



# Yoga and *giving* Birth

MADONNA AND CINDY CRAWFORD DID IT WHILE PREGNANT. SO TOO DO AN EVER-INCREASING NUMBER OF AUSTRALIAN WOMEN.

BY JANE CAMPBELL-KAYE

Yoga - it seems has stolen the limelight from 'pregnastics', aquarobics and other forms of fitness training as the preparation of choice for that most extraordinary life event: giving birth.

Curiously, most women who venture into 'yoga for pregnancy' classes have little or no idea of what to expect, never having practised yoga before. Yet they usually discover they love it, and keep up regular attendance, confiding later that "yoga helped me to birth my baby". What are these women getting from their pre-natal yoga classes that they are not getting elsewhere?

## NATURAL VERSES NORMAL

As we move into the new millennium, I believe that many people are expressing a growing desire for a return to natural, instinctive, inner

knowledge in all ways of living their lives and looking after themselves.

Some women want, if possible, to have a natural birth. A natural birth is one where there is no interference, no induction stimulation or management of the process of labour. Drugs are not used in a natural labour, and there are no fixed time limits for any stage. Women who want to give birth naturally need support and preparation if they are going to "go natural" in settings where it is, nowadays, considered normal for birth to be controlled and managed by technology and technicians.

In this issue I propose to look at aspects of yoga which women are taking into the delivery suite to help birth their babies naturally, with power and confidence.

## INTUITION IN THE PROCESS OF LABOUR

The process of labour and birth is orchestrated by a magical cocktail of hormones produced within the mother, and stimulated by hormones from the baby. The hormones peak and flow and interchange in precisely the concentrations needed. Artificial chemicals cannot mimic the subtle precision of our own hormones.

The knowledge of how to give birth is programmed into the brain of every girl that is born, passed down from her mother, her mother's mother, back to the first mothers. Scientists now know that this intuitive birth knowledge is embedded deep in the most primitive part of the brain, and not in the frontal 'intelligent' part. It's now understood that birth flows more smoothly when women know how to shut down the so-called 'civilised' brain and allow the ancient knowledge stored in the brain stem to surface.

In yoga, we practise accessing the third eye or Ajna chakra, as it is known in Sanskrit. In this way we are able to tap into the intuitive part of ourselves whether through asana, pranayama, relaxation or meditation. It is an integral part of yoga, and one that pregnant women particularly appreciate, even when they do not yet realise the value this skill will have for them.

## A SAFE PLACE

Animals in the wild demonstrate classic behaviours while in labour. They look for a private space that is often dark. The frontal brain is activated by anxiety and bright lights, and may impede the smooth progress of birthing. This is the same in humans. When animals are disturbed or threatened, their labours slow down or even stop, until things are safe again. This can also happen to women especially at the point of leaving home and travelling to hospital. Temperatures, the level of trust in those present, noise and even some smells can all help or hinder the progress of a labour.

## THE SAFE SPACE IN YOGA CLASS

Watch a yoga teacher prepare the space for class. Reflect on the paragraph above. Each mat represents a private space. Attention is always given to making the room quiet. Work is sometimes done with the eyes closed. Yoga is non-competitive. Progress is never judged by comparing one student to another. Listen to these kinds of statements from yoga teachers:

"Enjoy the enquiry into what you are experiencing."

"If you let go of what is holding you back you will find that you begin to open up."

"Try feeling, not thinking."

"Let yourself just be in the moment."

These could all be the words of people supporting a labouring mother. What we practise in yoga is perfect preparation for birth. In yoga we work at our own levels, we accept our limitations with grace and patience, and we look for the positive in everything. What a contrast for pregnant women whose antenatal experience is often centred round a search for things that might be wrong.

### PAIN

The pain of labour is not like any other kind of pain. To dull these sensations, the healthy, drug-free female body produces endorphins, which are similar in composition to opiates. These produce an altered state of reality. Endorphins are inhibited when women are anxious, feel unsafe, lose trust or are overstimulated.

