

# Take a Deep Breath

# and Say: Aaaaah!

Most people will agree that doing a cleanly and skilfully executed cascade has a soothing effect on your breathing. Even people in the audience will experience a feeling of relaxation in connection with certain movements ("breath-taking" tricks notwithstanding).

However, watching a beginner it is hard to discern any way in which juggling could release tension. The balls fly too high, the movements are jerky, the wrists tighten and the forearms reach up as though clutching at straws. Head and eyes are fixated on the balls, the neck muscles are taut. The balls tend to fly out to the front, putting extra strain on the back muscles, which are already overworked by all that picking up. The beginner's breath is shallow and uneven, the legs are only involved to the extent that they are forced to run after the balls.

These unhealthy exercises are often repeated for hours on end, and onlookers become unsettled and tense themselves, not from inwardly following the beginner's movements.

It takes a long time (longer for some than for others) before the lopsided movements become balanced, and the breathing becomes deeper and more regular.

In my experience, working on getting the movements to harmonize is a more permanently effective way of dealing with this problem than searching for special breathing exercises to relax the tension, because once the movements are right, correct breathing follows automatically.

## "Breathless" Beginners

Yet the tendency to tighten up returns again and again, every time a juggler learns a new trick or a new variation. Usually, advanced

jugglers are no longer conscious of this tension because they are more quickly able to get things back under control.

For a beginner who has just learnt the cascade, throwing just one ball overhand puts a considerable strain on his or her willpower, and this tension only disappears when the trick is mastered or when the juggler goes back to the "safe flow" of the cascade.

Moves like "chops" cause even greater problems. Initially, having to make a rapid downward movement of the hand while holding a ball causes most people to hold their breath. (Advanced jugglers often do not notice this until the 20th or 30th chop!) It is also useful to observe how tense or relaxed you are when clawing or doing floor bounces, juggling cross-arm, etc....

## What is a "breathing" movement?

For me it is always important to get into a smooth flow of the balls, where the movement itself seems to have a kind of "breath" of its own. Of course, I don't mean to say that all juggling movements should be rounded, but even cutting, jerky movements should "breathe".

To show what I mean by "breathing", try the following exercise:

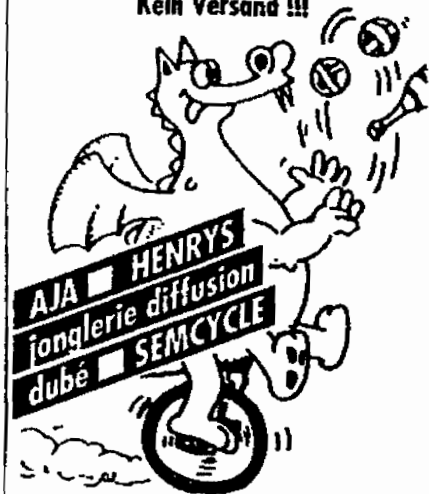
To start with, this is easier to do with a heavier ball, so that you can feel the weight better. Drop the ball from a raised hand, and use this hand to follow the ball down, either above it or to the side of it. As late and as far down as possible, the hand then reaches under the ball and with a swinging movement turns the energy of the ball's descent into an upward throw. The ball flies up to a

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point on the other side of the body where it is joined by the other hand, which again accompanies it on its way down and swings it back up from the bottom. In other words, the ball follows a U-shaped path. The idea is to turn the falling motion and the gravitational pull of the ball to good use, to really feel its weight, and to develop a smooth movement without rough edges, where the arms and shoulders relax during the effortless "fall" of the hand so that the breathing pattern also becomes relaxed.

The diabolo can be taken to illustrate another example. A beginner spends most of his or her time building up spin, either by vigorous tugging movements of the forearm which cause the shoulder and neck muscles to tighten up, or by a jagged whipping motion with stiff arms. In both cases the breathing is cramped and shallow.

Once a "healthy breathing pattern" has been found, however, many tricks can be learned involving a circular movement which actually accelerates the diabolo during the trick.

Here again, it is the ability to play with gravity that enables the player to make use of friction at the right moment to accelerate the diabolo, yet by "breathing out" (i.e. relaxing) at the right moment, he or she can prevent the friction from slowing the diabolo down.

For the people in the audience, this "breathing" is an unconscious criterion for the quality of a performance, and in therapy situations it is the main criterion for deciding how juggling should be used, which "tricks" and which props to introduce.

