

# YOGA: A BOON FOR MATERNAL AND CHILD HEALTH

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## **INTRODUCTION:**

Having been a medical practitioner for more than a decade now, and having been exposed to the benefits of Yoga as a way of life since the past 30 years, it amazes me that Yoga hasn't yet become an integral part in the preparation of this "life changing experience" of pregnancy and childbirth. It is deeply concerning to witness the lack of support an expectant mother receives towards preparing herself for childbirth leading to a feeling of stressful dread and debilitating exasperation.

It is often said that the knowledge of how to give birth without outside interventions lies deep within each woman and that successful childbirth depends on an acceptance of the process. Yoga as a way of life is an excellent tool to help the expectant mother dwell deep within herself and develop this spiritual awareness of her strengths with the realization of her blessings.

We must always remember that pregnancy and childbirth are a period of great change for the mother as well as for the entire family. It provides the opportunity to take another look at our life, bring about the necessary changes, and finally become a better human being as the result of this entire process that engineers a great sense of joy and confidence in the individual.

We must never forget that Yoga is not merely a preparation for pregnancy and child birth, but is a continuous preparation for the experience of one's whole life. Yoga is a boon that enables us to realise our blessings and manifest our potential. Pujya Swamiji, Gitananda Giri Guru Maharaj used to often say, "Yoga is not all about changing the world but is all about changing oneself".

## **EMOTIONAL AND PHYSICAL PREPARATION:**

Many stories from Indian tradition educate us about the maternal-child bonding that begins with conception and warn us against underestimating the power of this psychic bond. The great Rishi Ashtavakra, Prahalada and Abimanyu are just a few examples of so many incidents where the child in the womb was able to fully comprehend for itself the external environment and be born with amazing abilities.

Modern medicine has finally come to realize the importance of the maternal mental and emotional status in smoothening the entire process of pregnancy and childbirth. This has taken a long time in the coming and Grantly Dick-Read was one of the first medical doctors to suggest in the 1950's that emotional and physical preparation for birth encouraged more natural births. This concept that has been part of Indian traditional thought since time immemorial revolutionized the management of pregnancy in the west as it enabled the medical profession to understand that fear caused pain which in turn caused more fear which then caused more pain!

To facilitate better pregnancy and childbirth experiences, Grantly Dick-Read codified preparation classes that involved practicing deep relaxation, which could then be practiced during labour to reduce tension and pain. These techniques have been used for antenatal preparation for labour ever since but in recent times it is sad that these sessions have mostly become a place to share information rather than to prepare expectant mothers physically, mentally and emotionally for their "life changing" experience of motherhood.

#### **YOGA FOR A HEALTHY PREGNANCY:**

Yoga has enormous potential to help expectant mothers prepare themselves physically, mentally, emotionally for this grand experience that can be a very spiritual one for so many. Yoga as a way of life focuses on right living and right thinking while utilizing various tools for the overall psycho-physiological health of the mother and child.

The Jathis, Kriyas and Asanas help promote healthy functioning of all body systems while Pranayama creates psycho-somatic harmony with a Pranic energisation of every cell of the body. Various Mudras and Bandhas such as Aswini Mudra and Moola Bandha can help tone up the pelvic musculature while others like the Yoni Mudra induce a sense of inner wellbeing. The various concentrative and contemplative practices help achieve an inner peace with the development of a deep sense of self-understanding. Yogic relaxation practices facilitate a balanced and relaxed anabolic inner environment that promotes the healthy growth and development of the baby with the facilitation of healing at all levels of being.

Yogic diet with a stress on natural life-giving foods and adequate hydration helps the mother nurture the child growing within herself and fortify herself for the challenging events to come. A balanced lacto-vegetarian diet rich in calcium, iron and other essential vitamins and minerals is advocated with training in the preparation of soups, salads and sprouts. Foods of the Sattwic nature elevate the mother's consciousness thus helping to create an uplifting psycho-mental-spiritual inner environment developing the inherent potential of the child in a wonderful manner.

#### **SCIENTIFIC EVIDENCE OF THE BENEFITS OF YOGA IN PREGNANCY:**

Preliminary evidence from various scientific studies supports Yoga's potential efficacy, particularly if started early in the pregnancy. A study by Beddoe AE. et al (J. Obstet Gynecol Neonatal Nurs. 2009) showed that women practicing Yoga in their second

trimester reported significant reductions in physical pain from baseline to post intervention compared with women in the third trimester whose pain increased. Women in their third trimester showed greater reductions in perceived stress and trait anxiety.

Another study by Sun YC et al (Midwifery. 2009) reported that women who took part in the prenatal Yoga programme reported significantly fewer pregnancy discomforts at 38-40 weeks of gestation. The subjects who participated in the Yoga programme exhibited higher outcome and self-efficacy expectancies during the active stage of labour and the second stage of labour. They also suggested that the provision of booklets and videos on Yoga during pregnancy may contribute to a reduction in pregnancy discomforts and improved childbirth self-efficacy.

