

An Initiation into the Way of Juggling

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These instructions are the sort of things we say when we're sharing (with a friend or a crowd of strangers) our approach to juggling. These instructions are aimed at beginning jugglers. Experienced jugglers might benefit these instructions for their innovative approach to spreading the juggling bug. Experienced jugglers should also check out our instructions on JuggleDancing for more advanced adventures!

Let us say right off the bat: Juggling is more easily "caught" than "taught": it's most easily passed on directly, from person to person. Still, we've found that beginners who are up for some experimentation (and a bit of head scratching) can "catch" the juggling bug from each other, and have a fine old adventure learning to juggle from these crystal clear instructions. These instructions can also serve as a rough script for aspiring Juggling instructors to play with: we've included teaching tips and clarifications in brackets:[].

Preliminaries

Here's some technical suggestions that will aid you if you choose to try out the "recipe" we're describing here. If you just want to read, not enact, the instructions, feel free to skip ahead to the actual juggling instructions.

-The optimal setting for juggling is spacious and well-lit, with high (or no) ceilings and minimal distractions. (Don't let the lack of any of these conditions keep you from juggling. It is an adaptable art.)

-"Bean bags" are the most pleasant and forgiving objects to start juggling with. You'll need five such bags to learn this pattern. One can easily make serviceable juggling bags by filling small socks with 1/2 cup of popcorn, birdseed, pearl tapioca, etc. (Baby socks, size 4 to 7, work best. They're readily available at any department store.) After filling, twist the sock shut and double the neck back around the base. Voila! You can also make decent, though less durable juggling bags with 8 inch latex balloons. (Here's an easy way to do this: find a dry, empty beer or pop bottle and a funnel. Funnel 1/2 cup of birdseed into the bottle. Take your 8 inch balloon and blow it up to a few inches diameter. Twist the balloon at the neck, then slip the "mouth" of the balloon over the mouth of the bottle without letting much air out. This is a bit tricky but not too hard. It's most easily done sitting down with the bottle braced between your thighs. Now the birdseed will easily pour into the balloon when you invert the bottle! Cool. After that is done, gently detach the balloon from the bottle and tie it shut.)

-Having music playing while juggling is often helpful. Music with a strong steady beat and a moderate tempo works best but feel free to experiment. We've enjoyed juggling to reggae, Celtic, world beat, big band, Bobby McFerrin...

-It's good to do a few stretches to limber up before getting started.

-Give yourself at least an hour to enact these instructions. It doesn't have to be done all at once but that seems to work best, all other things being equal...

[-If you're teaching a group of people, it works best to allow at least 90 minutes for the first session. Later lessons can be much shorter. Teaching a group is MUCH easier if you have a teaching partner. A partner can help you demonstrate the steps in the process and will allow you to more fully embody the spirit of juggling ecstasy.]

Let the workshop begin!

Recruit yourself a partner or a group of friends. (Since we'll be learning a two person passing pattern, you'll need an even number of folks). Take turns reading these instructions aloud to each other. Collaborate in the adventure of figuring out how to enact them.

The juggling pattern we'll be learning today is woven between two people, so everyone match yourself with a partner. One of you will be partner "A". The 2nd partner we'll call partner "B" [If you're teaching a group, have folks line up in parallel A and B lines. If some folks in the group have experience in juggling or similar activities, make a point of assigning them to the A line and putting less experienced folks in the B line. This will aid in the group progressing smoothly as a whole. If there's an odd number of students, the teacher can stand in so that everyone is "partnered".]

Okay, to start with, each person take a single juggling bag. Get a feel for the bag. Toss it up in the air and catch it a few times. Enjoy its texture.

Begin tossing the bag back and forth between your two hands. [*Demonstrate.*] Learn how to create nice graceful arcs as you toss the bag back and forth. Aspire towards very even and regular tosses that rise and fall in an elegant arc. Aim for arcs that peak at about the height of the crown of your head. Relax into the activity. Let your body be at ease, let your breath flow freely as you enjoy tossing the bag back and forth. Pretend you're a tai chi master taking up juggling. [*Stay at this stage for at least 2 minutes. Let people settle into the experience.*]

