

The Yoga Of Motherhood

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Motherhood

Most people know the importance of yoga during pregnancy, but there is less awareness of how yoga can enhance the mother's physical and mental wellbeing once the baby is born. In this brief guide for new and experienced yogis, Ana Davis explores how yoga can help provide a fresh perspective on the challenges of new motherhood.

In the sleep deprived haze of new motherhood, I felt that I had lost my former life. The endless tasks involved in caring for my newborn saw me say goodbye to my precious daily yoga practice. As a yoga teacher and long time practitioner, this was a big adjustment.

It was only when I came to see the journey of motherhood as the ultimate act of devotional yoga, that I was able to surrender and release any feelings of resentment about the irreversible changes to the landscape of my daily routines.

Instead of looking at the clock and wishing I could be on my yoga mat while I patted my baby to sleep for sometimes up to an hour, I found I needed to make a conscious decision to soften into the moment and make *this* my yoga. "This is my yoga", I said, as a silent mantra to myself, "He is my yoga." This moment by moment experience of holding my baby close afforded me the opportunity to breathe deeply and feel the warmth from my heart and solar plexus centres permeating into his soft little body.

Centring and connection

With this shift in my thinking about the 'yoga of motherhood', I was also able to accept that my asana (posture) practice needed to be shaped around my baby-centred chores. Flexibility was the key. Instead of fighting against my limited time, I utilised every spare moment to get back on the yoga mat while my baby slept or was being minded by someone else. The beauty of yoga as a way of promoting mind-body wellness for busy new mums is that we can do it at home, in our living room. It's an ideal postnatal form of exercise as it is gentle and broad enough in its repertoire so that it can be sensitively adapted to the changing

needs of each woman. It is also safe and beneficial even for an absolute beginner.

I discovered that a lot could be achieved in a mere 20 or 30 minutes home practice: a complete and rounded practice that left me feeling refreshed, nourished and ready to return to the demands of mothering and running a yoga studio.

Conversely, Sydney yoga teacher Alexis Stewart didn't practice any yoga at all for the first six months after the birth of her son. She found that, as a consequence, she crashed mentally, physically and emotionally. "The worst of it was that I didn't feel like 'myself' and yet I couldn't remember how it was that I used to feel," reflects Alexis. "I just knew that I didn't feel like 'me'."

In the years since, Alexis has observed the many benefits that new mothers in her classes, experienced and novices alike, have received. She believes that new mums often lose their connection with the present moment because they are so busy and exhausted and get lost amidst their chores. "So yoga is a time to slow the whole show down," Alexis says. "By being in their bodies and watching their breath, they are brought into the present moment of 'being'. It is 'being' that the soul craves, and the more we are able to be, the more balanced we feel."

Many women are introduced to yoga for the first time when they attend pregnancy classes or, for an increasing number, their entrée into the joys and rewards of yoga may be through attending a Mums 'n' Bubs yoga class. Perhaps this is because these unique classes are baby friendly, allowing the mum to bring her baby to class.

Jayne Hughes, one of the mothers in the Mums 'n' Bubs yoga classes at Bondi Bliss Yoga Studio, found

postnatal yoga a godsend. She enjoyed the sense of community offered by yoga classes designed especially for new mums and their babies.

"I loved the special time and space these postnatal classes created for us in the early days and also the wonderful mums and bubs I've met through the classes," Jayne recalls.

A valuable skill that many of the mothers in these classes learn is how to relax – even amidst the cacophony of noises of a room full of babies. As Jayne found, this was a practical skill she was able to then apply within the context of her busy home life.

"I was able to give myself short relaxation sessions despite everything going on around me – dirty nappies, housework etc. – to relax and turn off and find my own quiet space", says Jayne.

What Byron Bay mum, Renee Adams-Cook enjoys about attending postnatal yoga classes is that she feels like she is doing something for herself. "The classes are not too strenuous for a new mum, but at the same time, I still feel like I'm doing exercise and getting the benefits," Renee says.

An overwrought new mother may be resistant to doing anything that might take her away from her many baby related obligations. However, in my experience, as well as that of many of my students and colleagues, yoga can actually help her care for her baby better.

If the mother practices yoga techniques that nurture her, then it only increases her energy and vitality to keep on giving back to her child. As Jayne Hughes says, "The classes helped me to keep my own mental health in sight as an important element of mothering, particularly in those early days."

