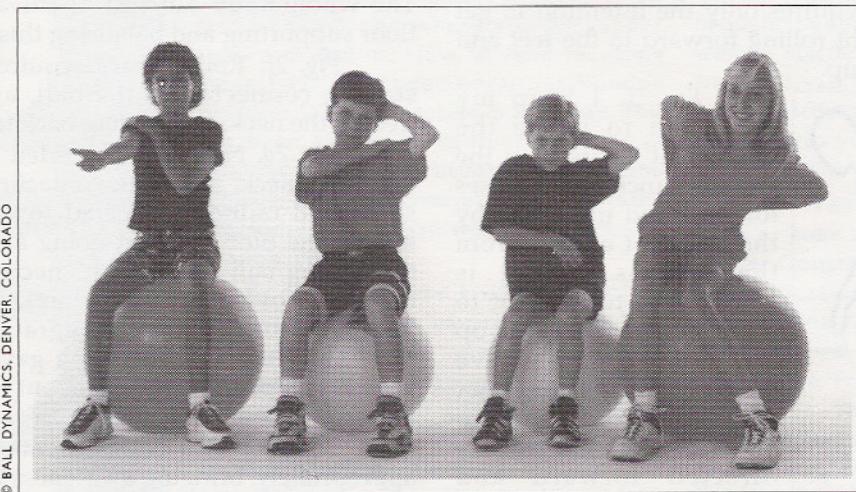


HAVE A BALL!

by Cathy Pollock



*A new stimulus introduced to
the environment of an Alexander lesson
can keep our responses fresh
and our thinking alive.*

I roll around a lot. Several times per week at the Aikido dojo. On my mountain bike. In Contact Improvisation dance. So it was only natural that I purchase a big inflatable ball to roll around on in my Alexander office. Soon, my students wanted to know what I used it for, so I showed them the basics of lying on the ball, belly up and belly down. Then, I took to using the ball as a desk chair, because I was simply more comfortable on it and it gave me more energy to tackle my paperwork.

While I still use chair work as a routine part of my lessons, I have found the Swiss physioballs a fascinating new stimulus to incorporate with traditional Alexander teaching methods. Even after carefully explaining the role of the chair as a tool for developing self-awareness, my students would come for their second lesson full of pride at practicing the art of sitting and standing, asking me if it was right or wrong.

How quickly we transfer our endgaining ways to new situations! Time and time again, the chair would signal performance time. So one day I tucked the chair in a corner, inviting my students to sit on the ball. As I spotted them from behind, I watched the initial

responses in the mirror, their eyes wide with alarm, suspicion, or glee. Those lacking body confidence were resistant to this unusual request of mine. Others immediately embraced the idea. Sitting and bouncing, the stress of the day suddenly forgotten, the playful kid emerged, often accompanied by a huge, ear-to-ear grin. I practically had to peel them off in the end.

They come to the ball without preconceived ideas of right and wrong. An unfamiliar stimulus requires new skills, adaptations, strategies for dealing with a moveable, somewhat unpredictable sitting surface. The ball demands balance and coordination. Support through the feet cannot be ignored—crossing legs or sitting on a leg is not an option. Finding the sit-bones is easy on the ball, the air pressure within giving lively feedback through the pelvic floor and the whole spine. Due to the buoyant quality of the ball, up comes very naturally. All of this leads to less fatigue while sitting without back support. The easy uprightness we see in children can be felt at once when seated on the ball. Many of my students now use balls at their work stations and are the envy of the office.

PREPARATION FOR CHAIR WORK

Ah, but aside from children's playrooms, the real world is not furnished with balls, so we must also know how to use a chair. Like training wheels on a bicycle, the ball acts as a preparatory tool, simplifying the directing, timing and weight transfers involved in chair work. Rising from the ball requires only the intention to get up, followed by a slight rolling forward to the feet and directing forward and up.

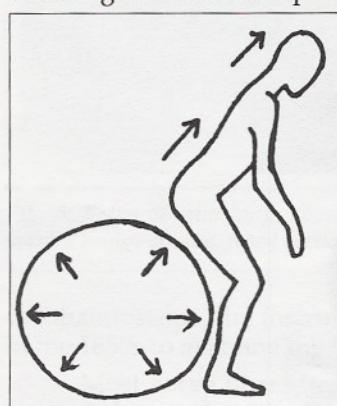


Fig. 1

Fig. 1. I keep my hands on to guide the movement at first, but the student quickly recognises forward and up, aided by the boost of energy from the ball as weight is transferred to the feet to stand. As we repeat the up and downs, I also have them notice whether or not the ankles are freeing up and if the knees are directed forward and away. Students find that they can apply this new

kinesthetic experience to the chair quite easily—they can better understand where forward and up is, and now hip action can be introduced. This method creates confidence, building awareness and coordination in preparation for chair work.