Endorphins are increased during labour through massage or stroking, a shower or bath pool, slow focused breathing, gentle repetitive movement such as hip rolling or swaying, and chanting or humming. Much of what we do in a general yoga class is endorphin enhancing.

Yoga devotees will know the sense of well being that comes from maintaining a series of strong postures, persevering with a still posture for some time, practising pranayama, or on coming out of a deep relaxation. These are invaluable tools that pregnant women take away from yoga classes.

I get such a buzz from watching women who realise they can boost endorphins themselves. Then when in labour, they are confident to help themselves enter that altered state again. Sometimes, women who are full of their own endorphins look very spaced out!

### SOUND AND LABOUR

The use of persistent tonal chanting or droning is a feature of every major world religion, and is clearly a tool for entering an altered mind state. The use of sound for labour and birth has become an important feature of my work with pregnant women. This is not something that is usually practised in a hospital-based antenatal class.

Natural endorphin flow during advanced labour.

Initially, everyone is a little self-conscious. I find that the group is less inhibited when we begin with a simple hum in unison. Placing hands on the face, neck, upper chest and throat, the women feel, as well as hear the hum. This encourages them to work towards optimum vibration and resonance, which maximises the flow of endorphins. Humming through the entire exhalation, playing with different notes and gaining confidence to move on to 'oo', 'aw', 'oh' and 'ah' sounds, we build up to an exercise I call 'Swallow the Bee'.

'Swallow the Bee' is a sound exercise where we imagine a buzzing (harmless!) insect in front of our faces. Opening the mouth and sounding 'ah' we take the insect into our mouths. We close the mouth as we change the sound to 'oh', and then on the sound 'mm' we take the buzzing insect down to tickle the baby's bottom (just under the diaphragm). The hum continues till the breath runs out. A deep inhalation follows, and the sound starts again.

With a group all working together, the sound is constant, very resonant and quite beautiful. I often ask the women to finish after three or four minutes with a few plain hums, and to become aware of the vibration that has been created in the space by the group. This of course is my westernised version of the Sanskrit word, 'Om'.

Labour is the word for hard work, and that is what birth can be about. Another sound exercise I offer to my pregnant clients is one I call 'Chain Gang'. We stand in a circle and copy simple repetitive movements that involve swaying and lunging (both good labour movements). I initiate a sound and the group echoes it back. This often develops into actions like digging, chopping, pulling and pushing. When we do this, we automatically get louder and deeper sounds with much more power behind them. These are the kinds of sounds some women need to get their babies out.

### BREATHING FOR BIRTH

Many women come to yoga classes because their mothers and aunts are asking them "Have you learned the breathing yet?" Thirty years ago, women learned all sorts of complex patterns of breathing intended to distract them from the intensity of labour. The most popular of these techniques was the Lamaze method. These techniques are not generally taught in antenatal classes today.

Like every yoga teacher, I make the importance of the breath one of the cornerstones of my work, as it is doubly important when there are two lives supported by one breath. My goal is to encourage women to find what works for them and to be prepared for things to change as the labour progresses.

I emphasise the importance of exhalation. The exhalation is a gift, and an ally. Each out breath is an opportunity to let go. As we slowly sigh away the air we no longer need, the lungs are emptied and space is made for the rush of energy and renewal that is the inhalation. We are even offered the gift of a little pause, a break in which absolutely nothing happens, between the exhalation and the body's choice to expand and suck in the rush of new life that is the inhalation. If we focus on the quality of the exhalation, the inhalation just takes care of itself.

Furthermore, the exhalation reminds us to let go of more than stale air. It is an opportunity to release tension from the body. As we sigh we let go of the physical self and give our weight down through our spines to the earth, and the pull of gravity. For women in labour, this physical release between breaths and between contractions can be a great way to conserve energy and rest before the next surge.

As well, each exhalation is an invitation to let go of what went before, especially if it was unpleasant or arduous. This process of letting go of what has emotionally hung over us allows us to just "be" in the empty space before the wheel of respiration turns again.

