

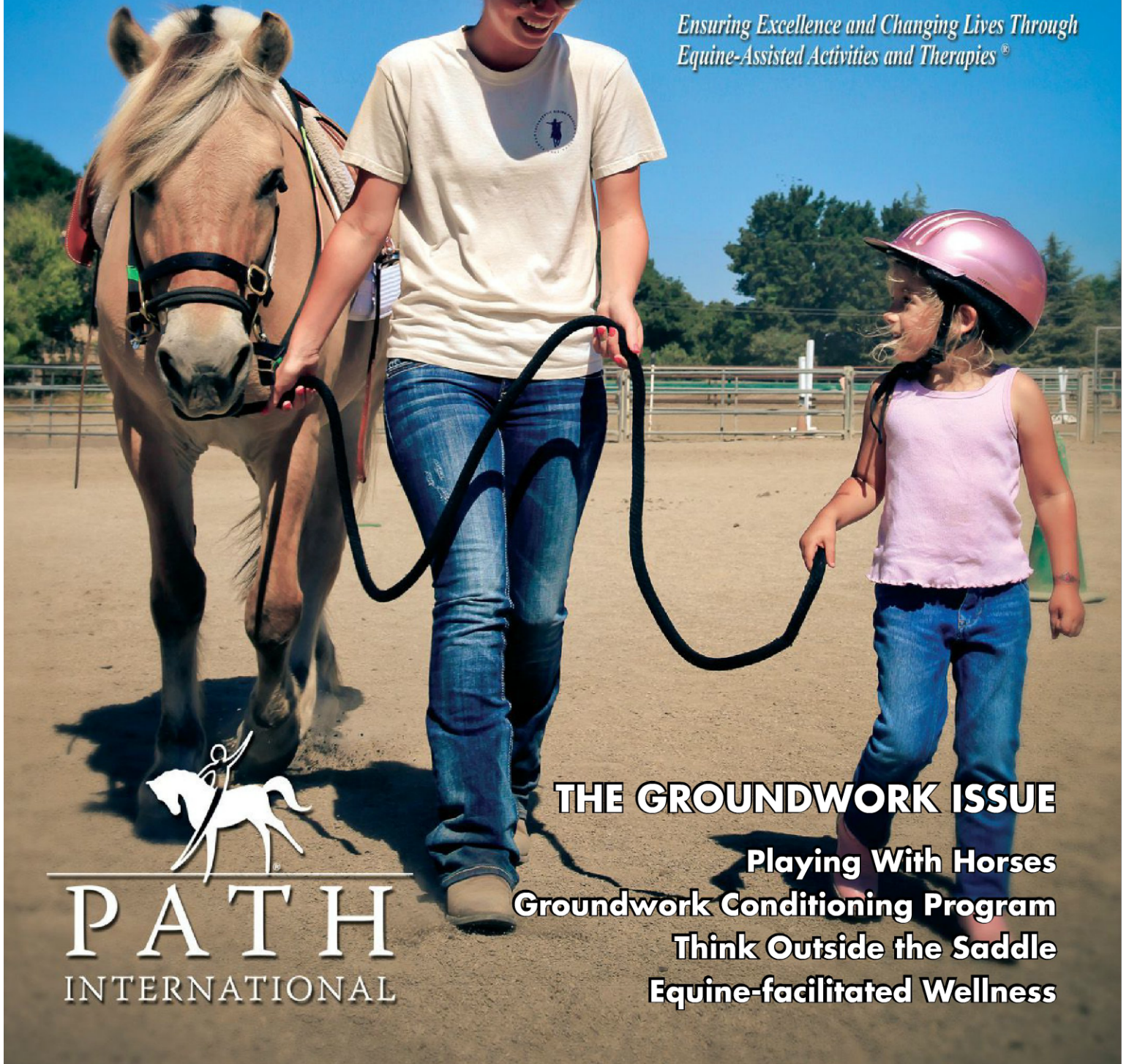
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STRIDES

