

# Horses and Biodynamic Healing

By Pam Billinge

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*Recently I fulfilled a personal dream and spent six weeks training in Colorado at the world's leading school of Natural Horsemanship. This transformational experience is still resonating within and around me. Here I will attempt to share with you just a small part of my learning and the powerful insights which I gained into the horse and how these wonderful creatures can support biodynamic healing.*

## Setting the scene

Natural Horsemanship (sometimes referred to as horse whispering) refers to a whole philosophy and approach to training, riding and managing horses. As the name implies the whole essence of it is about respecting nature and what is natural.

In practice this means communicating with the horse in the same way that horses communicate with each other, it means respecting the

horse's dignity, never using pain or punishment as a training aid, never 'making' a horse do anything but winning its cooperation by establishing a trusting partnership and effective leadership. The usual gadgets used by many traditionally trained horsemen and women to encourage 'good behaviour' or the 'right shape' or to control high-spirited creatures are rejected. The spirit of the horse and innate or learned behaviours are understood and harnessed, and consequently 'correction' as we would typically understand it is not often required.

Natural Horsemanship requires that we seek to understand the horse before we seek to make ourselves understood. We have to suspend judgement, suspend our goals, abandon notions of preconceived timelines, and question our selves at the deepest levels. Before blaming the horse for his behaviour we look

to ourselves to see where our responsibility lies – what emotions, feelings, attitudes, energy or physical posture might be causing our horse to be the way he is.

As I settled into the remote ranch at 7,700 ft altitude what I was not fully prepared for (apart from the snow in May!) was the intensity of the personal development and healing that took place for me while I was there. And also the parallels which I saw unravel before me with my work at home as a body psychotherapist, biodynamic massage therapist and leadership coach. I had known that parallels existed – indeed had been running clinics and private lessons for riders for a couple of years – but I soon realised that the learning I was experiencing was at an even more profound level than I had imagined.



Photograph by Coco, courtesy of Pam Billinge

## The Horse as Healer

During my adult life I have had personal experience of finding emotional comfort and healing through my animals (dogs and horses). During my stay in Colorado, where I lived and breathed horses for such an intensive period, I have developed a much clearer sense of how and why horses can help us to heal. My teacher was a horse called Coop – who was my partner for the whole stay – a chunky little quarterhorse the colour of dark chestnuts and with gentle brown eyes as deep as the ocean.

### *Therapeutic partner*

The horse is a prey animal. As a species horses have survived due to their highly sensitive, intuitive nature, their ability to sense danger and then run fast. They live as a herd and the herd dynamic is structured so as to maximise the chances of the species surviving rather than the individual. Being part of a herd increases chances of survival. Knowing who the leader is and respecting their decisions is also important. Knowing what, who and when to trust, when and how fast to run. Horses tend not to take too many chances.

As humans we are predators. Horses see us as predators and will respond to us as such. The way we speak (to each other as well as to horses), the way we hold things, pick things up, move, even the way we plan our lives are all predatorial responses. That is how nature has programmed us. That is how we survive. So, to create a trusting relationship with a prey animal we have to be acutely aware of how we are, think, feel and act.

A horse's finely tuned senses pick up on the slightest nuance of attitude, emotion, intention and behaviour. They then respond to that or mirror that depending on the circumstances. It is this instant and honest feedback which we get which makes the horse such a useful therapeutic teacher. If the horse does not like or is afraid of

what he sees in us he will show this instantly and not spare our feelings. This might involve the horse turning and running or, at a more subtle level, the swish of the tail, or blankness in the eye. Equally, when a horse accepts us as a partner, leader and friend, the feedback is also clear. They approach without fear, they want to be with us, they offer their itches so we can scratch them and they scratch us back, they are eager and open to learning with us.

In this way a horse can be our therapeutic partner, guide and teacher – helping us to discover ourselves at the most fundamental level.

### *A healing relationship*

One of the most remarkable aspects of a horse is their capacity to trust us, once we have earned it, and to forgive. They forgive (although they never forget) not only our past misdemeanours and mistakes but also those that other humans have made before us. It is a wonder that they ever allow us on their backs at all.

