

# Yoga For Riders, by Cathy Woods

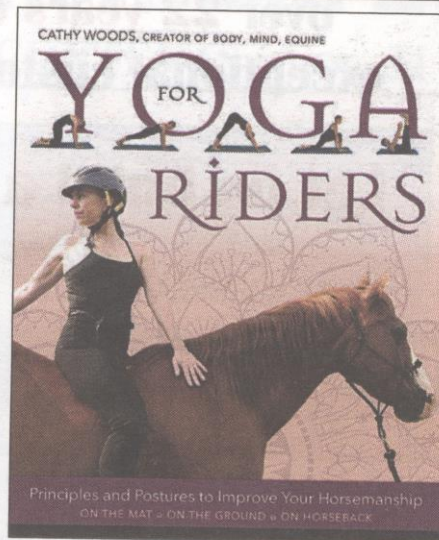
Review by Nancy Brannon

The New Year is usually the time when people consider starting a fitness program and general resolutions to improve one's life. But now is the best time to weave exercise and measures for better living into our lives, especially as we enter the holiday seasons of eating more than usual.

Cathy Woods' *Yoga For Riders* is an inspiring way to embrace the practice of yoga. As Woods explains, yoga is not only about the poses, it encompasses every part of you. "Yogic tradition was founded thousands of years ago as a path to self-realization, enlightenment, and conscious living. Clearly there are physical benefits to yoga stretches, such as improved strength, balance, and flexibility. True yoga can enrich your life in many ways: you become more aware, senses are heightened, the mind is sharper, and yoga brings an overall integration of the body, mind, and spirit."

She draws the connections between yoga practice and horse whisperers: "What adept natural horsemen do is yogic in essence. They read body language, energy, pauses, expressions, actions, reactions, and act on them. They operate from a place of inner knowing and intuition."

Yoga helps us break through the illusion of separateness, experiencing union with all aspects of ourselves, union with a higher power, and union with all of creation. Yoga teaches breathing patterns; energy awareness of the life-force energy, called "prana," which flows through all of creation. Observing the workings of the mind and seeing where thoughts come



from can help us understand the truth of our existence and our purpose. From *right thought* spontaneously comes *right action*.

From her general introduction into what yoga is and what it can do for us, she explores the attributes that make a good rider and how yoga can help us be more aware riders, leading to better judgment and improving focus.

Awareness of the life force energy that flows through all life can help us improve communication with horses, since they detect energy all the time – that's how they survive and communicate. "You can't lie to a horse or a highly attuned person!" Woods emphasizes. "When you are energy aware, you hone into right timing, learn to detect the ambiance of a situation and adapt accordingly." In our connections with horses and others, she says, "If we practiced compassion and understanding more (which true yoga and meditation can help us do), we'd find it easier to bond."

From here she moves into a section on practical instruction for the yoga postures on the mat. The chapter following is adapting yoga postures to horseback. You may want to skim through these two chapters first to get an idea of the poses and see which ones will best fit you. Then I rec-



commend coming back and thoroughly reading how to do them as you practice doing them. The poses are well illustrated so you can see how to do them, while she also shows variations according to body type and ability.

The remaining chapters cover the yoga of breath, meditation, and the power of intentions. All these are incorporated into the practice of the yoga poses. The breathing techniques become part of a healthy living system. Some techniques induce calmness and relaxation; others energize and have balancing effects. "Deep, correct breathing helps energize and oxygenate the entire system," she explains.

"Meditation may be the most productive downtime you ever spend," she recommends. "Meditation can help put things into proper perspective as you gain peace and clarity, enriching your life on many levels."

In the final chapters she has advice for creating your own personal practice and incorporating yoga to improve your daily life as well as your horsemanship and riding. "Once you recognize that yoga is a metaphor for living, your world and consciousness can expand exponentially. As personal self-awareness rises, you automatically begin to deepen your connection with yourself and the world around you." The result is a book that helps us become more aware and conscious riders, while gently correcting our imbalances, resulting in a richer, more rewarding, more joyful horsemanship experience.

Rebecca Didier, Managing Editor of Trafalgar Square Books, shared a sample exercise from Woods' book in an October 2, 2020 *Horse Network* article: "Release Shoulder and Arm Tightness with this Yoga Posture for Riders." Didier writes that yoga can help "improve balance and focus, better reaction time, increased range of motion, increased strength and flexibility, leading to fewer injuries and a boosted immune system." This particular yoga



posture can be done on or off your horse to keep shoulders and shoulder blades relaxed and tension-free, and can relieve upper back tightness.

Here's how the eagle arms exercise works. Begin by extending your arms out in front of you. Then place one arm on top of the other, crossing at the elbows and intertwining by bending at the elbows. You may or may not be able to touch hands, but stay crossed at the elbows. Remain stationary in the posture for several deep breaths. The arm on top is getting the deeper shoulder stretch. Do both sides, taking turns which arm is on top. When you release and unwind your arms, notice how the shoulder and shoulder blade you just stretched (the arm that was on top) feels different from the other.

You can incorporate a little movement to deepen the experience if you'd like: Exhale as you lift your intertwined arms up, keeping them crossed at the elbows (this will dictate how high to raise them), and inhale as you lower them. Do this up-and-down movement with the breath several times.

*About the Author:* Cathy Woods has taught yoga since 1991. She is also a rider who loves exploring the natural world from horseback, and is based in the Great Smoky Mountains of North Carolina.