

“Your Zebu and You: Communicating and Halter Breaking”

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So, you've just brought home a cow. Maybe it's a 70 pound Miniature Zebu weanling; maybe a 400 pound adult; maybe it's a full-sized cow weighing 10 times your weight. Even the tamest animal is nervous in new surroundings; cattle don't like change. It's important to remember that cattle are prey animals: their instinct is to get away as quickly as possible, no matter who or what's in the way. It's the fight-or-flight instinct—only two options. Avoiding this panic behavior is by far the most effective path to taming your cow. What are your goals? If you're reading this article, you want to get along with your cow, and for him to get along with you. By activating your cow's other instincts, you can accomplish this without danger to either of you.

Over the years of my experience with Miniature Zebu, I developed a number of techniques that I half-jokingly call “Zebu Whispering.” Realizing that the methods of Monty Roberts, the famed “Horse Whisperer,” are only effective on equines, I turned to Dr. Temple Grandin, the woman who revolutionized cattle handling techniques. But her experiences are with feedlot cattle. I researched the late Bud Williams, a renowned expert at driving range cattle. But he worked large herd of cattle on horseback, with a crew of riders. Steve Cote, a practitioner of Bud Williams' methods, has a great book available free on Temple Grandin's website. But none of my idols had done what I wanted to do—calm one cow and make him want to do what I wanted. Constantly studying cattle behavior and learning what cattle want has given me insight: now I call my cattle “dogs with horns!” You may laugh at some of the things I do—that's OK—but try integrating some into your routine; you may be surprised.

We'll start with your cow leaping out of the trailer into a pen you suddenly realize is awfully wobbly. He dashes to the far corner and confronts you with wide eyes, switching ears and flipping tail. Obviously he's scared: there's no way to get away from you, the predator.

Immediately reduce his stress. Give him hay and water and stay away for a day. Keep him separate from all other species including humans: visitors' squeals and stares will confirm his fears. But if you have another cow, you could place them in adjoining pens. Place him in a small enclosure; the wilder he is, the larger his pen should be. Cattle have personal space the same as humans—it's called the pressure zone—you'll be working with that soon. Keep him in the pen until he settles in—a week or two. His fear-induced behavior will change from panic to alertness—standing still and watching you—at that point begin to reduce the pen's size. When his pressure zone is entered, he will react; back off for a day. Bring him feed and water in a bucket; that way he connects you with his meals. Dumping it into a trough is too disconnected from you. Place hay in smaller and smaller flakes; this will make him look forward to your appearance.

Your cow needs to realize that all good things come from you. Don't push him about performing for his supper—just come to the outside of the pen and feed him. Talk to him constantly in a low voice—I cannot emphasize this more. Cowboys on the big cattle drives sang nonsense songs to the cattle; it calmed the cows by giving them something to distract them from their instinctive fear. Keep your voice low and calm; it's the opposite of what dogs like. Don't allow any stress to creep into your voice; he'll notice and react.

Stay with him a little longer every day. Bring a chair and read aloud to him, even if you have to sit around the corner so he can't see you. I promise you he'll be listening!

When he's comfortable enough to chew his cud around you, you're ready for the next step: entering the pen. Do not face him straight on; stand sideways with your head down. Don't stare; that's a confrontational behavior. If he gets agitated, turn your back. This is what cattle do when they meet. Give him lots of space and time. If you panic him, he will remember and it'll be harder next time. When he eats in your presence, you two have reached another step. Bring your chair into the stall even though it'll surprise him that you're suddenly a different size. With calves, I keep them in stalls with buddies to bolster their confidence. I'll sit on the ground and keep up my monologue. They'd get all over me within 15 minutes, sniffing, licking, and chewing on my clothes. After a while, they'd lie down—the ultimate sign of trust. The longer you stay on this step, the easier it'll be when you halter him.

When I first started working with my zebu, I couldn't quite figure out how to catch them. I'd make a narrow "V" out of a corner, but they'd thrash around in blind panic, bawling in the most gruesome way before I even slipped the rope on. There had to be something better. Roping? That'd take me 10 years to learn! Then I hit upon the perfect technique: in a small stall, make a loop in a soft nylon rope (I use 1" yacht rope) and get the cow to put his head in—it's easier than it sounds, really! Focus on his head; if he gets into that "left-right-left-right" shuffle, wait. When you get the rope on, immediately run it around a post to give you leverage. Tie him up short to keep him from hurting himself; he'll be upset, but at some point will freeze and you can halter him. Watch out for explosions; they will happen!

I used to think giving treats to cows made them tame. Now I know it doesn't: it makes them look for the treat. If you don't have one, they don't want anything to do with you. Instead, use back scratches. Start this way: with the cow tied and haltered, scratch her muzzle. Watch her ears and tail: if either starts flicking and switching, stop. Cautiously begin again, and advance up her face. As long as she stays still, keep going. Cows especially like to be scratched behind the poll, around the ears, and right on the sides of the tailhead.

Keep the halter on her for a few days. Then attach a long lead rope to it. I knot the end of the rope so I can step on it and she can't pull it away. Make sure there's nothing to catch the rope on. She'll constantly step on the rope and be annoyed, but she'll figure out how the lead works: step on it, pressure; step off, no pressure.

To teach your cow to lead, you'll use point of balance principles. Don't face the cow and pull; she'll just pull back. Get at her left shoulder—so you both face forward. Hold her close but not tight: about 12" from her halter. Step back ½ step, right past her middle. If she doesn't go, touch her tailhead lightly (calves often need this). In a perfect world, she'll walk calmly. Right behind her shoulder is her point of balance; if you move in front of that point, your cow will move backwards. Move behind that point and your cow will go forwards like magic. There's just one hitch in that perfect world, though: usually, in trying to get away from you, she'll spin around to face you, dig in her hooves, and pull. It's hard to keep close to her as she'll keep spinning. I learned to get them by a wall where they can't spin; the wall makes her feel secure. When she does walk straight forward, release the tension on the lead. If she pulls, tighten your hold. You'll still probably need either another cow for her to follow or someone to push her when she stalls, for a short while.

I promise all it takes to have that perfect world is for her to be calm and comfortable so she can focus on you. Cows are herd animals; they follow the boss cow. You are her support system when she's away from the other cows. She's looking to you; you're her boss; she's waiting for instructions. Communicate with her by means that she understands.