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HOLISTIC MOTHERHOOD



Shirin Venkatramani

Foreword
RP Soonawala

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CHAPTER

4

Exercise

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Physical exercise is an important aspect of health overall and particularly so in pregnancy. Young women today are figure conscious and generally have exercise as part of their daily routine. Moderate course of exercise is not associated with any adverse outcome. However, what is moderate for a regular is extreme for a beginner, and certainly some sports are contraindicated in pregnancy such as contact sports, vigorous racquet sports that may involve the risk of trauma, falls or excessive joint stress. Scuba diving may even result in birth defects and fetal decompression disease. If the temperature of the body goes up beyond 39°C it may harm the fetus especially before 12 weeks. Aerobic exercises such as running, brisk walking and swimming are not contraindicated in pregnancy while taking care not to raise the heart rate beyond 60% of the resting pulse rate, or allowing the body temperature to go up. A simple test for knowing whether exercise is being overdone is the talk test, meaning if you cannot carry on a conversation during the exercise, it is being overdone. Exercise gives one a sense of well being and improves overall circulation, stamina as well as helps cope with stress and labor. It can also reduce blood sugar levels for women who have gestational diabetes. Women who exercise regularly sleep better too!

Cautions are not to do any exercise which entails lying on the back after 16 weeks of pregnancy as this can compress the big vessels in the body and reduce blood supply to the body and lower the blood pressure. Any unusual symptom such as dizziness, pain, spotting, increased vaginal discharge is a warning to stop and report to the doctor.

Truly speaking our Indian culture and system which takes care of both physical and mental health is so perfect it fills the one practicing with boundless joy. Let us elaborate what we mean. The Himalayan tradition has such specific exercises which address both the body and mind simultaneously. Awareness is the key in every movement. Our subconscious mind resides in the muscles and skeletal system of the body and sends subtle sensory messages to the brain which we mostly ignore so much so that we almost deny their existence. We only

complain of a generalized weakness, tiredness, lack of energy and aches and pains from the tip of the toe to the top of the head! Several sensations called proprioceptive sensations are constantly passing to the brain to help keep our posture and balance; these have far deeper meaning than medicine is willing to research. Once one learns the joints and glands exercises which are all safe in normal pregnancy (notes for specific movements and restrictions given with the description) one realizes how even during the day we observe our muscle status—am I alert and relaxed? We realize that a particular bundle of muscles, e.g. around the shoulders, lower back or fingers, etc. are in spasm quite unexpectedly and quite unnecessarily, this is our stressed subconscious mind trying to talk to us but of course no one told us so. We are therefore perplexed and again look for physical reasons for the above mentioned symptoms.

It might not be improper to suggest that the physical exercises we are taught in the Gym are at the most useful for weight reduction and that too only as long as they are practiced. The fact of the matter is the Gym is detrimental to holistic health. This is so because loud music is played, this makes one become unaware of what one is doing, you do a 'work out' in air conditioned rooms which is in itself contrary to a healthy practise. One should be in an open environment while exercising and sweat it out! Weight lifting should not be done by the pregnant lady; the only weight lifting she does is carry the baby! This is a loving live weight which is totally different from the dead weight of dumbbells!

It would be prudent if we wholeheartedly accepted Yoga in its physical as well as spiritual aspect to live a healthy long life. First of all Hatha Yoga which is aimed at physical wellbeing combines every exercise with proper breathing—this itself will ensure proper circulation and blood supply to the requisite muscles, at the same time not stealing it away from vital organs. It uses one's own body weight as the lever to balance the system and increase flexibility ensuring that child birth is minimally painful and maximally normal!

Upper body exercises are safe for all except in seriously ill patients. The exercises are given in detail in the Appendix to this book, both illustrated and explained in detail. It is vital to remember:

- Relaxed but alert body
- Diaphragmatic breathing
- Awareness of each sensation throughout each movement.

Breath coordination with every movement—in principle when you bend forward or flex exhale and inhale on extension.

SIX STEPS OF MEDITATIVE ASANAS: BY SWAMI VEDA BHARATI

These six principles of asanas (yoga postures) were composed in sutra form by Swami Veda Bharati. These have been given a commentary by a team of advanced teachers of Swami Rama Sadhaka Grama Ashram in Rishikesh, India.

"Yoga is a journey of the self, through the self, to the self."

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Every yoga asana (pose, posture) has six steps to it. These steps follow each other in a precise sequence and apply to all asanas. If we can master, if we can understand these steps in a single posture, then the procedure for doing all other asanas is understood. For example, if we know the steps of doing neck rolls in Swami Rama's Joints and Glands Exercises, the same principles can be applied to all other asanas.

The six steps are as follows:

Centering

Of the six steps in doing an asana, there are three steps which are totally motionless, and there are three steps which involve movement. All asanas begin from a motionless position in which we are centered. The centering positions vary depending on the posture we are doing. Examples of Centering poses are:

- Sitting in a meditative asana (Svastikasana, Sukhasana, Maître-asana, etc.)
- Standing in the Mountain pose (Tad asana) or a more relaxed standing pose
- Sitting on the floor with the legs outstretched (Dandasana)
- Kneeling (Virasana)
- Lying on the stomach (Makarasana, crocodile position)
- Lying on the back (Shavasana, corpse pose)

In the Centered poses we prepare ourselves to do the posture by being balanced mentally and physically. The Centered poses are all symmetrical and contribute to a feeling of harmony and groundedness. From this still, watchful place, the subsequent step or steps can be visualized in the mind.