Satyapriya M. et al (Int J Gynaecol Obstet. 2009) concluded that Yoga reduces perceived stress and improves adaptive autonomic response to stress in healthy pregnant women while Chuntharapat S et al (Complement Ther Clin Pract 2008) concluded that Yoga produced higher levels of maternal comfort during labor and 2hour post-labor with a decrease in subject evaluated labor pain. They also reported shorter duration of the first stage of labor, as well as the total time of labor in the subjects practicing Yoga.

A study by Narendran S. et al (J. Indian Med Assoc. 2005) reported a lower trend in the occurrence of complications of pregnancy such as pregnancy-induced hypertension, intrauterine growth retardation and pre-term delivery in subjects who practiced Yoga. He also concluded that an integrated approach to Yoga during pregnancy is safe. It improves birth weight, decreases preterm labor, and decreases IUGR either in isolation or associated with PIH, with no increased complications (J. Altern Complement Med. 2005).

A review by Field T. (Altern Ther Health Med. 2008) reported that alternative therapies have been found effective for reducing pregnancy-related back and leg pain and nausea and for reducing depression and cortisol levels and the associated prematurity rate. It also said that the labor research generally shows that alternative therapies reduce pain and thereby the need for medication.

### **SUGGESTED YOGA PRACTICES DURING PREGNANCY:**

The entire duration of the pregnancy is traditionally divided into three trimesters and hence the Yoga practices may be advised under this classification, too.

In the 1<sup>st</sup> trimester, standing postures such as Ardhakati Chakra Asana and Trikona Asana can be introduced to create a sense of stability. 'On the floor' postures such as Nikunja or Bala Asana along with the Chatushpada Asana, Chatushpada Kriya and the Vyagraha Pranayama can be taught to reduce the potentiality of back pain. Postures such as Eka Pada and Dwi Pada Uttanpada Asana, Hala Asana and Sarvanga Asana may be taught if the person has some previous experience of Yoga as they create a healthy neuroendocrine feedback along with the toning-up of the abdomino-pelvic musculature. Variations of the Utkat Asana as well as the Baddhakona Asana and Kriya are to be

introduced right away to help open up the pelvis to facilitate the healthy delivery later. Aswini Mudra and Moola Bandha create a healthy flow of Pranic energy in the urogenital region. Relaxation practices such as Shava Asana with the Savitri Pranayama are to be taught. Pranava Pranayama creates a harmonious inner environment that is conducive to the creation of a healthy child right from day-one.

Continuing into the 2<sup>nd</sup> trimester, practices such as the Supta Baddhakona Asana, Mehru Asana, Nava Asana may be introduced while the Nikunja Asana, Baddhakona Asana and Kriya are continued with Aswini Mudra and Moola Bandha. Jathara Parivrittana Asana may be introduced if possible to open up the pelvis in a healthy manner. Relaxation practices such as Kaya Kriya, Tala Kriya and Yoga Nidra may be introduced. Practices on the face may not be possible and if there is too much tension in Shava Asana, then the relaxation may be done in Nishpanda Asana on the side. Kukkriya Pranayama is added to strengthen the diaphragm and create a sense of optimistic energy.

In the 3<sup>rd</sup> trimester, the main practices are the Chatas Pada Asana and Chatas Pada Kriya along with the Vyagraha Pranayama. Moola Bandha and Aswini Mudra in Baddhakona Asana are continued while Bhramari Pranayama is added to reduce stress-based anxiety levels. Yoga Nidra, Anuloma Viloma Kriya and other practices can be used to produce a calm and steady mind with an optimistic outlook.

During the delivery, deep breathing may be done and the abdomino-pelvic muscular strength obtained from previous months of practice is used to facilitate a healthy delivery through the flexible pelvis. A positive attitude with the feeling of a deep sense of love towards the new born will enhance the spiritual nature of the whole process.

Post natal practices may be started in a few weeks time following the delivery and are aimed at enhancing a swift and healthy physiological return to the pre-pregnant state. Baddhakona Asana and Kriya along with the Chatas Pada Asana and Kriya are key elements of this programme. Vyagraha Pranayama, Pranava Pranayama and Savitri Pranayama in Shava Asana help to repair tissue damage as well as facilitate healing at all levels. Aswini Mudra and Moola Bandha help focus the energies in the pelvis while the Uddiyana Bandha, Eka Pada Uttanpada Asana, Dwi Pada Uttanpada Asana and Nava Asana help the mother to regain abdomino-pelvic muscular tone at the earliest. Pavanamukta Kriya and the Vakra Asana help to correct any spinal displacements while the Surya Pranayama helps burn up excess weight that accumulated in the pregnant period. The importance of the right diet and positive attitude towards parenting is to be encouraged at all stages to produce a state of excellent psycho-physiological health and harmony.

The role of the father in the whole process must never be underestimated and his involvement in both the practical Yoga sessions as well as in the adoption of a Yogic diet with positive attitudes is vital for the success of the programme. Yoga can help the family top bond together and such a bond is a boon to the entire social unit that is based on healthy inter-personal relationships.