I spent most of the first two weeks of my stay simply winning the trust of Coop. And then came the point where I knew that he trusted me – mostly. I sensed that he forgave my little mistakes too along the way. He welcomed me back to





his side every time I approached him. And yet I still felt tension when I rode and couldn't achieve a 'smooth' movement in the saddle. And then I realised, out of the blue, that whilst he had put his trust in me, I had not put my trust in him. When I did our relationship flourished. There was something very pure about our connection from that point. And in the purity I experienced a stillness, calm and peacefulness that was at the same time lively with spontaneity, fun, confidence and joy. Or I should say we experienced it together – it was quite clear that he, too, was having a lot of fun.

As therapists, much of our focus is on creating a healing relationship with our clients. For me, the experience of this trusting, forgiving and healing relationship with my horse was a powerful lesson. I learned what it can be to be myself in a relationship and how when I am the relationship can be so much simpler.

#### *Window to your Soul*

And within this trustful relationship once it was established Coop also offered me a window to my soul. It was as if he saw me and I saw my reflection in him. Connecting with him was like having an open gateway directly to nature and the

spiritual universe that it offers. This sense of connection was a wholly embodied experience. I learned that horses don't accept humans if you come in 'bits,' If I was not all there, Coop didn't see me. His eye would be dull and his stride lacklustre. He was only interested in the whole of me – my mind, body, and spirit.

Through this window to my soul, some of what I saw of myself or realised about myself was difficult – some of it I had known before but not accepted because it made me too sad, or ashamed. Other things I saw gave me cause to rejoice and celebrate – I had retrieved a part of me which was lost or which I couldn't remember knowing.

### **The Biodynamic Process**

As I digest my experience I have become more and more conscious of and fascinated by the biodynamic rhythm and process of the experience that this healing process involves.

#### *Self regulation and the vasomotoric cycle*

Being a prey animal, the horse is an expert 'panicker.' The panic or flight response is triggered in a fraction of a second and can be over as quickly as it started. Breeding clearly has an impact on the intensity and duration of the 'flight' – but all horses are programmed for flight and then rapid return to relaxation so grazing can re-commence. As a Natural Horseman, we need to understand this in the horse. We play games with them to win their confidence in us and then to build their confidence in themselves. We aim to help them shorten their 'flight line' when they panic and to help them bring themselves 'back down' when the panic is over. We are effectively teaching the horse the art of self regulation.

This supports the human biodynamic process in a number of ways. Helping horses who are prone to panic can be frightening and dangerous. It is important for the horsewoman to master her own



vasomotoric cycle and learn to stay calm so that we act without emotion with our horse. If we are frightened our horse will respond to that as well as the original source of the fear. This requires a very conscious learning process to moderate our mind/body response to fear.

However I also observed and experienced learning at an unconscious level. Although many horses panic easily, once they feel safe they tend to complete the downswing of the cycle easily and very visibly. You will see their eyes soften and blink, their breathing deepen, you will hear their gut, their head will drop and they will salivate and lick and chew. The oral action of licking and chewing is also a sign that a horse has ‘taken something in’ – when teaching them something new it is important to wait for them to signal that they have understood by this reaction before moving onto a new task (which can take many, many minutes of patient waiting). As humans we find it innately difficult to come down off adrenaline or stress. Simply being around a creature who self-regulates readily and often, and normally with a fairly consistent pattern, seems to help humans to develop their own capacity for self-regulation and particularly completing the downswing of the cycle.

#### *Muscle armouring*

As part of the relationship building with our horse we look out for what is called ‘brace’ at a physical level in the horse. Clearly any physical brace prevents the horse from moving gracefully and athletically. However it is also often a sign that the horse has not connected with its human partner at an emotional or mental level and the issue needs to be tackled at that level. Of course it also follows that any physical ‘brace’ in the human (caused in turn by emotional, mental or spiritual issues) will trigger similar brace, or muscular tension in the horse.