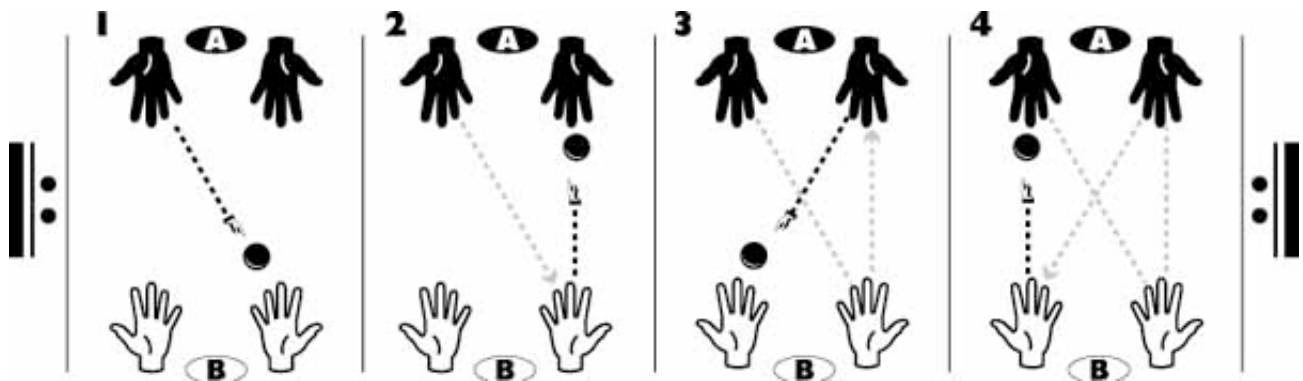
OK, now A and B, stand about 5 feet apart, facing each other, making eye contact. We'll start by teaching y'all the "Juggler's Salute": both partners simultaneously fold and raise your forearms with closed hands (typically filled with juggling bags) up to your shoulders, bending at the elbows, and then lower them back down, like so: [*Demonstrate. It's amazing how many words it can take to describe a simple action*]. Synchronize your movement: mirror each other. This "salute" is a common custom amongst jugglers, akin to members of a band counting out a measure of "1 2 3 4!" before launching into a tune. It's a way we make sure we're starting together, synchronized. We call this little rite "attuning" and practice it each time we begin a juggling pattern. It can really boost the partners' level of focus .

There are countless possible juggling patterns to play with. Each is a sort of dance with its own special character. The one we'll be playing with today (we call it "ZigZag"), has a wonderful magic to it: beginning jugglers, even self-proclaimed klutzes pick it up easily. It allows us to leapfrog over the more austere lesson that beginning jugglers are typically given to start with: learning to juggle 3 by yourself in the "Cascade" pattern. In the course of today's session you and your partner will work up to juggling 5 bags amongst your 4 hands. This is a more exciting feat than the Cascade pattern, yet it's easier to learn, thanks to the magic of community! Learning *ZigZag* also establishes some basic skills and confidence that will make the Cascade easier to master down the road.

[*If teaching with another experienced juggler, it's good to demonstrate the full 5 bag pattern at the outset to give the learners a clear sense of this lesson's destination.*]

Step 1: Starting with just one bag (in A's right hand) and the attuning salute, get the feel for tossing the bag back and forth between you like so: [*demonstrate*]. In "ZigZag", A always tosses diagonally to B, and B always tosses straight across to A, like so [*demonstrate*]:

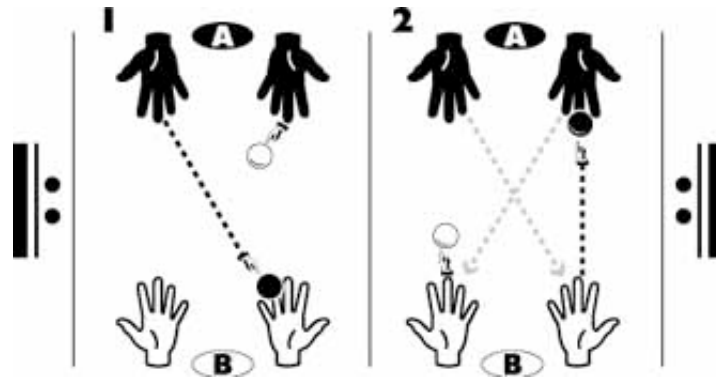
(*Here's a bird's eye view of the steps in this pattern, which flows in an endless circuit. In these diagrams, we're borrowing a bit of musical notation, bracketing each cycle with the "repeat" symbol of a double bar with two dots.*)