**A word of caution:** All Yoga practices must be learnt from a competent and qualified Yoga teacher / therapist and performed with a common-sense based approach. Postures such as Dhanur Asana and other "on the face postures" that exert great pressure on the uterus and impair flow of blood to the fetus must be avoided. Inverted postures may result in 'falls' that can cause many complications while the rapid breathing practices such as Kapalabhati must be done with caution. The mother must be helped to develop an inner sense of knowing what is happening within her own body during the practices and if she senses anything wrong must stop the practice immediately and consult the Yoga therapist immediately. In the final trimester it is better to be aware of how even simple things like jumping into postures or sudden change in position may cause premature rupture of membranes. The list of practices that are safe / unsafe will of course depend on the mother's previous Yoga experience, on how long she has been practicing Yoga, and on the type of practices she has been doing previously. On the whole, it is better to be safe at all times rather than sorry later.

#### **CHILDBIRTH- A NATURAL STATE OF BLISS:**

My beloved mother and Guru Ammaji, Yogacharini Meenakshi Devi Bhavanani has so beautifully said, *"I must confess that bearing, delivering and raising my son has been the single most significant spiritual experience of my life, my first real initiation into the blissful state of Yoga - a oneness and communion with the Universe on a nearly mystical level"*.

In her book on Yoga for expectant mothers and others, she has beautifully described the Samadhi-like experience of my birth 38 years ago as follows: *"I really felt as though I had slipped into a Samadhi by mistake. Completely drained, relaxed, limp, receptive, I felt a bliss, which I had never felt before in my whole life. As though a purpose had been accomplished, as though I had achieved what I had set out to do, difficult though the task had been, as though I had somehow repaid a debt, which I had contracted by my own birth. I felt tremendous love for everyone, for my husband, for the doctors, for the nurses, for the Universe, for the good green earth, and the beautiful warm sun...but most all, I felt an immense, overpowering love and devotion to the small little creature that the doctors immediately put into my arms. It was mine, and from that day, I would be responsible for the growth into light of another little human soul. My baby smiled at me, he really did, even though he could not see, and I smiled and smiled back at him, for surely, he was the most beautiful, perfect, intelligent and fantastic child ever born to the Universe! And even as I thought that thought, I realized how many others must have experienced the same feelings, looking for the first time at the first child born to them, and I felt wonderful communion with all mothers who had ever lived and all those who would ever pass through this marvelous experience. Certainly, we shared a secret; certainly, we had something more precious than the most rare of gems; certainly, we were blessed by life itself to be brought so close to that mystical core which creates, out of nothing but a few cells of matter and a few sparks of energy, such a marvelous creature as the new-born child". "I took my pen to paper and wrote these words. "I was given life... I gave life... a debt repaid with*

*interest... I have returned what I was given a hundred-fold. Was there such perfect beauty in my own body... once, long, long ago...Did my mother also see...God move one step beyond herself...in me? And thus, on the crest of these overpowering, ecstatic emotions, did the Yoga of Motherhood rush into my life... a whole new phase of my Yoga Sadhana had begun... with Ananda!"*

#### **CONCLUDING THOUGHTS:**

Indian culture understands this and respects the mother as the 'First God', even before 'Father' and 'Guru'. It may be said that motherhood is the ultimate Yoga Sadhana. The attainment of motherhood is the height of ego-less-ness, which is the goal of all spirituality.

To be such a 'Mother', one who is consciously aware of the great spiritual nature of pregnancy and childbirth, it is necessary that our young girls start the practice of Yoga at the earliest and continue it into their adulthood. When this is done, healthy and conscious conception is facilitated. This along with the inculcation of healthy and positive attitudes towards child bearing and child rearing will lay down a firm foundation for the production of healthy and spiritually potent children who can transform the future of our planet into a 'Garden of Eden'.

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Improving maternal health is one of WHO's key priorities, grounded in a human rights approach and linked to efforts on universal health coverage. WHO advocates for health planning where women's values and preferences are at the centre of their own care. Meaningful engagement and empowerment of women, families, communities, and providers is essential for quality improvement initiatives. Promoting health along the whole continuum of pregnancy, childbirth and postnatal care is also crucial. Strong partnerships are crucial, such as The Network for Improving Quality of Care for Maternal, Newborn and Child Health, launched by WHO and UNICEF. Fact sheets. Maternal mortality. See more of Anishinaabe Maternal and Child Health Network on Facebook. Log In. Forgotten account? or. Create New Account. Not Now. Visitor Posts. This group was developed and is managed by the Raising Our Children team within Approaches to Community Well-being at Sioux Lookout First Nations Health Authority. . It is intended to support training and education of anyone working with pregnant women, infants and children in the northern communities served by Sioux Lookout First Nations Health Authority. . We welcome information and practice sharing, question asking, and any comments about your important role in supportin...g women and kids. Welcome to this space! See more. Anishinaabe Maternal and Child Health Network. 10 June at 14:50 Â.