THE BLOB

The evolution of my work with the ball began during a lesson with a student in acute back pain. Ann was in too much pain to sit on a chair, be in monkey, or be on the table. What was left?

Fig 2a. I draped her over the ball, face down and slowly the pain and tension eased away. Hence the Blob was born. Here, my student could passively yield her weight without pain, and actively experience rolling forward and back while leaving the back (especially the lumbar area) quiet. At first she initiated rolling forward

by tightening her lower back which brought immediate pain.

Fig. 2b. After inhibiting the back "working", we worked with reorganising the rolling activity by redirecting, initiating movement first through engaging the feet pushing off, then connecting the tail-end of the spine and sequencing up the spine and out the head. The whole body can rest, the head and hands on the floor supporting and balancing this resting phase.

Fig. 2c. Rolling back required doing nothing but staying connected to the ball, again giving weight, freeing the neck, sequencing back toward the tail.

Fig. 2d. No effort is needed to "blob" backwards, the head, neck, and back contacting the ball, the lower spine and tailbone directed towards the back of the knees. The Blob is about going along for the ride with the rolling ball—no "work" necessary. The sequential rolling forward and back organised Ann's neuromuscular activity, integrating the torso and the legs. Thinking and directing gave Ann the means to raise her upper body (coming out of monkey or up from a chair) without straining her low back.

The Blob also brings attention to working less, or, appropriately, bringing awareness to the role of the knee joints and their relationship to the hips. Ann's goals went beyond being pain-free, however—she had not been able to ride her horse without pain for a long time. We started to use the ball as a horse, trotting and cantering, all the while directing and inhibiting shortening the low back. After only 15 lessons, Ann was back to riding and hiking with renewed energy and virtually no pain.

SEATED WALKING

I have created other ball games to teach head leading, lunge, reaching, weight transfer from seat to feet, homo and contralateral patterns of movement, expanding the field of attention, head/neck/back integration, and movement of the arms out of the back. Seated walking encompasses just about every Alexander principle there is.

Fig. 3a. To begin, the student sits on the ball, then takes a small step, rolling slightly forward.

