

First Lesson

Training in the Ring

This will be the first in a series of articles describing how we are training Vraja and Gita. Keep in mind that we began training Vraja and Gita at two and a half months.

The preliminary step to the first lesson in the ring is to develop a friendship with your ox. This can be accomplished in several ways. One is that the person who is training the ox should preferably be the person who is feeding the ox. In this way a favorable exchange of friendship is established. Another is that the ox should be given time to get accustomed to any new experience such as wearing a halter. He should be accustomed to wearing a halter before beginning the next step that is hooking him to a lead rope and taking him out for walks.



Balabhadra developing a relationship with Vraja and Gita through affection

Spending time walking with your ox in a field, lawn, or whatever quiet area you have available will help to develop a relationship with him. No commands, such as “Get Up” and “Whoa,” should be given. You will see he will follow you. You will also see, especially if you are training two for a team, that they will want to run and kick their heels up and play just like kids. So be prepared to do some jogging and occasional running.

When we first got Vraja and Gita, I would walk with one of them and one of the children would walk with the other. We would stay out for an hour to an hour and a half letting them walk, run, and graze. Occasionally, we would pet them and scratch them behind their ears and under their necks. A relationship of love and trust began to develop by being together in a positive and pleasant way. We did this for several weeks.

The training ring should be placed in an isolated location so that there are no distractions during the training session. The ring should be constructed so the animal can not jump out. I prefer training animals starting about 2 1/2 to 3 months old. The training ring in this picture is constructed of materials reflecting this age group. If you are training animals between 1 and 2 years of age, your construction should be of boards and should be 6' to 7' in height so they can't jump out. The ring in this picture is about 16' in diameter. I used "cattle panels" which are 4' high and 16' long and consist of heavy gage mesh. Also, we built a heavy-duty gate that they could not break through. When we started training Vraja and Gita, we had been walking with them on the private roadways and meadows. Each day we would also walk with them into the ring, let them sniff around, and then walk out without closing the gate behind us. So when the day came to start training in the ring, we walked in and this time closed the gate behind us. Because they had been in the ring previously and had no reason to be afraid, we were able to start the lesson without the trauma of them thinking, "Why am I enclosed in this ring with the gate shut?" On the day of the first lesson in the ring, at the age of three and a half months, Vraja and Gita walked into the ring without any hesitation or fearful apprehensions.



The ring

Training in the ring should be done with one ox at a time. Since Vraja and Gita are twins they are very accustomed to always being together. To prevent anxiety I would train one calf within sight of the other. After one entered the ring the gate was closed. Our little friend, still on his lead rope, was allowed to venture throughout the ring to sniff here and there and ascertain his new surroundings. After he did this, he and I walked around the circumference of the ring side by side. In this way, I was showing him what I wanted done.

After several laps around the ring, I began training with voice commands. First, I started from a stationary position, with the ox next to the ring fencing and myself a few feet towards the center of the ring. With a slight reinforcement from the lash on his behind, a slight tug on the lead rope indicating to go forward, I gave the command "Get Up."

Your ox should not stop walking around the inside of the ring until you give him the command "Whoa." The training period should be short, no more than a half an hour session in the morning and the evening. Every time your ox

performs correctly he should be given encouraging words such as “Good Gita” as well as affectionate strokes on the head, neck, and so on. Every command must be accompanied by their names so they will know that you are speaking to them. Periodically treats are nice to reinforce a job well done. Vraja and Gita like peanut butter cookies.



Balabhadra training Vraja in the ring

After the completion of each session in the ring you can walk your ox back to his pasturing area or living quarters. When leaving a ring the gate is opened slowly. You should be holding the lead rope and giving the command “Whoa” as the gate opens. Your ox should not bolt out of the gate but should wait for the command “Get Up.” Now as you leave the ring and proceed back to your ox’s destination use the commands “Get Up” and “Whoa.”

From now on your ox must begin to follow the voice commands. While walking give him a tap on the behind if he doesn’t respond right away. The first lesson should be continued until your ox responds to the commands with little prodding. It took 1 week of daily morning and evening half hour sessions for Vraja and Gita to learn the first lesson. Obedience based on a loving relationship is the foundation of successful training.

Footnote: Since 1991 we have trained many teams without a ring. It is much easier with a ring, especially if you are new to training.

Second Lesson

The Commands “Gee” and “Haw”

At the completion of the first lesson, Vraja and Gita learned the commands “Whoa,” to stop, and “Get Up,” to go forward, or come. Next they learned the command “Gee,” to turn right, and “Haw,” to turn left. In order to be taught these commands, Vraja and Gita had to know how to work together. During the first lesson, they were taught individually in the ring, not together.

