A JOURNEY TO
SOFTNESS

In Search of Feel and Connection with the Horse

MARK RASHID

One Simple Truth
"It's not about what we do that starts us on the path to softness," says renowned horseman Mark Rashid, "but rather, it's what we don't do."

Softness is having the sensitivity we need in order to understand when and if the horse tries to "give." It is about developing the kind of awareness it takes to know when we are working against our horses, rather than with them. And it is intrinsically linked to the feel and connection we seek on the ground and in the saddle. In these forthright stories—whether remarkable events, quiet moments, or humbling stumbling blocks—readers get a glimpse of a life that has produced a man known for his ability to solve difficult problems with communication rather than force, as well as methods and techniques gleaned from decades of work with horses, horse people, and martial artists.

Mark Rashid met an "old man" when he was 10 who taught him to work with horses, not against them, and to listen to what horses are trying to say. Rashid eventually decided to study the martial art of aikido as a way to improve his horsemanship, and now teaches the "way of harmony" in his local dojo. It is his combination of martial arts with horsemanship that has enabled him to communicate new ways of connecting with horses, methods spread throughout the world via his many bestselling books and DVDs (markrashid.com).

"There is strength in muscle but power in softness."
—Mark Rashid

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Over the years, I have come to understand that one of the keys to developing true softness in oneself is by practicing it full time. It is not a skill that can be mastered with part-time application. For instance, I believe it is very difficult for people to become skillful at being soft if they only practice it while working with their horses. Sure, that would be a good start, and ideally, if one became soft with a horse, eventually that softness would begin to permeate other aspects of life. But the truth is, unless softness is a way of life, it is extremely difficult to master.

If a person were only trying to be soft with a horse but not when driving a car; setting down a glass; shoveling manure; sitting in a chair; talking with co-workers, strangers, friends, or family members; or during any number of other daily activities, it seems to me that the art is not being practiced in an overall mindful way. For those folks, softness is something they do but not who they are. For me, there is a big difference between the two.

For a very long time, I thought I understood what true softness was. In fact, I felt I was fairly accomplished at being able to develop softness when working with horses, and even in other aspects of my life. Back then, I, like so many others who work with horses, made the assumption that somehow softness came from the hands, and if I could just get my hands soft enough, my horses would become soft as well.

Don’t get me wrong—that way of thinking served me well for a very long time. Overall, the horses I worked with would become soft in the bridle and soft in the body. But still, I always felt like something was missing, or...
maybe a better way to say it is that I felt I was missing something.

Still, the truth is, I can’t really point to any one situation, horse, or event that stopped me in my tracks and started me on the path of looking deeper into the subject. Rather, things just sort of shifted for me over time. Instead of looking to horse professionals, horse books, and magazine articles to help me improve my skills, I found I was slowly being drawn to other, seemingly unrelated subjects, such as martial arts, Eastern history and philosophy, and even certain occupational and physical therapies, as well as particular pieces of music and certain musicians.

Around that time, I began to closely observe some of the masters in the martial arts world, particularly those in aikido, an art I had been studying and training in for several years. I started seeing a number of similarities in those old masters’ movement and techniques. Primarily, I began to notice the seemingly effortless way the masters were able to not only move their own bodies, but also the bodies of their training partners. While this effortlessness of movement was impressive, the power that was being generated by these individuals during their movements was even more impressive. It was a power of mind and body I found to be very similar to that exhibited by the mare protecting her baby all those years before.

I should probably mention here that I originally began training in aikido as a way to help improve my horsemanship. I was fascinated by the core concepts of the art, primarily the ideas of entering into a conflict instead of fleeing from it, blending with the energy no matter how negative, and directing the situation to the most peaceful solution possible. I was also interested in the overall idea that aikido only works well when the practitioner is in control of him- or herself, as well as that the overall goal of the aikidoka (one who practices the art) is to make sure the attacker isn’t harmed during an altercation. In other words, those who practice aikido must take care of their attacker, even though the attacker’s intent may be to harm them.

When I first began training, I, like most new students, was flooded with the art’s various techniques. I was taught how to move fluidly and how to strike and punch properly. I was also taught ukemi, the art of defending, or taking care of oneself. However, something I had read while doing my initial research prior to beginning formal training seemed to be missing.
Specifically, there wasn’t much talk about or practice of the internal (and ultimately, external) quiet that is necessary to perform the art properly.

Most of my training in those early days focused on how to perform the techniques through strength and the control of my partner’s joints. Of course, these too are important aspects. But as my training progressed, I assumed that the focus would eventually shift to the finer and more refined aspects of the art, the internal and external softness I had read so much about.

Unfortunately, however, those aspects were seldom talked about or practiced in our dojo; the style of aikido in which I had chosen to train was taught by instructors who focused on proper technique through total control of an opponent’s body. They taught the way they themselves had been trained.

The techniques of aikido are extremely effective, regardless of how much finesse is used. Because of this effectiveness, the more muscle an aikidoka puts behind the technique, the less he or she can feel how the partner’s body is responding to it and the higher the risk of injury to the partner. Over time, I noticed that our dojo was losing students because of the overall lack of sensitivity displayed during the performance of techniques, particularly by the higher-ranking students. In fact, of the dozen or so students who began their training around the same time I did, I am the only one who is still a practicing member of our dojo.

Many students quit after being injured while training with one of the higher-ranking students whose technique was absolutely flawless but whose feel was lacking. Many suffered broken fingers, hyper-extended elbows, concussions, sprained wrists, and injured knees. I ended up with a separated collarbone and a torn rotator cuff (among many other injuries), which I ultimately needed surgery to repair.