The Blob



Fig. 2a

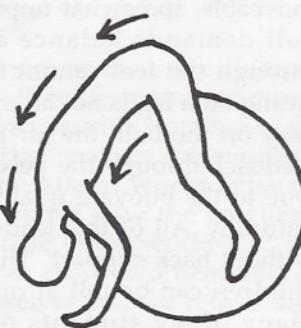


Fig. 2b



Fig. 2c

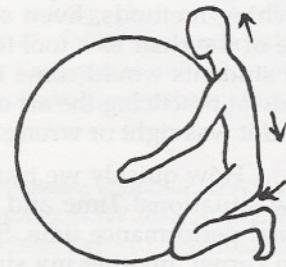


Fig. 2d

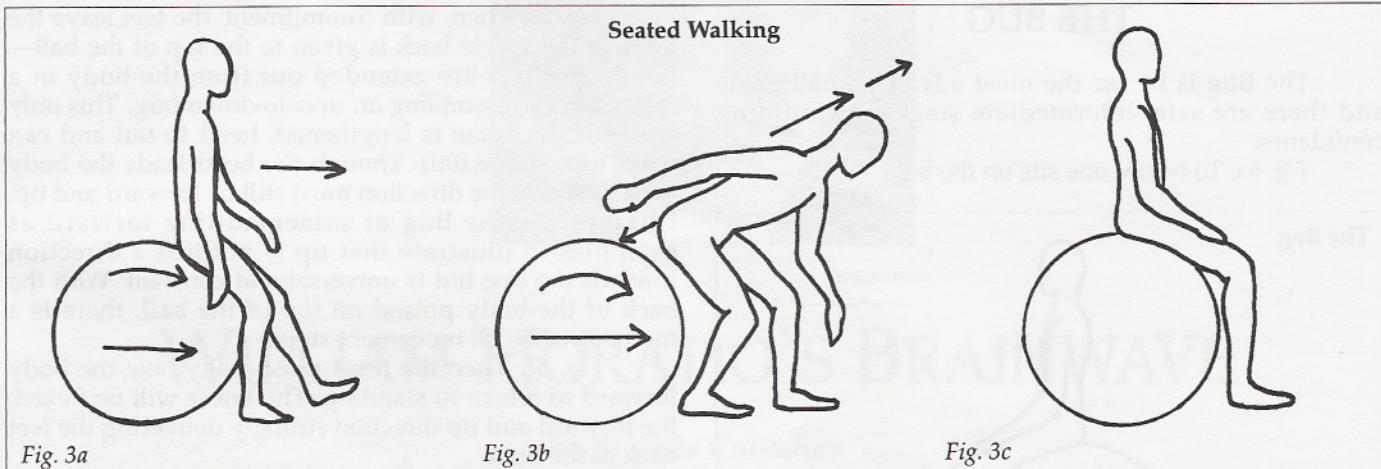


Fig. 3b. Then, with the head leading, the weight comes off the ball and onto the feet; the student should be in a deep lunge at this point, with most of the weight directed forward and up over the front foot.

Fig. 3c. The opposite arm reaches behind to tuck the ball safely back under the bottom, and the student returns to a seated position. Now, the other foot comes forward and the seated walking continues across the room.

"They come to the ball without preconceived ideas of right and wrong."

The challenge of coordinating it all is intriguing to most (I haven't yet seen anyone despair from over-stimulation). I have them try scooting the ball back underneath them with the same hand as the leg that is forward to notice how the torso can shorten on that side. I ask them to think about when and why we lunge—shaking hands, reaching to open a door (same side, foot and hand) or bowling (opposite feet and hands). With seated walking, the head has to lead them to balance over the forward foot, even when their attention is split, forward to get off the ball and back to reach for the ball. Many rush at first, becoming disoriented. This is a good time to ask them to stop endgaining, and use the primary directions to organise themselves. Seated walking requires attending to the present moment to coordinate the whole activity. A rhythm will develop as coordination improves—stepping, lunging, reaching behind, sitting, etc.

Finally, we go over to the desk and chair and I ask them to reach to the far corner of the desk to pick something up. Rather than keeping one's bottom glued to the chair and straining the back, the new use of the lunge can be employed—momentarily out of the chair, but with intention to be seated again, attention expanded to include front and back, reaching in front, the chair behind. Seated walking has applications to raking, shoveling, vacuuming, playing croquet and more.

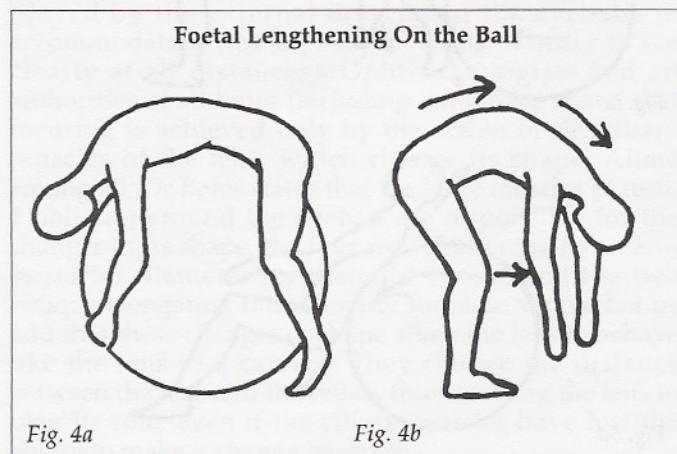
FOETAL LENGTHENING ON THE BALL

Since studying with Alex and Joan Murray, I have incorporated the concept of foetal lengthening into my lessons. The initial foetal curve is a C curve. Often, students learn monkey and try to apply it to every activity as the right way to go about something. But natural movement involves curving the spine at times, as in tying shoe laces with one leg pulled up and crossed over the other or writing in a checkbook that is in one's lap, or going into a forward somersault.

Many people habitually shorten the upper spine, causing it to bow out or collapse the lower spine. If this is a postural habit, or even a longtime structural deformity, I use the ball to re-educate awareness in the affected area.

Fig. 4a. The student lies over the ball first to gain the kinesthetic experience of a truly lengthened, curved spine, looking in the mirror for visual confirmation.

Fig. 4b. Then we do roll-downs, either seated or standing, with me touching each vertebra to help them cue in kinesthetically to every part of their spine. Moulding to the ball and roll-downs anchor in the sensations of natural foetal lengthening.



THE BUG

The Bug is by far the most advanced ball game and there are safe, intermediate stages for building confidence.