Moving Into the Pose

It might be thought that postures which involve movement are not as mindful or meditative as those in which we are totally still, but this is not the case. In all steps of doing asanas, the mind is always awake, alert, attentive, aware. To maintain the awareness, the movement into the pose is done slowly, smoothly, carefully, gently. It is important not to overstretch. There should be no strain. Always stay well within one's stretch-limits and let the mind and the breath do the work. In about 30 seconds, the muscle fascia will release the spasm. We are observing, at each tiny incremental movement and at each micro-moment, all the information which is being communicated to us, as if we are carrying a bowl of water filled to the brim and do not want to spill a drop.

In the beginning one's attention is pulled to physical areas of tension. However, as one advances in practice the attention is more and more drawn from the material to the subtle until, at an advanced level, the entire process is watched from the moment of intention, through the pranic movement into the areas needed to make the movement, to the activation of the nerves and muscles.

A very good rule to follow in doing asanas is "Go though the posture as if you have all the time in the world, but not a moment to lose." Explore, explore, explore!!

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The breath is important in moving into poses. Moving into 'closing' poses, where parts of the body are coming together (such as forward bends) begins with an exhalation. Moving into 'opening' poses where parts of the body are opening (such as the Cobra) begins with an inhalation. In all the six steps, and from one asana to another, mindfulness of the breath is essential to smoothly connect the parts, like a string (sutra) which unites the beads of a necklace.

Refining the Pose

Once the pose has been adopted, there is a period of adjusting and correcting. It is here that the pose is fine-tuned. Adjustments are made—further straightenings, extensions or rotations are done so that certain awareness can be obtained and certain benefits can be derived. This might involve shifting the position of the neck, shoulders or hips to bring them, or the spine, into alignment.

Holding the Pose

All the mental concentrations here are the same as in the original Centering Pose. The mind goes within and watches. An important principle of doing asanas is that no muscles be used that are not needed. This requires discrimination and selectivity. Swami Veda has said that bodily parts which are not needed should be totally relaxed to free prana flow through those areas into areas where the mind is focused. It is in this phase that the 'work' goes on—the 'action in inaction.'

The mind watches the areas under tension or stretch in the physical body and then brings to bear the elements of attention, breath and prana. Certain chakras may be focused on and certain mantras may be used. Patañjali has stated: "Asanas are perfected by relaxation of effort and meditation on the infinite." [Yoga-Sutras 11.47]

Coming Out of the Pose

The awareness here is the same as with going into the pose, except that there is an additional caution. In many asanas, such as the side bend or triangle, critical muscles are tightly stretched; therefore, coming out of these poses quickly would contract these muscles even more and cause strain. So it is important to come out of poses slowly/with special care, mindfulness and gentleness.

Rest and Reflection

After coming back into the Centered Pose, one remains completely still again and observes the so-called 'afterglow' or 'echo-effects' of the posture. Frequently there are very dramatic changes in blood flow, temperature change, and pranic activity in different parts of the body. There may be shifts in the breath rhythm or changes in the flow of breath in the nostrils. We need to honour this phase of asana and not be impatient to move on hastily to the next asana. There are

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some master hatha-yogis who feel that the Rest and Reflection step is the most important part of asana. Some even advise their students to go into shavasana after each asana to totally absorb and assimilate the effects and awareness which the posture has generated. For further understanding of greater subtleties do read Swami Veda Bharati's book, Philosophy of Hatha Yoga.

All asanas and exercise should be done in silence, one should not speak during doing exercise as then there is no focus and the breath cannot be combined, it also causes an imbalance in the energy fields created. If the posture is wrong and the teacher is trying to correct it the change must come from inside it cannot be just physically corrected for this attention is required, speech scatters attention. Patanjali has prescribed Asanas as a preliminary step in the ladder towards Samadhi which is a state of Sat Chid Anand (Existence Consciousness and Bliss) this means that it is *Meditation* in action or Dynamic Meditation. It would be absurd to say one is in deep meditation and speak all the time! The above is the sentiment and theory behind each movement. In the appendix is given the sequence and actual PRACTICE. One could read and record it slowly and practice with the recording.

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HOLISTIC MOTHERHOOD

The holistic approach in this book will undoubtedly prepare the mother-to-be for the most precious gift nature has to offer—the birth of a bonny baby. Practical techniques of meditation and stress relief described will benefit the entire family. The modern enquiring mind will appreciate the scientific evidence provided for ancient spiritual wisdom making the book relevant for all ages and at all stages of life.



Shirin Venkatramani is a gold medallist with an excellent academic career having achieved the highest degrees in the field of obstetrics and gynecology. She is Professor and Senior Consultant, Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, Ruby Hall Clinic, Pune, Maharashtra, India. She has been honored by both the Federation of Obstetric and Gynaecological Societies of India (FOGSI) and the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (RCOG), UK. Her passion has been to reduce maternal mortality towards which she masterminded and conducted the *Suprabha Ganga Yatra*, which was a walkathon of 2,400 km along the river Ganga covering 5 states doing health camps, awareness events and taking 108 days. The then President of India Dr APJ Abdul Kalam met her for the same at the Rashtrapati Bhavan. All along her life's journey, she has had the good fortune of being on the spiritual path and today her aim is to help create a new generation of radiant enlightened beings by taking true education to the very source—the mother-to-be.

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ISBN 978-93-5250-044-4