

Yoga: empowering women to give birth



Practising yoga in pregnancy gives women control over their bodies and the ability to say, 'This is my birth, my baby, my labour', writes **Nerissa Fields**

This is my 20th year of teaching yoga to pregnant women. I know this because I often bump into one or other of the three 19-year-old boys who were my first yoga babies. I still know their three mothers, and am particularly close friends with two of them. One went on to have three more children, and is planning to train to be a yoga teacher next year. It is thanks to these three women that I now specialise in yoga for pregnancy as they all encouraged me to follow that path.

It has been a learning curve; one is always learning in yoga. When I first started working in this area there were very few other teachers in the same field. However, as yoga teachers we develop our own specific style of teaching, and that has been no exception when working with pregnant women.

My starting point is that I cannot promise anyone a good birth. I would love to be able to say to women that if they practise yoga and do all the 'right things' in pregnancy they will have a wonderful birth.

Unfortunately, no one can promise that. Anything can happen in labour. For instance, the baby only has to have her hand on her head, or turn and become breech, or not be pushing against the cervix, and the labour will become a totally different experience to what the mother might have planned or hoped for.

The two main things that any woman needs in order to give birth are, first, to work with the breath and be focused; and, second, to have the confidence to know that she can do it. After all, one wouldn't run a marathon or climb Everest without good preparation –

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giving birth is no exception. What a woman does not want is to have her mind set on a specific type of birth. Certainly, the pregnant woman needs to go for the birth she wants, whether it be a home birth, a water birth, a

Frances's story: yoga and me

I went to my first yoga class when I was 20. I continued to attend different classes as I travelled around, and by my mid-20s was beginning to practise at home as well as at a weekly session. I found it helped me to stay balanced and developed my flexibility – not only physically but mentally. Sometimes, though, I would slip out of the habit, and I noticed that during these periods my life was more fraught.

I went through a very difficult time when I was living in Jamaica, having miscarried twice and getting no support, and realise now that my daily yoga practice got me through in a way that nothing else would have.

I returned to England four months pregnant and was fortunate to find out about Nerissa's yoga for pregnancy class. I thoroughly enjoyed it. I found the yoga gentle and the support and social side of

it wonderful.

There was also a Saturday session for women to attend with their birthing partners, which was excellent. I felt prepared for the birth; and, although when the time came it was not exactly as I had planned it, I felt in control and



happy with the way things went.

That was 10 years ago. I continue to have close friends I met at that class, and our children still play together when we meet up.

I have since attended Nerissa's various other yoga classes (postnatal, intermediate and advanced). I found her so inspiring that I decided to begin my training as a yoga teacher two years ago.

My life seems to have come full circle. I am now 39 and I have returned to Nerissa's yoga for pregnancy class! My baby is due soon, and I feel completely ready for labour. I am even looking forward to it! I know that whatever happens I will breathe through it and stay in control because, after all, this is my birth, my baby, my labour. *Frances Lee*

Frances has since given birth to a baby boy who weighed in at 9lbs 11oz. She had a water birth at home and did not tear. She grunted him out!

EMMA S STORY

I have two children, Kia aged four and Levi aged one. I feel that having my children has taken me on a journey into yoga and into myself. Yoga has given me extra confidence with my abilities, and helped me to birth two children naturally at home with no medical intervention.

I worked as a nurse for 12 years and have practised yoga for about the same. When I became pregnant with my little girl I was adamant that I wanted a home birth. It came from inside. I continued to go to my regular yoga class and also started going to Nerissa's yoga for pregnancy class. Attending that class helped me to learn many positive techniques to deal with labour and birth. It gave me a complete focus. I also learnt so much about the essence of yoga.

Through practising yoga for pregnancy I learnt to let go, to be easier on myself and to become more flexible: mentally, emotionally and physically. It was such valuable preparation. Although I had my hopes on a home birth, the classes encouraged me to realise that it was okay to have my goal but it was also important to be open and flexible to whatever happened on the day. So I packed a hospital bag just in case!

I found the yoga gentle and relaxing and looked forward to the class for the special connection time with my baby. The repetition of labour movements plus the humming and sound work we did just clicked into place when I went into labour. I enjoyed making sound in the class, and found this invaluable while in labour. It gave me the focus described above and enabled me to hold my space and take myself deep inside my body. I felt totally in control, I hummed through



the contractions and kept my hips moving. I could hear Nerissa's voice: 'upright and mobile', 'send the sound down to your perineum'... I visualised a flower opening; and, with the help of my partner pressing shiatsu points on my back, we had Kia Rose eight hours later weighing 5lbs 8oz at home in the bedroom – no drugs, no gas and air, just yoga, breathing and sound.

With my second baby I attended the same class as I knew it was the yoga that had helped prepare me and put me in such a positive space with Kia. Second time round it all happened more quickly and contractions felt much more intense, but again I coped using the power of sound and flowing with my body. I didn't resist; I let my body open as it wanted to.

In the early stages of labour we were having dinner with Kia and I was able to

leave, do some humming and hip-rocking then get back up at the table and keep everything relatively normal. I have always practised humming with Kia so she wasn't at all fazed by this, although she did think I was being naughty getting up and down from the table while eating! Once she was in bed I let labour take full hold, and it all progressed very quickly.