Fig. 5a. To begin, one sits on the ball.

The Bug

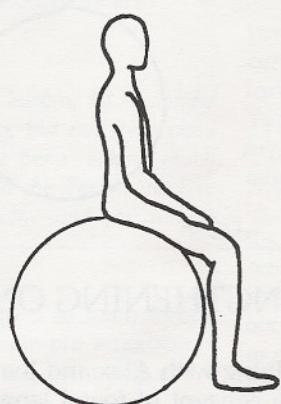


Fig. 5a

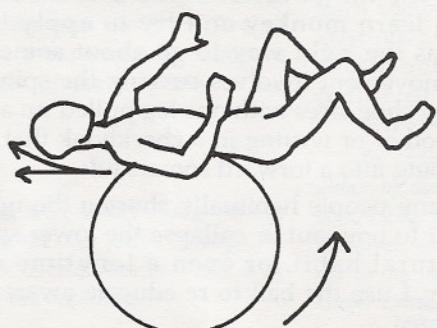


Fig. 5b

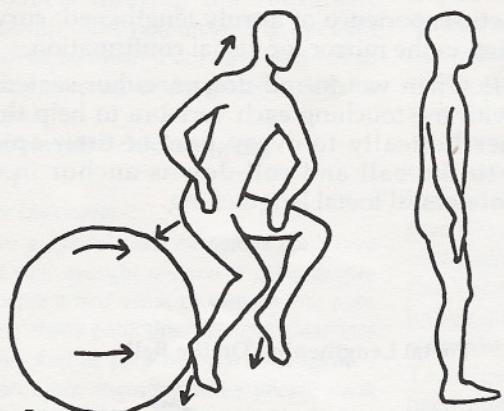


Fig. 5c

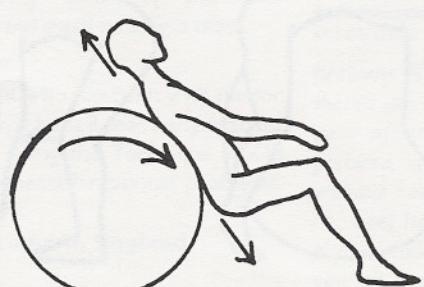


Fig. 5d

Fig. 5b. Then, with commitment, the feet leave the floor as the whole back is given to the top of the ball—hands and feet are extended out from the body in a relaxed way, resembling an upside-down bug. This only works if the spine is lengthened, head to tail and can work as a stable unit. Though the head leads the body back in space, the direction must still be forward and up. I like to use the Bug or somersaulting forward as examples to illustrate that up is not just a direction towards the sky, but is universal and constant. With the back of the body poised on top of the ball, there is a moment when all movement stops.

Fig. 5c. Then the head must really take the body forward to return to standing. The knees will be flexed, the forward and up direction strongly delivering the feet back to the floor.

Fig. 5d. A good way to build confidence is to lift the feet gently off the floor as you slowly slide down the ball to the floor. Everyone can try it at their own comfort level.

The Swiss ball is an alternative to the chair that encourages self-discovery and growth. It is playful, taking us temporarily out of our adult mindsets to a place where learning becomes a joy, not a heavy responsibility. The dynamic qualities of the ball require us to respond in a dynamic and spontaneous manner. The ball work teaches coordination, balance, and fluidity in movement. How many adults can go down a playground slide without stiffening? Or make a graceful recovery from a slip on an icy sidewalk? The chair has become an unquestioned, unconsciously accepted sitting tool in many societies. Only recently have ergonomics brought to light the harmful effects of many chairs. An inflatable ball suddenly becomes a seat, albeit a non-traditional one. As Alexander students we can begin to discriminate by first becoming aware of the little things, such as the suitability of this couch or that car seat. These simple, yet important decisions lay the foundation for developing the awareness to make conscious choices in every aspect of our lives.

When you tire of spending hundreds of dollars on ergonomically correct chairs for your office station, try a simple Swiss ball—and have a ball!

A special thank you goes to my Alexander student, Randy Speers, for his dogged requests for ball work.



Cathy Pollock is certified by the American Society for Teachers of the Alexander Technique. She teaches privately and to groups, and has presented to hospitals, businesses, clinics, schools, performing arts groups, and athletic clubs. Cathy holds a black belt in Aikido and draws from her interest in the martial arts, yoga, cycling, climbing, and skiing to create a teaching atmosphere that is both fun and practical. Cathy is devoted to empowering her students towards self-care through the experiential education the Alexander Technique affords.
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