Since I had not yet completed the yoke, I connected their halters together with a light chain. Using a lead rope and a lash, I proceeded to walk up and down the road with them reviewing the first lesson’s commands. I was surprised at their prowess. Vraja took the lead and seemed to enjoy the accomplishment of a successful performance. Gita, who was less cooperative than Vraja in the ring, followed Vraja’s example.

Twice daily, for 1 week, I gave them ½ hour training sessions before beginning the commands “Gee” and “Haw.” The command “Gee” is considered the most difficult because the team must move away from the teamster who is always on the left. We therefore started with the command “Haw,” to turn left. The “Haw” turn is generally taught more easily since the teamster stands on the left side of the team allowing the left turn to be towards the teamster.



Picture 1: Vraja and Gita beginning the "Haw" turn

Picture 1 shows Vraja and Gita $\frac{3}{4}$ through the “Haw” command and picture 2 shows Vraja and Gita completing the command in beautiful symmetry. Picture 3 shows Vraja and Gita several weeks later in Los Angeles, USA, wearing their yoke. In this picture they are half way through the successful completion of the “Haw” command. Notice their beautiful symmetry and the amazed audience.

The “Haw” command was taught by tapping Gita, who was always the “off” ox (the ox furthest from the teamster) on the outside right shoulder and tapping

Vraja, who was always the “neigh” ox (the ox closest to the teamster) on the knees while firmly giving the command. I continued to do this for about a week with half-hour lessons twice a day. Lots of hugs, compliments, and peanut butter cookies were given as rewards. At the beginning of the second week, I held back from giving taps as much as possible. The goal was to accomplish this turn down quite well without much tapping. Occasionally I would give Gita a tap on the behind.



Picture 2: Vraja and Gita completing the "Haw" turn

I then began to teach the “Gee” command. First, I walked in front and to the right of Vraja and Gita and then had them follow me through the turn as I gave the command. This should be done only early on in the training of this command. The goal is that the teamster should be able to give the command to turn right, from the left side of the oxen, by voice command. The reason for this is that often the teamster cannot walk ahead of his team through the turn and if not trained to turn by voice, they expect to follow the teamster through all the turns.

I moved onto the next stage of teaching this command as soon as I thought Vraja and Gita got the general idea. The next stage in teaching this command was to remain on the left side of them, giving the command and taping Vraja, the “neigh ox” on his outside left shoulder. I concentrated on teaching this command and occasionally reviewing the “Haw” command for about 1 week, again for ½ hour lessons daily. In the middle of the second week, I dropped the tapping as much as I could while still allowing a successful turn to be completed.

In the weeks that followed, I practiced all the commands by interchanging them. The more practice they had, the less they needed to be reminded by tapping. As much as I could I used affection, compliments, and peanut butter cookies as motivators instead of tapping them with the lash. The later teams I taught received only affection and compliments with equal success.

It took about 2-3 weeks to teach them these commands. The speed with which the oxen will learn the commands will vary according to their

capabilities, experience of the trainer, and the time spent daily. Vraja and Gita took about 3 weeks from the beginning of the first lesson in the ring to the completion of learning “Haw” and “Gee.” But don’t forget there is the preliminary necessity of getting to know your ox to establish a relationship, and then practice of the commands to assure capability before learning the third lesson of pulling. Also, I recommend teaching oxen at this young age because they are very easy to control and influence. However, as in young children, their attention span is limited. Therefore, I would not recommend lessons of more than 45 minutes each. The lessons should be timed to the attention capabilities of your oxen.

I spent the next month practicing with them. During this month we traveled across the country which resulted in sporadic practicing. However, they seemed to grasp the commands very well. I completed the yoke in the middle of the month’s travels. I was happy it took only a few lessons for them to get use to it. But did you know they grew out of this yoke a few weeks after our return from traveling? Before this happened we started training them to pull, and this will be the subject of the next training article.

Third lesson

The command "Back"



The team Agni and Shaym are gentle, obedient, and good workers. They are the team of choice for training new teamsters since they are also small in stature and therefore easier to handle. Here Balabhadra is demonstrating one way to give the command "Back"

There will be times when you hook up to your load, that your initial position of oxen to load will require that you back up to the load. This is not an easy task for your ox, as backing up is not a normal occurrence for them, especially yoked together. They will be concerned as to what is behind them and they will hesitate to back up.



The second way to give the command "Back" is to massage and push on their chests simultaneously

There are several ways you can encourage them to back up. One is by putting one of your hands on each of their heads gently pushing on their

heads and giving the command "Back." Never forget to use their names first before the command so they know you are talking to them.