Viloma Pranayama with interruption of the inhalation

Take a couple of full breaths and as you inhale, visualise filling up with breath from the base of the torso (the pubic bone) to the top of the torso (the collar bones/base of throat). Next, divide the inhalation into three parts with short breath retention in between. So, inhale a third of the breath, visualising filling from the pubic bone to the navel. Pause. Then inhale another third of the way from the navel to the chest (line of the nipples). Pause. Finally, fill all the way to the top of the chest to the collar bones. Pause. Then, exhale slowly and deeply. Take a normal, unbroken inhalation and exhalation. Then continue between five to 10 more rounds of this broken, three part inhalation, with normal breaths in between. Cease the practice and breathe normally if you feel dizzy or uncomfortable at any time.

Nurturing and restoration

In the first six weeks or so after childbirth, a woman's yoga practice needs to be gentle and nurturing. Pranayama (breathing techniques), relaxation and supported restorative postures will form the basis of her practice. These practices will help her rest and rejuvenate on a deep level. This very gentle approach to postnatal yoga makes it ideal for the first time practitioner to experience how yoga can help in the healing process.

There is no need for the mother to rush onto the gym treadmill or back to her favourite Ashtanga class in an attempt to lose the baby weight. In fact, strong exercise, if performed too early or rigorously, can be counter productive and can contribute towards injury and even burn-out.

Instead, she can take this opportunity to practice the yogic concept of *ahimsa*. Ahimsa or non-violence means not only cultivating gentleness towards others but also compassion towards oneself. This is where restorative yoga poses come to the fore: deeply restful postures with plenty of support, from bolsters, cushions, blankets or blocks. Judith Lasater's

[the first six weeks]



Supta Padangusthasana (Reclining big toe pose) – skip the leg to side/ inner thigh stretch variation



Janu Sirsana (Head to knee pose) and Maha Mudra (The Great Seal)



Apanasana (supine knees to chest)
Pelvic floor 'kegels' exercise, which can be started straight after birth



Marjariasana (Cat pose) – all fours with abdominal lifts on the exhale

classic book *Relax & Renew* is a great way to acquaint you with these poses.

Perth based yoga teacher and mum, Kiah Hamersley found she experienced gentle back bending and shoulder opening effects from the pose Supta Baddha Konasana (Reclining bound angle pose) over a bolster. "I loved it for the the calm, measured breathing it seemed to induce and the opportunity it gave me to put the eye bag on and rest," says Kiah. "I think I even went to sleep in the pose (legs supported on pillows) when I did it in bed! Which may sound bizarre but it really helped me get into a deep sleep quickly."

One of my own favourites after the birth of my son, Marley, two years ago, was Supta Virasana (Reclining hero pose) supported on a bolster, to passively stretch my quadriceps and psoas. As is common, these had become tight from the lower back being moved into exaggerated lumbar lordosis (swayed lower back) in the latter months of pregnancy. I also found this pose beneficial for its gentle stretching and opening of the abdominal area that had been so cramped from sharing the space with the baby in utero.

After bleeding stops, the restorative pose, Viparita Karani (Legs up the wall pose) with the bottom supported on a folded blanket or bolster, is a wonderful pose that can be practiced on its own at any time to receive the benefits of an inversion as well as facilitating deep breathing. It is extremely rejuvenating and therapeutic for the lower back. See 'The First 6 Weeks' for other safe and effective poses.

While in a supported pose or sitting or lying in relaxation, the emphasis is on lengthening and deepening the inhalation during the early postnatal weeks. I found the *viloma pranayama* (interval breathing) with emphasis on the three part inhalation especially helpful. (See pull out box for instructions). Focusing on the inhalations can help energise and build optimism which can be beneficial for counteracting the lethargy and negativity that can accompany sleep deprivation. As time goes on, women can shift their focus to longer exhalations which engender relaxation and the letting go of mental and physical tension.

[6 Weeks Onwards]



Standing poses, especially *Virabhadrasana I* and II (*Warrior I* and II)



Floor based hip and shoulder stretches like *Kapotasana* (*Pigeon pose*, above) and *Gomukhasana* (*Cow face pose*, right)



Arm/core strengthening poses like *Chaturanga Dandasana* (*Plank pose*) and Forearm Plank and half *Navasana* (*Boat pose*)



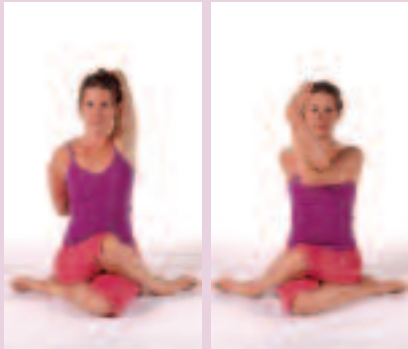
Finishing poses such as *Sarvangasana* (*Shoulder stand*), supported *Setu Bandha Sarvangasana* (*Bridge pose*, variations as above) over bolster(s) or block and most importantly, *Shavasana* (*Corpse pose*)



