

How Breastfeeding Changed my Practice of Yoga

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As a three time 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 mom and baby. In fact, the World Health Organization, the Public Health Agency of Canada, Health Canada, the Canadian Pediatric Society and Dieticians of Canada all recommend exclusive breastfeeding for the first 6 months after birth for healthy term infants with the introduction of complementary foods and continued breastfeeding for up to two years of age or beyond. Despite these recommendations, in Canada in 2005, the rate of breastfeeding initiation was 87% with duration rates falling dramatically and quickly with time, as only 16.4% of mothers were still exclusively breastfeeding their infants at 6 months.

How can our yoga practice support us while we are breastfeeding? Over the years while breastfeeding and practising yoga, I have realized 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 lactation 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 *ujjayi prānāyāma* I as it helps the establishment of lactation: "*prānāyāma* and *savāsana* ensure that milk is purified, and lactation increased." Afterwards she recommends a series of *āsanas* 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, my home country, 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 post natal 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 4 to 6 weeks) correspond to the time it takes for the proper and full establishment of our milk supply.

I must confess that during my "cuarentena" with my first child I did nothing other than variations of *savāsana* when I had a chance. Living in Mexico, my main teacher, Herta Rogg, suggested I follow the guidelines on postpartum yoga practice and beyond in Geetaji's *Yoga: A Gem for Women*. 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 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, UK. I had religiously attended the pregnancy classes at the Iyengar Yoga Institute in Maida Vale. 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, one of the most senior teachers in the UK, told me kindly to follow what felt right and to avoid any strong *āsanas* 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 sarvāṅgāsana* instead of *sarvāṅgāsana* at the end of certain classes. Sheila Haswell in preparation for the backbends Professional Day told me: "Strong back-bends and vigorous practice are not recommended as they can dry up the breast milk."

When Ilan was 6 months old, my menstrual cycle resumed. Coincidentally, it was the first day of the Iyengar Yoga Association UK Convention in June 2007. Rajalaxmi, who is an Obstetrician and Gynaecologist that has been trained by Guruji and Geetaji, was one of the guest teachers. She was extremely generous with her time. She came to me over and over again to show me how to adapt certain *āsanas*. She told me to do the standing poses with the support of the wall and tailored an *āsana* sequence designed for my combined breastfeeding and menstruation period (with lots of height in forward bends to avoid breast compression and supine *āsanas* to rest and recover).

Afterwards, during a four day residential retreat in Mexico, Jawahar Banger 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.

On July 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 who was one year and a half. 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 at 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 *parvrita parsukonasana*, yes to inversions and particularly rope *sirsāsana*, and *viparita karani*. She also mentioned that *sarvāṅgāsana*, *ardha halāsana* and *setu bandha sarvāṅgāsana* 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*.

Over the years, I have come to realize 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. ॐ

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1 Nutrition for healthy term infants. Canadian Paediatric Society, Dieticians of Canada: Health Canada. Ottawa: Ministry of Public Works and Government Services. Canada, 1998.

2 Accessed on 20/06/2009 <http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/publicat/2008/cphr-rspc/pdf/cphr-rspc08-eng.pdf>

3 *Yoga A Gem for Women*, Geeta S. Iyengar, 1995: p 51.

4 *Yoga during pregnancy: a guide for Iyengar students and teachers*, Dr. Geeta S. Iyengar, 2008: p 59

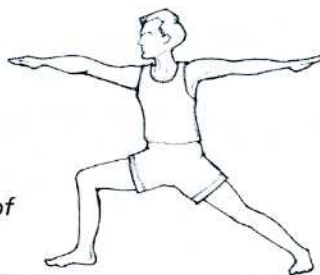
5 *Yoga A Gem for Women*, Geeta S. Iyengar, 1995: p 51.

6 *A Matter of Health*, Dr. Krishna Raman, 1998: p. 183.

7 *Yoga during pregnancy: a guide for Iyengar students and teachers*, Dr. Geeta S. Iyengar, 2008: p 59

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