of animals reflects the way they think about themselves.
- Humans are the only animals with negative thoughts.
- You have to work well with yourself to work well with horses.
- One definition of freedom is to be open so we can hear and see.
- When you love a horse they know it.
- Horses are able to spot someone who is not honest, and they know who is.
- Horses will teach us all about the incredible value of kindness, and they will repay us a hundred times.
- In their own way these mustangs exemplify the best of what we hope for in ourselves, strength, courage, kindness, forgiveness and love.

**Halted in animated expectancy or running in abandoned freedom, the Mustang was the most beautiful, the most spirited and the most inspiring creature ever to print foot on the grasses of America. *J. Frank Dobie, The Mustangs***

### **Principles from Bill Dorrance:**

- Observe, remember, compare.
- Make the wrong things hard and the right things easy.
- Let your idea become the horse's idea.
- Be as gentle as possible and as firm as necessary.
- The slower you go the quicker you'll find out.
- Feel what the horse is feeling.
- Take the time it takes.
- The horse has a need for self-preservation in mind, body and spirit.
- The horse is never wrong.
- Instead of a hard tightness find a soft firmness.
- Think, think right to the ground.
- Don't make a horse learn. Let him learn.

## Characteristics of Horses:

- Horses run when frightened.
- Horses are highly perceptive.
- Horses react quickly.
- Horses learn quickly.
- Horses crave company.
- Horses communicate with body language.
- Horses must know who is boss.
- Horses desensitize very quickly.
- Horses are precocial. (Precocial refers to species in which the young are relatively mature and mobile from the moment of birth.)
- Horses are honest.

*Anything forced and misunderstood can never be beautiful. Xenophon*

**Xenophon** zēn'əfən, c.430 B.C.–c.355 B.C., Greek historian, b. Athens. He was one of the well-to-do young disciples of Socrates before leaving Athens to join the Greek force (the Ten Thousand) under Cyrus the Younger of Persia. After the Greek generals had been treacherously killed by the Persians, Xenophon was chosen as one of the leaders of the heroic retreat. He tells the story in the *Anabasis*. Among his other works are the *Hellenica*, *Memorabilia*, *Oeconomicus*; the *Apology*, on the death of Socrates; the *Symposium*; the *Hieron*; the *Cyropaedia*; and essays on hunting, horsemanship, the ideal cavalry officer, and the constitutional practices of Sparta. The Columbia Encyclopedia. Copyright © 2001-07 Columbia University Press. All rights reserved.

**Leadership Training Course developed by Connie and Robin Doughman**

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