[10 yoga survival tips for new mums]

1. Take the opportunity to do a short home practice whenever you have a spare window in your day. Prioritize 10 minutes of supported relaxation over housework-It can wait, but your sanity might not!
2. Set up a room, or corner of a room, as your sacred yoga space, where your yoga mat and equipment live, and preferably with access to some wall space for poses such as inversions.
3. You don't have to limit your yoga practice to quiet, dedicated times in your day. While watching TV at night, lie over a bolster or sit on the floor and stretch your tired, tight body or do a shoulder stretch while waiting for the kettle to boil.
4. Work with your energy levels, not against them. If you are feeling particularly exhausted, then don't force yourself to do lots of Salutes to the Sun (*Surya Namaskar*). Instead, nurture yourself with some restorative poses and deep relaxation. This will be a tonic to your nervous system rather than increasing the stress on your already depleted system.
5. As soon as you can, from around six weeks for a natural birth, start abdominal exercises, making sure they are gentle, precise and graduated. Learn to engage your core muscles when lifting your baby or lugging your stroller. This will help protect against back strain as well as prepare your back for the weight of larger babies and toddlers.
6. Use breast feeding and any prolonged period of sitting or standing, such as rocking or patting your baby to sleep, as an opportunity to scan your awareness around your body, breathing out and away any accumulated tension. Your baby may also pick up on your calming energy and settle and feed more easily.
7. Practice being aware of your posture when you breastfeed. Focus on lengthening from the base of your spine to the crown of your head, release your shoulders back and down and then breathe, soften and enjoy.
8. Punctuate your day with conscious sighing and what is called 'the falling-out breath' -inhale through the mouth, followed with a long, slow, audible exhalation through the open mouth. This can help release pent up stress, soften the seriousness of your mindset and brighten your day!
9. If you are not confident about conducting an unguided yoga practice at home, a good yoga video or CD could be just the thing till you have the time to go to a local yoga class. Make sure the practices are suitable for postnatal women and don't start until at least six weeks post, or two months if you've had a C-Section.
10. See if you can find a local postnatal yoga class. Not only is this an excellent way to receive specialized tuition in postnatal yoga, but it provides a baby-centred environment where you can share the joys of yoga with your baby and connect with other like-minded mums.

Breastfeeding Counter-poses



Shoulder stretches like *Gomukhasana* (Cow face pose) and *Garudasana* (Eagle pose)

Pectoral stretches like Clock at the wall (right)



Adho Mukha Svanasana (Downward facing dog pose, top) and Right Angle Pose.



Bhujangasana (Cobra pose) and *Salabhasana* (Locust pose) variations

Strength and stability

From six weeks onwards, the body has had some time for restoration of the uterus and energy levels begin to return. The mother can now focus on some stronger poses that will enhance her energy and continue the work of knitting back the birthing muscles-pelvic floor and deep abdominals.

Strengthening the core muscles will also be beneficial in supporting a weakened back, which is essential to help combat the relentless forward bending postural strains caused by carrying and caring for her baby. I found a blend of yoga and pilates very effective in returning strength and stability to my core. (see '6 Weeks Onwards' page xx for some beneficial poses).

After a Caesarean Section, a woman should wait till the wound has completely healed, usually about two months, before embarking on abdominal toning or any of the stronger yoga poses.

Many women enjoy poses that help release tight upper back and shoulders caused by the endless hours of breastfeeding. See 'Breast Feeding

Counter-poses' above for poses that help release tension and in build stability in this area, and counterbalance a tendency towards postural kyphosis (rounding of the upper back).

Enjoy your baby and your yoga

Originating from the ancient *Yoga Sutras* of Patanjali is the concept of *Isvara pranidhana*, which can be interpreted as 'surrender to the divine or a higher power'. To flow more harmoniously with the demands of new motherhood, there needs to be an ongoing melting of the ego. As BKS Iyengar points out: "In bhakti or true love there is no place for 'I' and 'mine'. When the feeling of 'I' and 'mine' disappears, the individual soul has reached full growth."

Now, as a busy, single mother to a rambunctious toddler, this wonderful tool called 'yoga' continues to help boost my joy levels on a daily basis. I relish the opportunities that motherhood has presented so far to embody the rich philosophy of yoga, both on and off the mat.

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Go to www.ayl.com.au for our free information section including a post natal vinyasa.

Ana Davis has been teaching yoga for over 10 years, and founded Bondi Bliss Yoga Studio, known for its specialization in pre/postnatal yoga. Ana is now based in Byron Bay where she teaches pregnancy and Mums 'n Bubs yoga classes, runs retreats, workshops and pre and postnatal teacher trainings. She can be contacted on ana@bondiblissyoga.com.au