The only advice on breathing that I give for women in labour is "Remember to breathe out"

#### POSITIONS FOR BIRTH

Postures best for labour depend on how long the labour is likely to be, the baby's position, the mother's amount of physical support, and a host of other factors. Confident healthy women will intuitively change positions frequently throughout their labours and births.

I do talk in my classes about the value of upright postures to enable the pull of gravity to let the baby down. These could be alone or supported, sitting, standing, kneeling, or even side-lying positions. Lying on the back for birth is for most women like trying to push a bus uphill.

I talk about the 'dance of labour' that I have often witnessed. This is the slow, rhythmic gyration reminiscent of belly dance movements that women do by themselves, and often with their partners. It is as though the sensual closeness that led to the baby's creation is now leading up to getting him or her born!

## Endorphins are increased during labour through massage or stroking, a shower or bath pool, slow focused breathing, gentle repetitive movement such as hip rolling or swaying, and chanting or humming.

This is one mother's account of how she combined yoga with labour. Helen subsequently gave birth to her beautiful daughter, Avery.

**Q: What postures did you find most helpful in labour?**

*Helen: During labour I found all the postures I had practised in class were used. In particular, standing while leaning forward from the waist with the top half of my body horizontal to the leaning support. Then while in my 'second stage', being down on all fours, using circular pelvic movements.*

**Q: As well as postures what else did you find helpful?**

*Helen: I found the power of visualisation particularly effective. We would do some form of visualisation in each class. This enabled me to connect deeply with my body, particularly in the pelvic area. It also helped me to connect very deeply with my baby while still in the womb, and also during birth. By the time I was giving birth, I had developed a strong communication with my baby.*

*Jane would often use a phrase 'letting go to open up.' This helped me to free, or open up that part of my body experiencing contractions. I noticed that my shoulders, jaw and mouth were also a part of this. If I had tension in these areas during a contraction, the pain was much more intense.*

**Q: Did you consider using yogic sounds or chanting in your labour?**

*Helen: Often during yoga classes, we would rehearse and explore the use of sound - in particular the use of chant in relation to our*

*bodies. I used sound throughout my labour, from the moment regular contractions started. This was in the form of long sustained notes lasting for the whole of my outbreath, which was usually also the length of a contraction. I cannot remember breathing halfway through these long notes but I probably did from time to time. The pitch of the note, and where I placed it visually in my body had a lot to do with the success of my contraction. As the labour progressed, the use of sound became more and more beneficial and effective.*

**Q: Can you expand on how you were able to use sound particularly in the second stage of labour?**

*Helen: When my midwife suggested relaxing my shoulders, and imagining going through the contraction, it was at this time that all my 'yoga training' started to kick in. Suddenly, the sounds I produced became much deeper, more resonant. My mouth and jaw were very relaxed and I felt as though the sound was being directed from the birth canal. Somehow, I found myself enjoying this, and again the pain was much more manageable.*

*During the second stage, my use of sound altered, and became less significant as I concentrated on pushing my baby out. These outbreaths were more like long 'pushing sighs' as my body engaged all the necessary muscles and strength to give birth.*



Bonding with baby happens even before birth, as you 'internalise' through yoga.

I constantly encourage women to drop within, follow their instincts, act on their feelings not their thoughts, and let their intuition guide them through this amazing, unique, birth journey.

As yoga teachers, we have more tools to give to a woman who wants a natural birth than most other health care providers she will meet during the course of her pregnancy. That is because our work embraces not just the physical realm, but also the emotional and spiritual. During pregnancy, birth and early mothering, women benefit greatly when they have skills to help them bring these three realms into balance. The tools yoga teachers pass on to all our clients include mindfulness, patience, acceptance, endurance, intuitiveness, enquiry, individuality, positivity, inventiveness, adaptability. Women will draw on these skills in their pregnancies, during their labours and in their new lives as mothers.

Jane Campbell-Kaye is a specialist in the area of yoga with women in the childbearing year. She is also a qualified childbirth and parenting educator. Jane trained in London with Janet Balaskas. She is a member of the International Active Birth and Yoga Teachers Association and holds trainer status with the National Association of Childbirth Educators. She is an associate member of the IYTA.

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