As time went on, the number of students dwindled to just a handful, then it went down to three, and finally, there were just two: me and one other. At that point, aikido classes were canceled; in order to continue training, the two of us were absorbed into the karate classes.

During the months the class list was dwindling, I was on the road doing horsemanship clinics, which gave me a chance to search out other dojos.
around the country. As luck would have it, I found myself training and studying with some of the top individuals in the art, people I had only heard and read about until then. As I launched into my training with these folks, I almost immediately began to experience the type of powerful softness that had been eluding me, not only in my aikido training, but in my horsemanship as well.

The first time I trained with someone who had a deep understanding of this powerful softness was in a small dojo on the West Coast. Sensei (the instructor) called on me, the visiting student, to help demonstrate a technique in front of the class. I was to throw an overhead strike downward toward the instructor’s head, a motion similar to coming down with a knife or bottle. He would then perform the technique with me so the other students would know what he wanted them to practice.

The particular technique he was demonstrating was one in which I was fairly well versed. A version of a movement known as kokyunage, it was one I had grown to despise in my home dojo; it always ended up with me having a sore arm and shoulder as a result of the force exerted on both during the throw by the people with whom I was training.

As I lined up to administer the strike, I could feel the apprehension building. This is going to hurt, I thought to myself. I had heard stories of visiting students going into a new dojo and promptly being turned into punching bags by the sensei and other high-ranking students—a way to show off the “skill” of the dojo.

Sensei could see the apprehension in me. Heck, a blind man could have seen the apprehension in me. He exhaled, and then smiled. “Don’t worry,” he said so quietly that only I could hear. Then he nodded, which was a signal for me to throw the strike, which I did.

As I swung my hand downward toward his head, I braced myself for what I was sure was going to be the very painful lock, and then an equally painful throw. The strike came down with my full force behind it. As expected, Sensei moved slightly to his left, causing the strike to miss his head. Here it comes, I remember thinking. But instead of the painful lock I anticipated, Sensei gently caught my arm in the crook of his elbow and surprisingly, my arm just seemed to effortlessly move toward his body. My body followed my
arm as he turned me slightly, and then for just a second, I felt weightlessly suspended in time and space. Then, I was suddenly but softly launched backward toward the mat. I went into the most perfect backward roll I believe I had ever done, which allowed me to pop right back up into a standing position, facing Sensei.

I had no idea how I had gotten there, or what Sensei had done that resulted in my acrobatics. All I knew was that it must have looked fantastic. As I stood there in my defensive stance facing Sensei, I wondered why the rest of the class wasn’t clapping!

Sensei turned toward the class and began explaining what he had done. I immediately kneeled down (a sign of respect for the teacher), and as I looked at the faces of the students in the class, I slowly realized that the reason they weren’t impressed with what had just happened was because it was nothing out of the ordinary for them. It was how they were being taught, with powerful softness. And just like that—as though someone flipped the switch on an enormous floodlight that only I could see—the thing that had been missing in my aikido, my horsemanship, and my life suddenly became very clear to me.

Over the next several years, I returned to that dojo whenever I was in the area, and found others around the country where the art was taught in a similar manner. Slowly but surely, I began to pick up on not only the subtleties of what was being taught, but also how the powerful softness I sought was actually being achieved.

I quickly came to realize that while there are a number of components and variables involved in developing the type of softness we are talking about here, two in particular made its achievement possible. The first is the overall development of what I would ultimately come to refer to as internal softness.

Internal softness is exactly what the words indicate: becoming soft from the inside, and then allowing that softness to extend through the rest of the body, both inside and out. This was the most difficult piece of the puzzle for me to comprehend, primarily because my awareness and understanding of it came much later in my training. But it was also because the idea was quite foreign to me; most of my instructors used different terms
to describe basically the same concept. As a result, I found that for a while, I was trying to understand the words they were using instead of grasping the concept itself.

Before going further, I need to step back for just a second here and reiterate that in most forms of horsemanship, a tremendous amount of focus is put on riders developing softness in their hands. In fact, at one time or another, most of us have probably heard of getting a horse to follow a “feel.” This particular idea or concept usually refers to a rider or handler gently directing the horse by means of a rope or rein that goes from the person’s hand to the horse’s head or mouth.

While this thought is certainly a very good one, and while it is also one that I have talked about and even taught over the years, the unfortunate part is that it sometimes stops short of taking into account the whole picture in regard to total softness. You see, by focusing on just softening the hands, which is what a lot of folks do, we are only taking into account one small part of the body: the hands. Not only that, but our hands are at the very end of our arms, as far away from the body as they can possibly get. So, while trying to soften the hands is certainly a good beginning to the process, I’m not sure how much total softness is actually being transferred to the horse if the rest of the body happens to be stiff or tense.

That being said, my training with some of the aikido masters I’ve mentioned helped me come to the realization that total softness doesn’t come from the outside of the body. It comes from the inside. Also, there are two separate but equally important aspects to developing this internal softness. The first is the part that actually involves physically softening the inside of the body, which can be achieved through practicing certain relatively easy physical exercises. The second can be much more difficult for most folks to achieve because it involves the emotional facet of softness, a quiet and positive mind, which in turn has a tendency to enhance our overall physical softness.

The reason the emotional facet can be so difficult to achieve is that many people go through their everyday lives with fairly high levels of stress and concern for just about everything they do or are involved with. These folks generally put an equal amount of importance on all things in their