

Knowing Your Dan-Tien Breath

By Andrea Steele

How Breathing Works

The diaphragm is the muscle at the base of the chest just above the abdomen. When the body feels the need for air, the brain sends an impulse for the diaphragm to drop flat, thereby initiating the inhale. The “dropping” action creates a vacuum, drawing air in through the nostrils (or mouth) to

expansion of correct breathing. Your breathing is incorrect, however, if you cannot feel this expansion. **To test further for incorrect breathing, place one hand on the opposite shoulder and take a breath. Your elbow should not move. If it does, this confirms that you are breathing from your chest instead of from your abdomen.

Paying attention to your breath at different times during the day will give you an idea of your breathing pattern. If you find your breath high in your chest, relax your shoulders

ing in two ways. First, your center of gravity will be too high, physically lifting you out of the saddle and disconnecting you from your horse. Then, sensing the rider’s tension that is associated with thoracic breathing, your horse will become tense, affecting his balance and the flow of energy within his movement.

In this situation, simply being told to breathe does not give you the tools to breathe correctly and does nothing to improve your riding or your horse’s performance. You must be able to maintain a lower abdominal breathing pattern. In many cases, this means retraining a subconscious impulse. But, not to worry: most people can easily refocus their breathing in a short time, usually in a few weeks or months.



Patricia Norcia shows how breathing works and teaches two different unmounted exercises to maintain a lower breathing pattern while riding.

fill the lungs. The diaphragm is then drawn upward for the exhale cycle pushing air out of the lungs through the nostrils (or mouth) as it expands.

When you lie down, you can analyze your resting breathing - inhale and your belly will expand out, exhale and your belly flattens. You should also feel this expansion and contraction when standing. **Placing your hands at each side of your waist allows you to feel the

and make a point of exhaling from your belly. High “thoracic” breathing by nature creates tension within the muscles of the chest and shoulders, giving the lungs less room to expand and contract. Breathing becomes harder and therefore faster in order to supply the body with air. Over time the body actually adjusts to less air.

Upper-body tension associated with thoracic breathing affects your rid-

Abdominal Breathing

Singers and dancers as well as practitioners of tai chi and the martial arts know the importance of “deep-belly” breathing to maintain a low center of gravity and balance within the body. And, as professionals in these disciplines will tell you, improving your breathing is mostly about the exhale.

Tai chi and qi gong (pronounced chee kung, which literally means energy mastery) are forms of exercise that should be of particular interest to equestrians. The diaphragm muscle will strengthen by correctly breathing with the slow relaxed and balanced movement of tai chi. As breathing becomes stronger, the diaphragm moves higher and lower and the lungs utilize more air with each breath. The deliberate meditative motion of tai chi also serves to put the rider more in touch with the natural rhythm of the horse, which is much slower than ours. And since the tai chi stance mirrors the rider’s position in the saddle, the concentration on low breathing keeps the upper

body relaxed and stabilizes the center of gravity within the abdomen – just where it is needed for effective riding.

Your Dan-Tien Breath

The term dan-tien represents an area in the abdomen just below the navel and deep within the belly. (Note: You will find a variety of spellings for dan-tien.) Technically, there are three

not necessary for this explanation.) Deep-belly breathing combined with many of the tai chi exercises is said to massage these abdominal nerve groups and internal organs to stimulate blood circulation and improve the mind-body connection that takes place during the exhale. This deep breathing exhale allows riders to connect with the spine of the horse and, when needed, coordinate their breath with

five, as you exhale will tell you the strength of your breath (how high you can count without straining) and provide a baseline to measure improvement. Using groups of five and ten counts and increasing the counts over time, is a great exercise to develop better breathing and to begin an awareness of energy flow within your body. Combine this with tai chi and qi gong exercise and you will be



Patricia Norcia explains how the ability to coordinate your breath with your horse's breath during certain movements begins by analyzing your horse's resting breath.



Patricia Norcia, David Ritchie, and Mark Russell demonstrate qi gong exercises that lower your breath into the "dan-tien" or center of energy within your body. These same exercise serve to slow your motion to better align with the much slower natural rhythm of the horse.

dan-tiens in the body, the area in the brain, where the pituitary gland is located (often referred to as the "third eye,") an area in the heart, where the thymus gland is located, and the abdomen, considered the body's center of internal energy. Dan-tien breathing refers to the lowest of the three and is focused in the area of the third chakra or solar plexus of nerve groups. (Understanding the science of "chakras" is interesting for those who want deeper knowledge but is

their horse's breath – the harmony needed to accurately time and deliver the aids for certain movements.

Paying attention to your breath is arguably the most important thing you can do to improve your riding, so it is puzzling why the topic is not more frequently discussed. Breathing is natural and easily corrected when you just relax your muscles and use your belly to direct the movement. Simply counting one, two, three, four,

on the pathway to better riding and energy mastery. This is of course a condensed version of all that breathing entails, but it encapsulates what we, as riders, need to understand. 🌀

About the Author: Andrea Steele is coauthor of the book *Lessons in Lightness: The Art of Educating the Horse*, with trainer and clinician, Mark Russell and produced the 2-Disc DVD program *Riding with Chi: Your Pathway to Energy Mastery*. For more information and to view video trailers for *Riding with Chi*, visit the website: www.Mouse-HoleFarm.com. CHA members will receive a 10% discount on purchases just enter CHAmember with no space at checkout.