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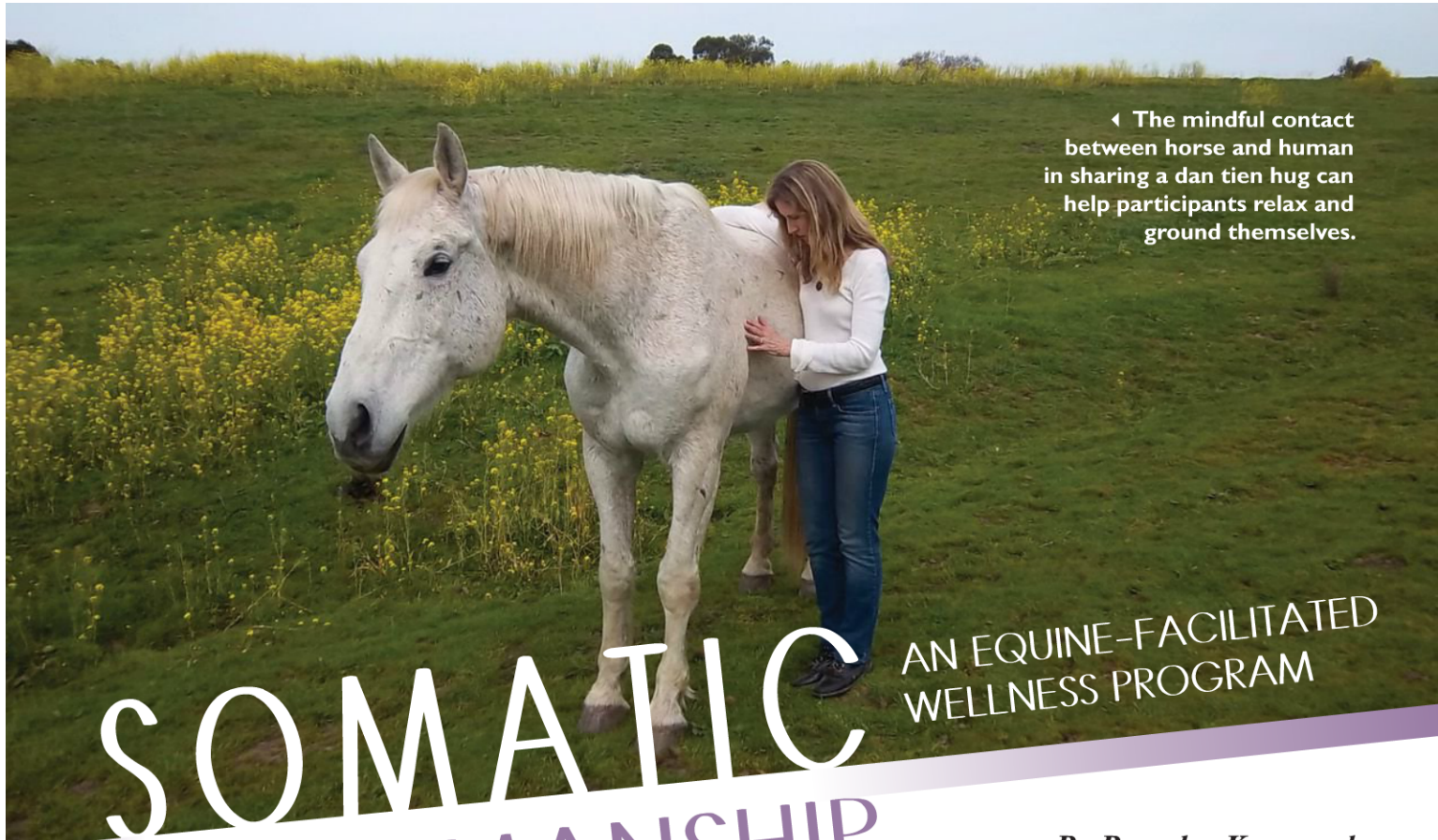
*Ensuring Excellence and Changing Lives Through
Equine-Assisted Activities and Therapies®*



PATH
INTERNATIONAL

THE GROUNDWORK ISSUE

**Playing With Horses
Groundwork Conditioning Program
Think Outside the Saddle
Equine-facilitated Wellness**



◀ The mindful contact between horse and human in sharing a dan tien hug can help participants relax and ground themselves.

