



YOGA FOR PREGNANT WOMEN IS AN AREA THAT NO YOGA TEACHER CAN AFFORD TO TAKE LIGHTLY.

PREGNANT WOMEN SEEM TO BE INCREASINGLY TURNING TO YOGA AS PART OF THEIR PREPARATION FOR CHILDBIRTH. WHILE YOGA IS GENERALLY BENEFICIAL FOR MOST PREGNANT WOMEN, IT IS CERTAINLY A SPECIALIST AREA THAT MANY YOGA TEACHERS FIND CHALLENGING AND SOMETIMES DAUNTING. THIS IS PARTICULARLY TRUE WHEN THE NEW PREGNANT CLIENT HAS NEVER DONE YOGA BEFORE.

In this issue, *Australian Yoga Life* looks at how yoga teachers can look to incorporate the special needs of pregnant women in their classes, with advice from Australia's foremost expert in the field, Jane Campbell-Kaye.

She says: "Yoga for pregnancy has been enjoying quite a celebrity status lately. Perhaps this trendy image attracts many women, for it is becoming increasingly common for women to look for their first ever yoga class during a pregnancy.

There are a wide variety of reasons for this. It is a good idea for yoga teachers to examine and reflect on all these reasons, so as to be able to be quite clear about what they can and cannot offer to pregnant clients.

- Many women say they want to come to yoga now they are pregnant because they feel unfit.
- Others find their way to yoga teachers in the hope of improving all sorts of minor

ailments such as heartburn, insomnia, puffiness and breathlessness.

- Some women are experiencing anxiety with their pregnancy and someone has suggested yoga to them.
- Many women are looking for somewhere to meet other pregnant women.
- Some women fear the pain of labour and believe that practising yoga during their pregnancy will alleviate this.
- Many women are looking for information relating to pregnancy, birth and parenting.
- The huge changes of pregnancy often cause women to look for ways of redefining themselves.
- Many are looking for acceptance in their new form in new circles.
- Many women are looking for a way to process the grief of miscarriage, previous termination and past sexual assault, and

want this pregnancy to be a joyous journey into renewal.

- Some women are looking to be nurtured, perhaps by a mother figure to replace the one that is not nearby.

JANE'S STYLE OF TEACHING

In my antenatal yoga classes, we commence with introductions and I gather in client record forms full of personal information often invaluable to me in understanding each client's needs. Having the women briefly share how they are each feeling today, enables me in making quick changes to a class plan if needed.

We will then move on to a short breath awareness, to bring us into the space, to leave the stressful world outside and to invite the unseen babies into our fold.

The asana section of my classes concentrates on a variety of adaptations of classical postures intended to benefit the pregnant woman and her baby. This section would typically last around one hour.

I include a section of pelvic floor work in every one of my pregnancy classes. There is a great need for developing awareness and control in this part of the anatomy; for pregnancy, for birth and then recovery. Many of my pelvic floor exercises are derived from body mind centering practices and some from physiotherapy. From classical yoga I include Aswini Mudra and a gentle version of Moola Bandha.

I always finish with breath awareness and relaxation. For many women this is the part they love the most. However ungainly they feel, however anxious about the challenge ahead, this time brings them into the safe space of the moment and reconnects them with themselves and their unborn babies.

My classes always finish with a social time. I make a pot of herb tea and offer dried fruit and nuts. We form a close circle and share this time together. Sometimes it is only 10 minutes and just long enough to exchange names. Sometimes it is longer and we talk on a chosen topic around pregnancy, birth and parenting issues. The occasions when I find it hard to finish on time are those when one of the group comes back with her baby and tells her birth story. On those visits I just sit back and let the women teach each other.

This style of teaching meets many of the physical, emotional, social or educational



Alison with newborn Rafferty.

needs of pregnant women. It also takes longer than a general class. I teach classes of two hours duration.

PREGNANT WOMEN IN A NON-PREGNANT CLASS

Because of the growing popularity of yoga among pregnant women, and because there aren't many specialist teachers in Australia, many women are requesting places in non-pregnant classes. Perhaps because of this, some yoga teachers without specialist training in this area are setting up classes just for pregnant women.