Let the bag travel along in elegant and graceful arcs, again with the tosses peaking a bit above "crown height". It's better to give your tosses too much height than too little. The more you arch your tosses, the more easygoing the tempo of the juggling will be. (You'll appreciate this fact as we increase the number of bags we play with.) Observe how your tosses arrive in your partner's "court". Ideally your partner will be able to keep their hands at ease at waist height, effortlessly receiving your perfectly aimed tosses into their awaiting palms. This may not be the case at first! Just keep patiently aiming for that goal. Practice with a spirit of "easygoing excellence": aiming for gorgeous tosses without tension or self-judgment. Have faith that with focused practice your body will naturally become more skillful in tossing and catching. Have you ever watched a baby learn to walk, or eat with a spoon? That's your role model!

When the bag is dropped, you can begin again at whatever point in the pattern the drop occurred, always starting with the attuning salute. Let us emphasize: **Whenever a bag is dropped, re-center by attuning together before you start tossing again.** The practice of re-centering- letting go of any judgment, embarrassment, giddiness or irritation, restoring a sense of focus- is key to navigating the ups and downs that occur with all learning and collaboration. The more you want to rush through the attuning, the more you probably need to really slow down, take a deep breath and salute your partner. Be playful! Attune with flair and ceremony! That's an order!

Step 2: When tossing one bag through the pattern has become a gracious experience, dance the same pattern with 2 bags, like this: [*demonstrate*]



(This time A starts with a bag in each hand, and passes them in succession to B. Let the first of the 2 tosses land in your partner's hand before you begin the second one. B then does likewise back to A, tossing straight across instead of diagonally. Notice that both throw their tosses in a right/left succession.)

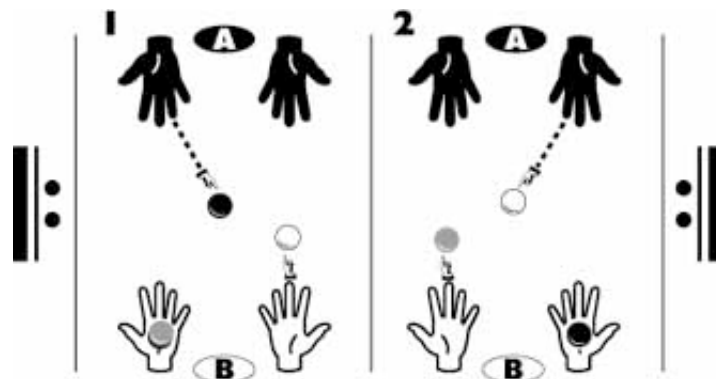
Keep refining your tosses so that they're ever more gracious and elegant. Learning to make beautiful, voluptuous tosses is the foundation of juggling.

Here's a finer point to start focusing on as you toss: it works best for A's tosses to be aimed a bit towards B's center and for B's tosses to be aimed a bit to A's outside. This will minimize mid-air collisions when there are more bags in motion.

Take your time in perfecting your tosses! Enjoy the learning curve and the opportunity to explore and learn and connect with your partner. Let this entire learning process be like a fine meal that you savor.

Throughout this process, practice the art of *discerning nonjudgment*. If you start judging yourself (or your partner) for "screwing up" (and especially if you're judging yourself for judging yourself) engage in a bit of psychological "alchemy". Cultivate an attitude of patience, curiosity and good humor (towards both partners' screw-ups). Notice how these qualities can turn frustration and self-judgment into laughter and insight. Become a playful scientist: Exactly how does it happen that you drop the bag? (No need to get analytic or ponderous here. If you're not sure how the bag was dropped, consider it a mystery to be revealed by sharper observation of the next inevitable drop.) What is the feeling that flashes over you on the moment after you dropped? How does it manifest in your body? In a furrowed brow, in a muttered curse, in laughter? [*We've noticed that women tend to laugh more readily in this process than men. Why is that?*] Observe the learning process with a curiosity that's both passionate and detached. "To live a creative life we must lose our fear of being wrong," Joseph Pierce observed. In an ecstatic relationship, there is no stigma placed on falling short of a goal. Instead, there is enduring fascination for the peaks and valleys, for the shifting rhythms of learning.