SOMATIC HORSEMANSHIP

AN EQUINE-FACILITATED WELLNESS PROGRAM

*By Beverley Kane and
Cornelia Thompson*

PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF
STANFORD SOMATIC HORSEMANSHIP

When Allison left her comfort zone at the top of her game as editor of a nature magazine to take a high profile Fortune 500 job, she suddenly felt out of her depth. Her performance anxiety was so severe that it was somaticized—expressed through her body—as a rapid heartbeat that sent her to the emergency room. The cardiologist found nothing abnormal with Allison’s heart and diagnosed a case of nerves. Weeks later Allison, still unable to relax or subdue the racing feeling in her chest, discovered somatic horsemanship.

Somatic horsemanship is the practice of exploring the physical relationship between humans and horses using groundwork and/or mounted activities to promote physical, emotional, mental and spiritual health in both species. While all these aspects of the horse-human relationship are closely interrelated, for the majority of people and horses, the most tangible mode of interacting is through the five senses and the body as a whole.

Horses are consummate teachers of somatic intelligence because of how they live in their bodies, rather than their mind, both in times of stress and times of tranquility. Horses, for instance, quickly go back to grazing after a fright. Humans often become trapped in a

bodily “fight-or-flight” response because they internalize this fear through an inner mental dialog that heightens anxieties, worries and concerns. Somatic horsemanship teaches humans to go “back to grazing” through observing and interacting with horses, using breathing and body movements.

HEALING TRAINING

Somatic horsemanship combines the principles of traditional horsemanship with techniques from meditation, yoga, tai chi, qigong (pronounced “chee gong”), dance, mindfulness training and other somatic, meditative and healing arts. It includes practices from various models of natural horsemanship, therapeutic riding, equine-facilitated learning (EFL) and exercise physiology. A qigong-based somatic horsemanship program whose chief objective is stress reduction can easily be adopted by PATH Intl. Certified Professionals. An added benefit is that horses working in somatic horsemanship enjoy a relatively unstructured, playful environment uncomplicated by specific treatment or skills-acquiring agendas.

Stress reduction and emotional self-regulation are the primary objectives of somatic horsemanship workshops

and sessions. For decades, medical research has shown a causal relationship between stress and chronic ailments such as heart disease, diabetes, weakened immune systems, susceptibility to colds and flu and mental illness. The elimination of stress has been proven to alleviate and prevent physical and mental illness.

Following the 1975 publication of Harvard physician Herbert Benson's classic *The Relaxation Response*,¹ which examined transcendental meditation, studies have established the stress reduction and disease prevention capabilities of several forms of meditation and relaxation. *The Harvard Medical School Guide to Tai Chi* documents the latest research showing the health benefits from stress reduction in particular of tai chi and qigong. By observing how horses exhibit the ebb and flow of chi (or qi, which is life energy), somatic horsemanship participants learn to raise and lower their chi in order to modulate the rise and fall of stress and of emotions such as fear and anger.

QIGONG WITH HORSES

Many people complain they are unable to achieve a state of relaxation using meditation techniques that require sitting still and clearing the mind. The appeal of a moving meditation such as qigong lies in the fact that practitioners learn to direct energy rather than contain or suppress it, in a similar way that equestrians do when schooling horses. Focusing on flowing, rhythmic body movements during qigong exercises effectively clears the mind of worry while giving it something else to do.

Qigong is an ancient Chinese sitting or standing exercise with slow, graceful, no-impact, no-contortion movements, suitable for people of all ages and physical abilities. Stanford University School of Medicine's Somatic Horsemanship uses one of the best known and simplest forms of medical qigong, the ba duan jin (poetically translated as, "eight silken movements"). Studies of the ba duan jin show its ability to reduce stress.² Stanford Somatic Horsemanship uses shaolin ba duan jin in which four of the eight classical forms are taught initially on the ground and, for the last class, on the horse.³

Ba duan jin exercises prepare participants for the blending of the lower chi centers, called the dan tien, between humans and horses. The dan tien in humans is about three fingers width below the navel and in the horse is located around the area of the participant's left hand (see page 48). This mindful contact between the two bodies allows the human heart, with its rate of 60-100 beats per minute, to entrain (synchronize or align) with the horse's heart, with its rate of 40 beats per minute. When Allison shared a dan tien chi hug with the mare Sierra, the racing feeling in her chest subsided, and Allison was able to ground herself from her lower abdomen to her feet. At the moment Allison was able to breathe into her dan tien, Sierra exhaled a huge sigh of release.