In this last section I would like to offer some hints and ideas for those of you who feel you could use them:

In the next Issue of *Australian Yoga Life* I will focus more on adaptations and modifications, identify postures to assist with common ailments of pregnancy and discuss cautions and even exclusions.

CREATE A HEALTH FORM

Just as you would want to know about health problems with your non-pregnant clients, it is important that you take some kind of history from your pregnant ones. Devise a form, which asks when the baby is due, whether this is a first or subsequent pregnancy, and if there were any complications with another pregnancy. Ask how the woman's physical and emotional health has been in this pregnancy and if there is anything special or different about this pregnancy.

In cases of twins, breech presentation or placenta previa, for example, you will need to be ready to offer cautions on certain asanas. In a later issue of *Australian Yoga Life* I will deal with these in more detail. Above all, include a section for her to sign, which makes it clear that it is her responsibility to inform you of any change in her wellbeing. I keep these forms on file and add notes to them if there is ever a change in a client's condition or if any incident occurs in class.

DON'T WORRY, KEEP PERSPECTIVE

Now, let go any anxiety caused by the above, and believe me that the majority of pregnant women are wonderfully well, and very in tune with their bodies. Along the way most of them will suffer one or more of the normal discomforts of pregnancy, and in the next issue I will give you a number of postures specifically for those.

But do keep in mind that certain asanas will be unsuitable for the majority of pregnant women.

Lying prone on their bellies is obviously out. Lying supine on their backs will also be too uncomfortable for some. Elevated postures are not recommended because of their effect on blood flow, and simply standing for a while can cause a pregnant woman to faint.

SOME BASIC POSTURES FOR PREGNANCY

Here are a few postures to offer as alternatives when your pregnant client is unable to do what the rest of the class are doing.



Sylvia in the Cow posture.



Sylvia in Vine posture.



Sylvia enjoying the support of the ball.



Storm kneeling on a bolster.

Clothing supplied by Pranava.



Lisa in a calf stretch.

- 1. Calf stretches.** Calf stretches either on all fours or standing and leaning on a wall. These are useful for easing calf cramp, which is very common in pregnancy.
- 2. Safe squat.** A supported and safe version of a squat can be done with the back against a wall and the feet a little way out. The woman slides her flat spine down the wall bending her knees over her toes, until her thigh muscles are working, and the thighs are parallel to the floor. Like a ski preparation practice. In this position she strengthens her legs in preparation for any upright birthing positions. She can also do a form of Bridge, or Sethu Bandhasana, by slowly peeling her pubic bone up and lifting her spine, vertebra by vertebra, till she may be as high as her shoulders. Then she can lower her spine bit by bit again till she places her tailbone down. This is a gentle lubricant and spine release.
- 3. Cow and Vine.** Both the Cow (Gomulkhasana) and the Vine (Garudasana) postures are loved by pregnant women for

their release of the shoulders, help with rib pain and increase in breath capacity. I teach only the arm movements in the modified form, the women choosing to sit or kneel for the posture.

- 4. Cat stretch.** Arching up and simply returning to the level back position will gently stretch the spine, open the upper spine and release lower back tension. Avoiding the upward facing phase protects the lower lumbar curve.

USEFUL READING

If you are going to have pregnant women in your classes, I suggest you do a bit of reading on pregnancy and birth for yourself, and better still, invest in a couple of books that you can make available to pregnant clients, perhaps in those sections of your class they can't do.

You will gather good ideas from these for your classes: *Preparing for Birth with Yoga* by Janet Balaskas, published by Element; *Easy Exercises for Pregnancy* by Janet Balaskas, published by Harper Collins.; *Positive Pregnancy Fitness* by Sylvia Klein Olkin, published by Avery.

Both you and your clients will learn more about natural birth and grow to understand the relevance of yoga in preparing for this, if you read any of these: *Birthing from Within* by Pam England, published by Partera Press. *Birth Reborn* by Michel Odent, published by Souvenir Press. *Mind over Labour* by Carl Jones, published by Penguin.