When riding a horse it is virtually impossible to move fluidly with the



horse unless your mind and body are engaged and relaxed. The feedback is immediate and I have to say also very uncomfortable! So when I was in relationship with my horse in this way it was almost like having a mirror, giving immediate feedback on where muscle tension or armouring lay in my body. I was able to see it in my horse, feel it in my horse, then identify where brace resided in my own body. I was able to reflect on what might be causing my physical brace at an emotional or mental level and bit by bit loosen the tension and let it go. From one day to the next I had instant feedback from my horse and the quality of our movement together as to how successful I was being. I

monitored the whole process in my journal and over a relatively short space of time all sorts of tensions and anxieties that had been with me for years just ebbed away into the clear mountain air (and are largely still there!).

After about two weeks of this process, we rode one day and the fluidity of our movement together was harmonious and natural. Without brace in either one of us our energy flowed together with each other and universally. I have never felt so connected with the universe and my own spirit as part of that. The essence of what we are trying to achieve with our clients as therapists also struck me stronger than ever – it is all about this spiritual

connection, this fluidity in relationship with self and others, and in order to achieve that we need to lose 'brace' at an emotional, mental and spiritual level. While we have brace our relationship is not complete, and our energy cannot flow.

### Sequel

I was so moved by this experience that I am pursuing accreditation as an Equine Guided Therapist and hope to share the enriching experience of learning and healing with horses with others in the coming months and years. I look forward to sharing more of this journey with you all in the future.

I would love to receive comments, feedback or discussion from any readers on these topics. Please write to me at [pam@bestillmore.co.uk](mailto:pam@bestillmore.co.uk) or telephone 07900 830402.

# Book Review

By Maryline Gagnere

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## The Sacred Mirror: Nondual Wisdom and Psychotherapy

The subject of this book will be familiar to therapists trained in Buddhist-influenced psychotherapy or Eastern spiritual approaches. To those not familiar with the concept of no-mind, it will be more than an introduction. The book is a rich collection of essays and includes a fascinating interview with the spiritual teacher Adyashanti. The essays, some theoretical, others more practical, are written by American psychotherapists and scholars from different backgrounds as well as by another spiritual teacher, Peter Fenner, who share their understanding and experience of nonduality. The book is not a manual of how to do nondual psychotherapy as nondual wisdom is not a method nor a set of principles.

So what is it? John Prendergast explains in the book's introduction that it refers to "the understanding and direct experience of a fundamental consciousness" underlying all apparent divisions. Nonduality comes from the Sanskrit word *advaita*, which means 'not-two.' The theoretical chapters, which can be a bit arduous to get through, give thorough information and refer to many of the Eastern spiritual traditions – Buddhism, Zen, Taoism, Hinduism – but also, though to a much lesser extent, to mystical Christianity. In a very interesting chapter *Jungian Analysis and Nondual Wisdom*, Bryan Wittine, a Jungian analyst, links Jung's notion of the Self to the ancient notion of the *Atman* (a Sanskrit word which refers to the divine Self).

But here is a paradox which several writers stress: how can one explain with words something that the conceptual mind cannot grasp because it can only think dualistically? Nondual awareness can only be experienced. It is a state beyond words which can only be felt in silence and stillness. This fundamental consciousness which brings deep peace and a sense of connectedness with all of life is given many names: Buddha nature, pure awareness and unconditioned mind (among many others) in Eastern spiritual traditions, but it is also referred to throughout the book as openness, essence, presence, our true nature, unconditional love and God. It cannot be given nor taken away. It is always here. And yet we repeatedly connect with it and lose it. Another paradox.

To access that state, the process, we are told, is a letting go: of our projections, of outcomes and expectations, of our personal stories, of our core beliefs, of our need to know and to create meaning. Past and future are mental constructs and there is nothing beyond the present moment. We are conditioned by our past which stops us from being more fully present: this is also the premise traditional psychotherapy works with. But because psychotherapy is based on the notion of a separate self, the spiritual teacher Adyashanti thinks it is not addressing the central issue. He jokingly says therapy is "putting a nicer looking tutu or lipstick on a pig" because, for him, awakening to awareness comes first and the rest follows. Awakening, he says, is "the willingness to surrender to the moment."

The nondual approach advocates letting go of the notion of a separate self (since the psychological self is seen as the root of all conflict and suffering) and developing a "capacity