If this doesn't work easily for you, kneel in front of them, and put a hand on their chest (brisket) and massage their chest simultaneously pushing back. Once again, call their name and use the command "Back."



The third way to give the command "Back" is by tapping their knees

The third method that we use is by repeatedly TAPPING them on the knees with the lash. Notice the emphasis on tapping. Do not use the lash in a way that will hurt them. Just tap them on the knee. Once again, call their name first and then say "Back."

If you have time to practice before trying this in a working situation, that is best. We always train them to back up after they have understood the four initial commands of "Get Up," "Whoa," "Gee," and "Haw."

If you have an alley way that they can fit into but can't turn around in, you can practice in the alley way. The reason is because a lot of times when backing up, their back ends will have the tendency to move away from each other. So their heads will stay close together and their back ends will be spreading apart. If you see this happening, stop, and go to their rear ends and push on their rear end one at a time in the direction you want them to close up which is towards each other. Then call the ox by name whose rear end you are pushing and give the command "Over."

He will move his back feet in such a way that he is stepping towards his partner and closing the gap. Then go to his partner and do the same thing. They should back up straight while not spreading apart.

So if you are practicing in an alley, this will force them to back straight and they will get use to backing up straight because of the narrow confines of the alley.

You must be patient as any show of anger, yelling, or screaming will only cause them to be nervous and will delay the desired results of backing up nicely.

Fourth lesson

Pulling

In the very beginning there is the noise factor which they will find disturbing. Vraja and Gita kept turning their heads inward at every step to see what the noise was and when they figured something was behind them they settled down. To diminish their apprehension, I first approached the object to be pulled by walking them up to it to sniff at it. I then put the chain on it, and hooked them up. They could then understand it was the log which was making the noise as it traveled behind them.



The chain is placed through the ring and hooked to the load

From the very beginning they should learn to start as a team by standing while the load is hooked to the yoke irons. Then, upon the command "Get up," start together to get the most efficiency from their combined efforts. Not that one is starting ahead of the other. In the beginning your team will be pulling light loads. If they do not start together it will not be so noticeable. However; the uneven starting will be readily noticeable when they are grown and expected to pull heavy loads. As a result, the pulling efficiency of your team, especially on the initial start, will be greatly diminished.

Start with something light so they know they are moving something. As they learn more and more that they are pulling something, or are expected to pull, you can increase the size of their load. Vraja and Gita started with a light log, then heavier logs, a sled full of rocks, a cultivator, a spring tooth harrow, and now a sickle bar mower to bush-hog (cut the grasses) our pasture. Be sensitive to their conditioning and abilities and understand that this is something new to them and they will need time to become adept at it. Just like a weight lifter gradually works up to the number of pounds he is lifting gradually according to his conditioning and ability. The same should be true for your team. They should never be hooked to a load they cannot pull.

At first you should be working in open areas pulling for a distance, resting, and pulling again for a certain distance or allotted time period. After every 2 or 3 pulls, practice unhooking them from the load, making a "Gee" or "Haw" turn, (whichever they need more practice on) approaching your load and hooking up again. In this way they will become familiar with what is expected of them in hooking up to a load.



Vraja and Gita at 8 months old, are allowed to inspect the load they will pull

After several days of working in open spaces, depending on the ability of your team (how fast they have learned the pulling) take them into a lightly wooded area which is in essence like an obstacle course. Now you can practice pulling a load in a more demanding situation. Survey your area and design a course you can run them through which will give them experience pulling a load in a closely confined area. A good example of a confined space is between two trees slightly larger than the outside measurements of their bodies and yoke.



Vraja and Gita pulling the load

One thing you should know as a teamster is how to lead a load. If you cut a corner too sharp your load will snag which is a very big problem. Backing up is not an easy function for them, what to speak of with a full load. So, be aware you must allow a sufficient distance when making a turn so that your load will not be snagged.

The ideal is to work with your team on a daily basis. That way they can learn their lessons rapidly. If you do this you will see daily progress every time you take them out and run them through their paces. Don't forget all commands should be preceded by their names so that they know they are being spoken to. When you stop for their rests, tell them they are doing good: "Good Vraja", "Good Gita," and rub under their necks and behind their ears. Take some snacks along as special treats as they are doing their lessons. As you know, Vraja and Gita like oatmeal-chip cookies. Maybe your team likes carrots or apples. You will see they will be eager to please.

The performance of the team will only be as good as the teamster is qualified. So remember the ability of your team rests on your shoulders and your loving relationship with them.