

Become a *Natural Rider*

with **Vinyasa**
Flow
Yoga

Vinyasa Flow Yoga pairs controlled breathing with Yoga postures and uses the movement from one position to the next to achieve total body harmony.

by Theresa Zenner and Jan Evans

Horse riding – it’s as natural as breathing. Moving in harmony with the horse is an expression of true partnership. Too often, however, physical stiffness and emotional stress keep the rider from achieving this, because breath and physical suppleness are keys to moving with the horse instead of against him. Vinyasa Flow Yoga, a practice that pairs controlled breathing with Yoga postures, can help – it provides the tools to develop both of these keys.

Breathing – for Horse and Rider

A horse at work is a breathing machine. Each stride is part of the inhalation and exhalation process. Slow motion video of a thoroughbred galloping shows a perfect example of using motion to enhance breathing. The horse breathes with his stride, enabling his whole body to become a running machine.

When held back by the rider, the horse will often hold his breath, which creates more stress in his mind and tension in his body. Sometimes he becomes like a steel spring under too much tension so that it just breaks – going in several directions at once.

Learning breath control can alleviate stress and prevent panic in horse and rider.

Although humans are usually not as athletic as the stressed horse, this same breath holding can have similar dire consequences. The person becomes tight when the breath is held. Emotions are heightened as the heart beats faster to oxygenate the blood. When a person is in this stressed state, any little unusual action by the horse, such as a raised head focused in a new direction, can create full blown panic, which will be communicated to the horse – creating more anxiety in the prey animal.

Learning breath control can alleviate stress and prevent panic in horse and rider. Ujjayi pranayama breathing is slow, controlled, conscious breathing. Because breathing, like the beating heart, is controlled by the brain unconsciously, there’s not much reason to think about it – it just happens. However, when we choose to, we can consciously control our breathing. Ujjayi pranayama breathing can replace breath holding and shallow or fast breathing.

TRY THIS

Observe your breathing while in a calm relaxed state. Become aware of the body parts that move when breathing in and out. Ujjayi pranayama breathing is similar to what asthmatics and singers call diaphragmatic breathing:

Exhale all the air out of the lungs. Inhale while pushing out the abdomen to extend the diaphragm and fill the lungs from the bottom up. Exhale by pulling the diaphragm up to completely empty the air. Slightly constrict the throat so the breathing is audible. It will sound like the ocean, flowing in and out. This may take some practice, but this practice can be done everywhere.

When you encounter a stressful situation, in traffic, home or work, practice the Ujjayi pranayama breath and notice the emotional and physical reactions. Soon, the breathing will minimize the stress, anxiety or tension you’re feeling and facilitate a more positive response in your mind and body.

Take this practice to the horse and notice the difference in your relationship.

If the horse moves upon mounting, use one rein to gently turn him to a stop. Use the Ujjayi Pranayama breathing until the horse lowers his head and relaxes with a strong exhale. The horse who moves off immediately is not calm and collected, waiting for the rider's request. Show the horse through conscious breathing what is expected of him – calm relaxation.

Achieving Strength with Suppleness

Riding requires strength, balance and suppleness. Vinyasa Flow Yoga opens, supples and strengthens the whole body. Core strength keeps the rider centered and grounded on the horse. Moving with the horse without holding on with the legs or arms requires balance. Fluidity and suppleness enable balanced motion with the horse's movement: forward, back, side to side, up and down. This is staying out of the horse's way, which allows him to move soundly.

The horse will give subtle and direct cues as to what is happening while being ridden. If he moves out freely without a rider and tack but has short choppy strides under saddle, the problem most likely lies in saddle fit or rider stiffness. First, rule out dental, hoof, body, and emotional issues (consult professionals); then evaluate saddle fit and headgear and correct it where necessary. Notice where you feel discomfort while riding or after you dismount. If you're sore the day after riding, those areas of discomfort are where tension was held while the horse moved.

Stiffness in the rider creates stiffness in the horse, so if the rider can create a better, more supple, environment for her mount's movement, there will be less soreness and more enjoyment for both.

Unlike other yoga practices, Vinyasa Flow uses the movement from one position to the next to achieve total body harmony. This movement between positions with conscious breathing becomes a total body workout to strengthen the body and improve flexibility.

TRY THIS

One Vinyasa, or series of yoga movements, that helps connect with the breath while stretching and strengthening the body is the Integration Series. This Vinyasa begins with the extended child's pose (Photo A) where you find and connect with your breath - it releases and relaxes the muscles in your body and connects your body with the Ujjayi pranayama breath used throughout the Vinyasa practice. Pairing the conscious breathing with movement helps the body to become more supple and open while relieving tension:

Relax in the extended child's pose until your breath becomes full and rhythmic. Exhale and move into downward facing dog (Photo B) to open and warm the back body. Breathe deeply at least three times before moving into the modified rag doll position (Photo C), opening up your back body. Both

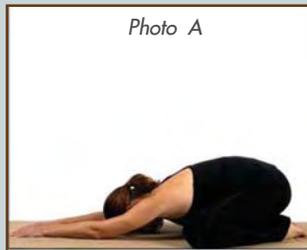


Photo A

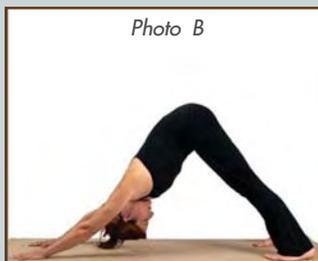


Photo B

Riding requires strength, balance, and suppleness - a supple rider rides a supple horse.



downward facing dog and rag doll revitalize the central nervous system. Bring your feet together, and slowly come up one vertebrae at a time for samasthiti (standing at attention). Remember your breath and start to awaken your posture while setting an intention for your practice as you begin Sun Salutation A, which is the next Vinyasa series of positions in the Fluidity Connection: Vinyasa Flow Yoga for the Equestrian.

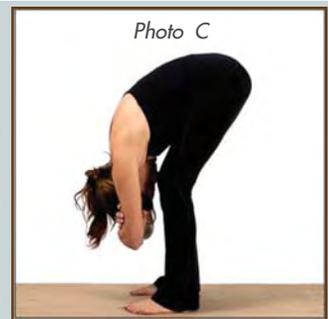


Photo C

Always finish the Yoga practice with a full body relaxation of Savasana: resting on the back, arms at sides, hands open, legs spread with feet loose.

Some of the positions can be challenging at first. Always listen to your body and respect your limits. As with any exercise program, be sure to consult your health care professional. Find a comfortable position within each pose when beginning yoga practice. Make Vinyasa Flow Yoga a part of your natural lifestyle – your horse will thank you for it. ☺☺

About the authors:

Theresa Zenner became a better rider when she discovered Vinyasa Flow Yoga. She is a certified Vinyasa Flow Yoga instructor, licensed horsemanship instructor, and creator of the Fluidity Connection: Vinyasa Flow Yoga for the Equestrian, a DVD series designed to help riders become true partners with their horses.

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Jan Evans is a freelance writer and lifelong lover of horses who is learning to love how Vinyasa Flow Yoga can strengthen and supple her body.

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