USEFUL TIPS

- Invest in one of those outsize inflated soft plastic balls known as a Swiss, Fit or Birth Ball. They are wonderfully supportive for the spine and I offer one to any woman who has pain sitting or kneeling, or faint on standing. A 65cm ball will be best for most women.
- Provide bolsters for women who have

trouble kneeling. The loosening hormones of pregnancy often cause pain in the joints, and the excess weight settling on the heels is too painful

- Make friends with a midwife or an educator who supports natural birth. She can help you with questions you can't answer. If you can't find one contact The National Association of Childbirth Educators, P.O. Box 311, Caulfield East, Victoria. 3145.
- Whenever possible, try to attend classes with yoga teachers who work in this very internal, simple, explorative way. Donna Farhi, featured in *Australian Yoga Life*, is one such teacher. Also Carola Krusche who lives on the Central Coast of NSW who offers workshops in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane.

JANES' STYLE OF YOGA

Integral to my training as a pregnancy yoga specialist was a retraining in my yoga practice. The guru of this unnamed method was Vanda Scaravelli, who died in 1999. She had been a pupil of both B.K.S. Iyengar and of Desikachar. She had taken what she liked from their work, discarded what she didn't like and come up with a style that she refused to name because she said that would limit it. She had pared away at the work until she had reduced it to its simplest forms. What was left were an awareness of gravity, a relationship with the breath and a sense of the wave-like motion of the spine at all times. I never attended a class with Vanda Scaravelli, but I was fortunate enough to work with her pupil, Sandra Sabatini. I recommend their books to you: *Awakening the Spine* by Vanda Scaravelli, published by Harper Collins; *Breath - the Essence of Yoga* by Sandra Sabatini, published by Thorsons

This kind of yoga appeals particularly to pregnant women. It is gentle, inward looking and totally non-competitive. It encourages

women to feel, rather than think. It helps them become connected with their unborn children. It nurtures their own inner knowledge or instincts when it comes to birthing their babies.

FUTURE TOPICS

In future editions I intend to look at adaptations and modifications to standard asanas, identify postures to assist with common ailments of pregnancy and discuss cautions and exclusions. I plan to discuss how yoga can help during the actual birth of a baby and in the postnatal months. If there any other aspects you would like covered send your request direct to *Australian Yoga Life*."

SOME COMMENTS FROM TEACHERS.

Jeanette Campbell, an International Yoga Teachers Association (IYTA) representative who handles the enquiry line for the Brisbane region, encourages pregnant women to join her normal classes but with a note of caution.

Jeanette doesn't take pregnant women into her classes during their first three months of pregnancy or in their final three months, unless they have been doing yoga for a very long time. She feels it is best for women fresh to yoga to avoid the risks of those periods.

"The danger", Jeanette says, "is that women can over-stretch during yoga, especially in the first and final three month periods.

"Which is why I recommend Jane Campbell-Kaye to them," Jeanette says practically.

"When there are 20 to 30 others in a class, you have to keep your wits about you to be able to help the women who are pregnant," Jeanette says. "It's very important."

But Jeanette is a strong advocate for the benefits of yoga in pregnancy - and they go well beyond the physical well-being aspects.

"A lot of women come along to meet other people who are doing the same thing", says Jeanette. "They find a very supportive environment in a yoga class."

As a yoga teacher and the mother of two small children, Rita Leu knows first-hand what the women in her class are going through and how yoga can help.

"It takes me back to my own experience," she laughs. "I attended a normal yoga class and found my way through what I could and couldn't do.

"I have the pregnant student next to me... so if a posture is not suitable for them any more, I can easily modify their poses as we go," she says. "The main thing is, you have to make sure it's safe for them."

Rita is also an advocate for yoga and the way it assists pregnant mums mentally as well as physically.

"My aim is always to be positive and optimistic with them," she says. She leads mums with gentle encouragement to achieve as much as they can, within comfort levels.

"I tell them that they are doing well and encourage them to make the most of this wonderful time," says Rita. "There's a nice energy in a yoga class that pregnant students can really enjoy.

"Yoga is not a miracle cure (to use) in childbirth, but it's sure helpful."

State Contacts

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