I phoned the midwife and told her I was okay but we would need her that night. I even practised the warrior pose to keep strong and focused in between contractions. The midwife and my mother (who was coming to look after Kia) both turned up at the same time just after I had gone into the final stage of labour and Levi's head was crowning. Levi was delivered about 15 minutes later weighing 7lbs 1oz. I was able to work with body, breath and sound – and stay focused. When the time came I breathed and panted with the final contraction and delivered him myself on to my tummy. It was an amazing experience.

Both times I felt an immense connection to the ancestral spirit, tuning into all the millions of women who had given birth before me as well as tuning into my own body. Yoga has taught me to listen, love myself and embrace life.

Having children changed me as a woman, and my personal yoga practice has deepened. Yoga time keeps my backache free and gives me space from busy family life. I am currently training with the British Wheel of Yoga to become a yoga teacher, and feel very drawn to working with pregnant women and children. I would like to be able to share my experiences and help empower women to be positively prepared for their pregnancy, labour and birth.

Emma Kennedy

birth with a partner and/or doula or a hospital birth. However, it is really important that she has an open mind and is able to deal with whatever happens. When a woman phones me and says that her birth did not go to plan (maybe she needed a ventouse, a forceps delivery or even an emergency caesarean) but she dealt with it – she continued to work with her breath, she

stayed in control and she came out of labour not only with a beautiful baby but feeling good about the birth – that is when yoga really comes to the fore.

I recently read that women are more scared of giving birth than they used to be. There have been two large British studies, *Great Expectations* (Green et al 1998) and *Greater Expectations* (Green et al 2003).

Among other things, these looked at women's anxiety at the prospect of giving birth: in 1987, 9 per cent of women were 'very worried'; by 2000, this had risen to 26 per cent. I read, too, of a 'celebrity' who had decided to have an elective caesarean because her mother had had a 'dreadful time with her and her brother' when she gave birth and she openly said she was scared. She then went on ►

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to say that giving birth was 'about choice'. She is absolutely right: giving birth has to be about choice, but it is also 100 per cent about preparation.

Giving birth is an holistic experience, mentally, physically and emotionally. Mentally, we work on concentration, the ability to focus and to have an open mind; physically, we stretch, strengthen, tone and relax the whole body; and, emotionally, we work on balance. Women's hormones have a lot to answer for from when we begin menstruating to beyond the menopause; bringing about that sense of balance, stillness and positive life and energy in pregnancy is fundamental to wholeness. Had the particular woman above known that she could have prepared for birth in a positive, constructive and creative way, she might have felt very different.

I feel that it is the empowerment of women to feel confident about giving birth that is so important. Consequently, by the time a woman reaches the day on which she is to give birth, she feels positive about the labour as well as meeting her new baby.

To get to this point it is important to work with small groups of women – a maximum of 10 – and to create a warm, safe environment. It is essential, too, that whatever work the woman does – whether she is a shop assistant or a doctor – that she takes her professional hat off and becomes the mother-to-be that she is. From this basis, one works on yoga movements that are relevant for pregnancy and for labour, with the focus on the role of the breath and sound. Yoga helps to alleviate stress and tension, to build up self-esteem and self-confidence and makes one feel good. And we all need that. Space for discussion is created alongside the holistic preparation for birth. It is as important as the yoga itself to take the time to talk about fears and anxieties as well as hopes and bringing the baby home.

It is key to keep the preparation for labour simple – ie, working with a few specific movements and knowing how to breathe. The breathing techniques are basic and relevant for pregnancy and birth. These are then practised regularly. Visualisation for birth is also included with breath work. It is the constant repetition that aids learning when preparing for childbirth. So, when a woman goes into labour she does not need to have taken a PhD in birth preparation; what

she needs is a few tried and tested techniques that she has practised many times and feels comfortable with and which have thus become second nature. This works well with the same repeated phrases:

- breath, movement, contraction working together
- sound, movement, contraction working together
- each contraction will end
- you have control: this is your birth, your baby, your labour.

It is the movement with breath or movement with sound working together that is required to work through labour. Sound is a good way of working with the breath, of clearing the mind of thoughts, and is a positive focus. The sounds I recommend in the first stage of labour are 'humming' or 'aahing' or any deep sound the woman feels comfortable with. The sound needs to go down to the perineum. Screaming is out – deep sounds are in! In the second stage of labour it is the deep grunting noises that help – again, sound and awareness right down to the perineum.

A woman in labour needs to feel free to do whatever she wants. She needs to be able to get in touch with her primal self. There is a sympathetic relationship between the mouth and the vagina; feeling the connection of sound between the mouth and the vagina is good preparation for the second stage of labour. The sound will actually help the birth of the baby. Thus, in labour, a woman needs to be able to open up and let go holistically: mentally, physically and emotionally.

Hence, the power of words, the power of sound and the wonderful power of the breath come together. So when the day for birth arrives the woman has both the knowledge and confidence that whatever happens she can deal with it and see it through, and if she loses control she can regain it by working with her breath. Being empowered to give birth not only sets a woman up for labour but for life. This is her birth, her baby, her labour. **TPM**

Nerissa Fields is a yoga teacher based in Leicester

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