

Breastfeeding and Yoga

Indira Lopez-Bassols

As a three times breastfeeding mum and an Iyengar yoga practitioner, I feel very passionate about breastfeeding in a world where it is more and more on the verge of extinction.

We all know that breastfeeding is best for mum and baby. In fact, the World Health Organisation recommends: "Exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months of life. At six months, other foods should complement breastfeeding for up to two years or more." Despite these guidelines, the UK sadly ranks top in bottle feeding rates in all Europe; and nowadays 50% of women give up breastfeeding when their babies are only six weeks old.

Thus, how can our yoga practice support us while we are breastfeeding? Over the years while breastfeeding and practising yoga, I have realised that my energy levels tend to fluctuate enormously. The other way round also held true: the way I practised yoga seemed to make an impact on breastfeeding. Breastfeeding a newborn during the early weeks or a baby who is not yet on solids is quite time and energy consuming, while nursing a one year old once or twice a day in established lacta-

tion can be less tiring. In that sense, how often and how much I was nursing seemed to affect my yoga practice differently.

Geetaji states the importance of breastfeeding by saying that: "The child must have pure breast feeding." She recommends soon after delivery the practice of Savasana and Ujjayi Pranayama I as it helps the establishment of lactation: "Pranayama and Savasana ensure that milk is purified, and lactation increased." Afterwards she recommends a series of asanas that "stimulate the pituitary gland which secretes prolactin that controls lactation." Similarly, Dr. Krishna Raman recommends: "For the first three months, no exercises are to be practised. This is to allow the body to recover. It is also to prevent interference with lactation of breast milk, as exercises change hormonal responses."

In Mexico, the "cuarentena" refers to approximately 40 "golden days" where mums are pampered and taken care of by other family members. Geetaji underlined the importance of this postnatal period: "The mother has to feel healthy and get her strength back, at this

time, and build up energy to continue her responsibility of motherhood." Interestingly enough, these 40 days (approximately four to six weeks) correspond to the time it takes for the full establishment of our milk supply.

I must confess that during my "cuarentena" with my first child I did nothing other than variations of Savasana when I had a chance. Back then in Mexico, my main teacher, Herta Rogg, suggested I follow Geetaji's *Yoga: A Gem for Women's* guidelines on postpartum yoga practice and beyond. With my second child also born in Mexico a few years after, it took me even longer to re-establish my yoga practice. I had to juggle with a baby and a toddler, and had little time to myself and very little energy left.

My third child Ilan was born in the comfort of our home in London. I had religiously attended Johanna Heckmann-Mohan's pregnancy classes at the IYIMV. Several months down the road after giving birth, I was keen to resume my classes.

As I started attending the Institute once again, I spoke to

several senior teachers and inquired about how my practice would be altered while breastfeeding. Silvia Prescott told me kindly to follow what felt right and to avoid any strong asanas including twists. Richard Agar Ward said to me: "You should practise plenty of chest opening poses and do not do jumpings or strenuous poses". Johanna Heckmann-Mohan gave me several variations as well as an adapted Setubanda Sarvangssana instead of Sarvangasana at the end of certain classes. Sheila Haswell in preparation for the backbends PD day told me: "Strong backbends and vigorous practice are not recommended as they can dry up the breast milk."

When Ilan was six months old, my menstrual cycle resumed. Coincidentally, it was the first day of the IYA (UK) Convention in June 2007. Rajlaxmi was very generous with her time. She came to me over and over again to show me how to adapt certain asanas. She told me to do the standing poses with the support of the wall and tailored an asana sequence designed for my combined breastfeeding and menstruation period (with lots of height in forward bends to avoid breast compression and supine asanas to rest and recover).

Afterwards, during a four day residential retreat in Mexico, Jawahar Bangera also suggested variations to my practice. He understood my need to go and

breastfeed my baby when my breasts were too full at the end of a long session. By then, I knew already of the importance of honouring my body's needs by adapting my practice.

In 2008, I made the pilgrimage to Pune to attend the RIMYI. I arranged to take along Ilan and my husband. I decided to do so mainly because I was still breastfeeding Ilan. As a parenthesis, I must note that even though my husband succumbed to a tummy bug like many foreigners, the amazing immune protection properties of my milk protected Ilan during the whole month of our stay in India.

Upon arrival to the Institute, I was advised by one of the teacher assistants to request in writing a meeting with Geetaji. Breastfeeding was obviously not a medical condition so the medical class was not an option, and yet I was aware I would benefit enormously from Geetaji's direct guidance.

During the interview, Geetaji recommended the following changes to my yoga practice while breastfeeding: standing poses with support, backbends with support, no strong twists, no strong standing poses such as Parvrrita Parsvkonasana, yes to inversions and particularly rope Sirsasana, and Viparita Karani. She also mentioned that Sarvangasana, Ardha Halasana and Setu Bandha Sarvangasana helped the pituitary gland to

maintain the hormonal balance. At the end of the interview, she added: "Do not do too much to build up your energy", which till today resonates with what I have learned through my journey of how energy levels fluctuate while breastfeeding.

Even though my yoga practice has been adjusted, I have enjoyed immensely my nurturing breastfeeding relationship with Ilan. But, in life every beginning has an end. Therefore, I didn't forget to ask Geetaji the last question: When the time of weaning came, what direction should my yoga practice take? Her main guidelines were: standing poses, unsupported backbends, Chatuspadasana, Pinchamayurasana and Adomukha Vrksasana.

I have come to realise how as women we can become a constant source of strength to one another, by nurturing one another through our experiences. I hope this brings a bit of light to the path of all new and future breastfeeding mums and Iyengar yoga practitioners. I am deeply grateful to Geetaji for her generous guidance and to all my teachers who have taken me from the darkness of ignorance closer to the light of the soul.

Indira is a qualified Iyengar yoga teacher. She also supports on a voluntary basis mums+babies as an accredited La Leche League GB breastfeeding counsellor; please visit www.laleche.org.uk for more information.