When working with sick or handicapped people, you have to pay attention to all sorts of little details, but the main thing is to make sure they can "breathe" with the movements. Music can help a lot in this respect.

## Juggling in Therapy

In therapy the aim is not usually to have the patients juggling three (or more) balls by the end of the session. Depending on the infirmity of, say, children in need of physiotherapy, the simple throwing and catching of a ball can be a task that keeps them occupied for months or even years. Combined with rhythms (music), rhymes and jingles, being able to throw one ball in the cascade pattern (and even momentarily close your eyes) can give a tremendous sense of achievement.

\* For the time she was juggling, one girl with temporary symptoms of spastic paralysis was able to experience for the first time

that feeling of "free, rhythmical movement of the hands" (as Victor Koschkin puts it in *Kaskade* No. 25), a feeling which lasted for a time after the session was over. Her harmonious movements while cascading three balls showed no resemblance to her habitual pathological movements.

\* With many forms of paralysis or involuntary movement, one of the therapist's main objectives is to get the patients to produce fluid movement.

into the juggling pattern itself.

\* Balancing a peacock feather can be learned in a relatively short time, but gives a tremendous boost to the development of hand-eye co-ordination. The degree of difficulty can be gradually built up using a spinning plate on a stick balanced on the palm of the hand or the fingertips.

\* Balancing and simultaneously negotiating an "obstacle course" (made by standing a row of clubs upright) is a challenge



In the therapy situation the problems experienced by every so-called "normal" person - not being able to let go, not being able to hold or grasp a ball - are magnified. Here, letting go and grasping have to be learned by slow and painstaking practice with one ball.

At first a ball (perhaps eventually three balls) can be rolled against a wall, or better still, up an inclined plane (a sloping tabletop, a mat, etc....).

Balloons and especially scarves are very helpful for learning the basic sequence of movements that may later be incorporated

even for the most able, and also helps the children develop their spatial and body awareness.

\* Greater awareness of their own bodies and the space in which they move can also be achieved by adding further balancing situations (walking a rope laid out on the ground, or on the bottom of an upturned gym bench, standing on a rola bola, etc.), or getting them to walk while juggling, maybe to music, using different rhythms, with or without a partner, tracing different patterns in the room, etc.

\* It is always vitally important to ensure

that the child or the patient does not feel too much is being demanded of him or her (nor too little). Juggling is particularly advantageous in this respect because of the unique possibility it offers of breaking every exercise down into into small intermediary steps. This is why it is also suitable as an aid to "learning to learn" as such. Juggling (and balancing) are also highly motivating activities which foster perseverance, boost self-esteem and thus increase the likelihood that the therapy will be successful.

\* For children with concentration problems, the many variations on the throw-and-catch situation with one or two balls have proved beneficial to their powers of concentration.

Here, as with children who have learning or reading difficulties, it is again important to increase the degree of difficulty in very small steps and not to push too hard too soon. Remember: there is always an intermediate step.

Children who had been taught to juggle using this step-by-step approach (including in some instances the use of an adjustable sloping plane to slow the balls down to exactly the right speed for the individual learner) turned in considerably improved performances in reading and deciphering exercises carried out after the juggling lesson.

\* Work with adolescents suffering from mental disorders such as anorexia and obesity has shown how juggling can improve a person's sense of rhythm. Here again, a crucial factor to watch for is the "breathing of a movement" described above.

Exercises and games with one ball, especially "body throws" help people to ex-

perience their whole body and particularly their feet. This can later be extended to simple balancing exercises.

It also helps if, right from the start, care is taken to ensure that the eyes are free to move, that they can look through the juggle. Throwing and catching a ball in one hand, or from hand to hand, while reading a newspaper or glancing across to a partner standing opposite are initial steps that are not as impossible as they may at first appear.

\* With patients who tend towards melancholia, and with some old people, experience has shown that even just watching someone juggle can bring about a temporary increase in their vitality. ("I look forward all week to the man who does the nice juggling." "You didn't forget to bring your balls, did you?" ...)

Here, and with patients with a tendency towards hysteria, it is particularly important to present juggling in the way described above. It is the "breath" of the movement that makes it harmonious, so that by empathizing with the external motion the spectator may be able to counterbalance the extreme commotion within.

By describing these experiences with the use of juggling in therapy, I do not of course wish to imply that juggling is appropriate to all situations. Nonetheless, there is no doubt that individual elements of juggling can be used to great effect in physical therapies, and there are still many possibilities to be discovered and explored.

Alfred Schachl, Stuttgart, Germany

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