STEP 3: After the 2 bag dance has gotten easy, we're ready for the 3 bag stage. [*Demonstrate.*]



A, start with one bag in your right hand. B, you'll have a bag in each hand. As before, A will toss diagonally to B's right. B, when A's toss is at the peak of its arc, toss your bag straight across to A's left hand. Now A will have a bag in the left while B again has a bag in each hand (assuming that both tosses were caught). Next (*figure 2 above*)

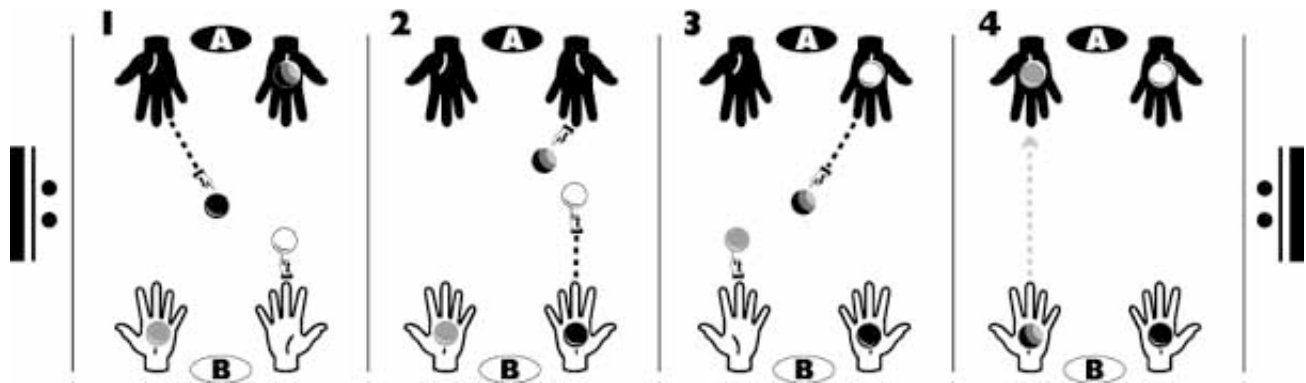
comes a mirror image of the first toss: A tosses diagonally to B's left. B, toss straight across to A's right when A's toss to you is peaking. After A catches B's toss, you're back in your beginning configuration! Continue in a cyclical fashion.

Pointer: Remember the spirit of Easygoing Excellence! The more you can let go of tension or anxiety, the more you'll be free to learn and enjoy. It helps to shake out the hands and swing your arms and shoulders regularly, releasing any tension buildup. [Often when teaching a group we'll take a break and exchange shoulder rubs around about this point. This is one of the most popular parts of the class]

STEP 3.5 (Not diagrammed): Step 3 is more of a challenge for B than A (since B has to quickly follow a toss with a catch in the same hand). Once B gets comfortable with it, turn the pattern around, so to speak: Now A will have a bag in each hand. B, you'll start with a bag in your right hand. Now B will initiate the pattern, throwing straight across to A's left, etc. Stay with this pattern until A feels at ease with it. **Note: A's tosses will still always be diagonal and B's tosses will still always be straight.**

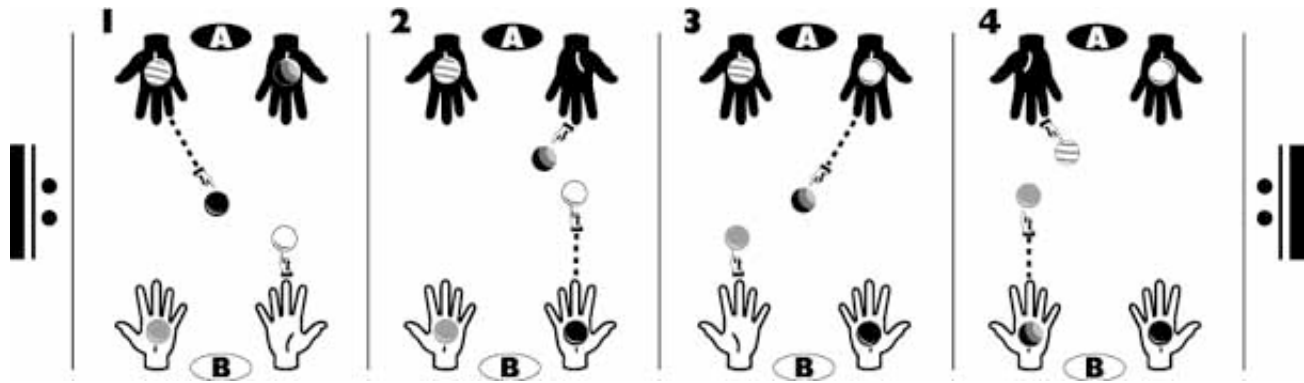
Another Pointer: A key aspect of creating juggling ecstasy lies in the art of "Co-coaching". In co-coaching, you and I both choose to be student and teacher to each other. We welcome each other's feedback on how our tosses are arriving, and we welcome each other's feedback on how we're coaching each other! When such a circuit of co-learning and accommodation is created, compassionate accountability can flourish!