STANFORD SOMATIC HORSEMANSHIP

Stanford Somatic Horsemanship is an employee wellness class, also open to non-employees, offered

SOMATIC HORSEMANSHIP FOUR-PHASE PROGRAM

For Phases I-IV, participants work in teams of two to four. Each activity is briefly processed EFL-style.

PHASE I

Introduction to the physiology of stress in horses and humans

- Locate the area of the dan tien on humans—dan tien exercises for stress and emotional regulation
- Body (somatic) awareness includes movements of the ba duan jin first form and an equine safety demo
- Meet and greet the horses—observing, petting, smelling, locating the dan tien on the horses, dan tien press and dan tien hug with horses (see photo on page 48).

PHASE II

Ba duan jin second form

- Human-human dan tien tandem walk
- Horse-human dan tien tandem walk

PHASE III

Ba duan jin third form involves grooming as meditation

PHASE IV

Ba duan jin fourth form

- Therapeutic ba duan jin ride (riding optional) to music, with leaders and sidewalkers

Private Session –

(Optionally mounted)

- * Personal body attention
- * Ba duan jin practice
- * 1:1 horse time
- * Dan tien press, dan tien hug

RESOURCES

- » Benedik L., Wirth V. *Yoga for Equestrians—A New Path for Achieving Union with the Horse*. North Pomfret, VT: Trafalgar Square Books; October 1, 2000.
- » Shaw J. *Ride From Within—Use Tai Chi Principles to Awaken Your Natural Balance and Rhythm*. North Pomfret, VT: Trafalgar Square Books; August 1, 2005.

through the Stanford Health Improvement Program to able-bodied or minimally disabled adults who have identified significant stressors that interfere with job performance. The program, which consists of four one-and-a-half-hour group sessions and one private individual session, is based in part on the therapeutic horsemanship program for military veterans at the National Center for Equine Facilitated Therapy (NCEFT) in Woodside, CA.

Because somatic horsemanship gives a great variety of participants the opportunity to benefit from contact with horses and nature without riding being a requirement, the practice could expand a center's programming. By applying existing resources and skills and adding simple qigong exercises, or some yoga or mindfulness techniques, PATH Intl. Certified Professionals could use techniques from somatic horsemanship to help individuals with emotional challenges reduce stress and improve their well-being.

Beverly Kane, MD, is an integrative medicine physician and program director for medicine and horsemanship, somatic horsemanship, and medical tai chi at Stanford University School of Medicine. Her private practice is Horsensei Equine-Assisted Learning and Therapy (HEALTH), www.horsensei.com. She is an EAGALA Level III provider and CHA Level I Instructor. In 2011, she had the good fortune to break her foot and meet Corie Thompson as her therapeutic riding instructor.

Cornelia Thompson, CTRI, the co-facilitator of Stanford Somatic Horsemanship, is a PATH Intl. Certified Registered Instructor, who worked at the National Center for Equine Facilitated Therapy in Woodside, CA, where she developed its program for military veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injury. She is currently a riding instructor for Stanford Red Barn Equestrian Center in Palo Alto, CA, and a therapeutic riding instructor for Jasper Ridge Farm.

For more information on somatic horsemanship, or a copy of the Stanford syllabus, contact bkanel@stanford.edu. To join the Somatic Equine Assisted Learning (SEAL) Group, a private professional group of therapeutic riding and equine-assisted learning and psychotherapy professionals and somatic arts students and practitioners on LinkedIn, go to <http://www.linkedin.com/groups?gid=4278711>.

- ▶ **TOP RIGHT:** Participant beginning to perform a dan tien press in a qigong-based somatic horsemanship program whose chief objective is stress reduction.
- ▶ **BOTTOM RIGHT:** Students from Stanford University work with Quizz in a somatic horsemanship session based on qigong.

NOTES

1. Benson H, Klipper MZ. *The Relaxation Response*. New York, NY: Harper Torch; 2000, expanded edition.
2. Griffith JM, Hasley JR, Liu H, Severn DG, Conner LH, Adler LE. Qigong stress reduction in hospital staff. *J Altern Complement Med*. 2008; 14 (8):939–945. Study intervention used the Basic 8 ba duan jin variant.
3. Shaolin monk Shi Heng Yuan performing ba duan jin on horseback at author's ranch. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zDATFToDq94>