STEP 4: When you're both comfortable with 3 bags, move up to 4 bags (starting with one in each hand). Here the excitement builds! Now the pattern will be [demonstrate]:



The tosses are timed so as to overlap: at the peak of toss 1's arc, toss 2 begins its flight, and so on. Aim for a crisp coordination of timing! We're creating a sort of music here. Think of the bags as having a "domino effect" on each other. 1 sparks 2 which sparks 3 which sparks 4. [At this point peals of laughter may start to break out as bags go rocketing off in unexpected directions and participants discover the novel sensation of incoming bags careening off their foreheads. This is good, perhaps the most enjoyable part of the entire journey. Just remind folks to regain composure before each new beginning.] This step is often a bit wild at first. Savor the edge between flow and chaos; always returning with composure and focus to the point of departure: the attuning "salute". It's often useful, when throws are getting rather frantic, to pause for a few deep breaths, regaining focus and composure before launching into the pattern again. Also, if 4 bags just feels too hard, go back to dancing with 3 bags again. Fine tuning the balance between the level of challenge and your ability is another key to ecstasy.

STEP 5: Often people find 5 bags to be easier to juggle than 4! With 4 there's always a pause between the end of one circuit and the beginning of the next. This can break the flow. With 5 bags the pattern becomes seamless. A begins with 2 bags in his or her right hand. (All other hands have 1 bag each) [Demonstrate]



Now a more continuous rhythm can develop: a rolling wave of movement is created. Yee Hah! Ride that wave! Settle into the rhythm while remaining alert and attuned. If a lot of collisions are occurring, A can focus again on those diagonal tosses arriving a bit towards B's inside. B, aim for your tosses to arrive a bit towards the outside on either side of A. If it all seems to be happening too fast, remember to breathe and take breaks if needed. Remember also that tossing your bags higher slows the pace of the pattern!

If either partner starts getting overwhelmed or fatigued, take a break for a few minutes. Relaxed concentration is the delicious blend that facilitates ecstasy. Again, if juggling 5 bags feels overwhelming, drop back to 4 or 2 or even 1! Practicing elegance, patience, mindfulness and nonjudgment with 1 bag is more useful and enjoyable than practicing agitation, stress, and self-flagellation with 5.

When this pattern becomes a piece of cake for you, play with increasing it's tempo by gradually moving closer to your partner as you continue juggling. For an extra challenge try maintaining eye contact with your partner as you juggle at point blank range!

It's a good idea for the partners to eventually learn to switch roles (i.e. with B tossing diagonally and A tossing straight across.) Save this challenge for a later session, unless both partners are feeling gung ho. It's also useful to learn how to start the pattern from any point in the circuit (e.g., you could begin with B holding the 2 bags in his or her left hand.)

Congratulations, you've all fledgling jugglers! Now, to truly know the delights and possibilities of ecstatic juggling you must share it with others. Go forth unto the land and spread the good news and laughter. Share it with friends, enemies, at work after lunch or during coffee breaks, while waiting at the dentist's... Juggling acts as a psychological yeast, lightening the heavy dough of everyday consciousness. Keep your bags on hand. Be prepared for opportune moments. Juggling can be used in diverse contexts for an energy tune up! Just whip out the bags and warm up the needed attitudes: focus, nonjudgment, persistence, humility, attunement... ecstasy. Use juggling to breathe new life into your meetings, your work crews, your marriage. Form juggling ensembles. Offer classes in your local school or prison....

FURTHER INSTRUCTIONS:

To arrange for a Juggling Ecstasy workshop in your school, organization or church group, contact us at the address below. Our introductory 2 hour workshop is available at no charge to groups of 6 or more in the Richmond or Charlottesville, Virginia area. (Groups from points beyond, please inquire.)

We're developing a manual that teaches further ecstasy provoking juggling patterns and adventures for different sized groups. If you'd like to obtain a copy when it's available, please drop us a line. Check us out at contemplayful.com

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