THE YOGA OF MOTHERHOOD: MY OWN EXPERIENCE

By

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Introduction: Though I often jokingly refer to myself as a "reluctant mother", I must confess that bearing, delivering and raising our son Ananda Balayogi has been the single most significant spiritual experience of my life, my first real initiation into the blissful state of Yoga – a oneness and communion with the Universe on a nearly mystical level.

At the age of twenty-eight, I had "practised the techniques of Yoga" for nearly four years before my son's birth. Yet, it was in the most real sense only a "practice", and not a realisation. It was a preparation for the experience of that sense of oneness, rather than a realisation of that blessed state. I can, with all honesty, say that from the moment of Ananda's entrance to this Karma Bhumi (earth plane), I have experienced an "inner wholeness", a "completeness", a fulfillment and a peace which I would never have dreamed possible.

This personal account of the pregnancy and delivery of my son thirty-two years ago may inspire some of our modern ladies to take up the practice of Yoga in order to prepare themselves for the greatest spiritual experience of them all - motherhood.

Born in the USA, I traveled to India in 1967 to take up the study of Yoga. Luckily, I found my Guru and I took to the practice of Yoga as easily as a bird on wing takes to the sky. The concepts of Yoga which I encountered through my Guru (later to become my husband) were those thoughts and feelings for which I had hungered for my whole life. In those days, I saw Yoga as Tapas, difficult austerities - long periods of silence, meditative practices, solitude, extreme Hatha Yoga Asanas, Pranayama and fasting. This I felt would culminate in that blissful state of Samadhi, which I assumed I could achieve within a year or two of intense Sadhana!

After three years of marriage, I found myself pregnant. My pregnancy was very easy, thanks to my Yoga Abhyasa. I had been practising Yoga Asanas, Pranayama and the usual Yoga Tapas, Fasting, Mauna, etc. for four years prior to the pregnancy, so my body was strong, flexible and healthy. Indeed, it was not till the end of the sixth month that anyone other than my husband even realised my state. At the end of the fifth month, however, one of our good friends, a Swamiji, had casually remarked, "Meenakshi, you are getting a little fat. That is not becoming to a Yogini". I simply kept quiet, and suppressed my smile.

Yogic Life Style Prepared Me Well for Delivery: I kept a good figure and never did become too big, even at the time of delivery. I was able to carry out all my normal, heavy workload, including riding on my bicycle to Pondicherry town, nearly five kilometers away, once and sometimes twice a day up to the end of the eighth month. I participated in all the Ashram's daily 6 a.m. Hatha Yoga Asana classes right up to the very day of delivery, and was able to do all of the Asanas, Kriyas and Mudras up to the end of the fifth month. After that time, my body began to change its shape, so that some of the face-prone positions, such as Dhanur Asana, Shalabha Asana, where extreme pressure is placed upon the abdomen, were not possible. After that, I performed whatever Asanas, Kriyas and
Mudras that my body shape would allow. I was able to do Hala Asana up to the beginning of the eighth month, and the Sarvanga Asana, Nava Asana and its variations, Nikunjya Asana, and Vyagaha Asana, with relative ease. I found those positions done from a four-footed position (hands and knees-Chatus Pada) were especially beneficial. I worked hard on strengthening and loosening up my pelvic area and lower back and strengthening my stomach muscles. I performed Aswini Mudra (tightening and releasing the anus) and also Mula Bandha regularly. I did many standing postures. I worked hard on sitting postures and sat often in the Utkat Asana, the Squat, at any time of day or night, whenever possible. Baddha Kona Asana and variations were very useful in loosening the pelvis. I concentrated on performing as many Pranayamas as possible, especially using the various types of Bhastrikas to cleanse the body of toxins; Savitri Pranayama, the Rhythmic Breath, to calm and harmonize systems; Loma Viloma, Aloma Viloma, Nadi Shuddhi, to clean and purify the nervous systems; I felt Sukha Purvaka gave my mind great depth and clarity. The various Vibhaga Pranayamas, Sectional Breaths, and Mahat Yoga Pranayama, the Complete Breath, stimulated Pranic flow into body organs. I also used often the Kukuriya Pranayama, the Dog Pant, sticking the tongue out and panting like a dog, breathing in and out through the mouth, to deliberately strengthen the solar plexus.

**Goals for a Healthy Pregnancy.** I wished to keep my system relaxed, flexible, and free of toxins, my pelvic area and lower back flexible, my lower back and stomach strong. I wanted my legs to be strong enough to support the added weight and prevent varicose veins. I wanted plenty of Pranic energy flowing through my body and breathed as deeply as I could whenever possible. I participated in as much Mantra chanting as possible and tried at least to begin and end my day with a short period of concentration. I actually only had two hours in the morning for my Hatha Yoga Sadhana, though by participating in the Ashram Sadhana, I also had some time at the high noon Sandhyam for concentration-meditation and again at the sunset Sandhyam for Mantra Chanting. The rest of the day I carried on my busy work load: Ashram administration, Swamiji’s private secretarial work, supervising the printing of books and our monthly YOGA LIFE magazine; teaching classes, receiving visitors, etc.

I did not go to a doctor until the eighth month. I only went then because I wanted to have some idea of the delivery date. At that time, the doctor told me I was in good health and should have no trouble. I found that my body did start to feel heavy towards the end of the eighth month and I found it difficult to take the deep breath to which I was normally accustomed. Swamiji told me this was because the child was now pushing up against the diaphragm. Two weeks before the actual delivery, the child dropped in the womb and the pressure against the diaphragm and lungs lessened considerably, allowing me to resume once more my various Pranayama routines. About that time I was starting to feel “crowded” in my body. I gave vent to my feelings in a poem to my unborn child, asking the child how it had the audacity to choose me to be its mother without consulting me! In the poem I complained to the child, that there was “scarcely enough room for me in this body, let alone for thee!” I was feeling cramped for space, in spite of all my Yoga! During that last month my husband would often take me to the sea-beach where I found taking bath in the salt water made my body feel light and buoyant and gave a great relief from its heaviness.

**Diet During this Important Time:** I was careful of my diet, eating much fresh foods and drinking much fruit juice and vegetable juice and eating many salads. I was eating only whole grains and chewed the food carefully. If I was what I ate, then surely, my child would be what I ate as well! I was a vegetarian, and though my parents expressed concern that there would not be enough protein in my diet to build a child properly, our little Ananda later proved that all their fears were false.
I used to see, occasionally, European women in Pondicherry who were expecting, sitting in the coffee shops smoking, and gorging themselves on pastries and ice cream. Many of our students coming from the West had horror tales to tell of the life style of many expectant mothers in Western countries, who thought nothing of drinking alcohol, smoking cigarettes, taking drugs and eating the grossest of foods during their confinement. Swamiji cautioned me that I must be very careful of what I put into my system, for he explained that everything which entered my blood would pass via the umbilical cord into the child's body! "Those women who smoke in pregnancy are pouring nicotine into the clean, pure tissues of their child! Then they wonder why their child cries so much after delivery! The poor thing is suffering from "nicotine withdrawal", he said. Apparently, pregnancy in the West is a traumatic time for most women. What a terrible shame! I was most grateful, when I heard those tales, and remembered my own experience, that I was privileged to experience this wonderful time in "Mother India", where a pregnant woman is treated as a "priceless jewel". The Hindu style of life, spending much of the time squatting on the floor, or sitting on the floor; the light, cotton saree, which makes such a graceful and beautiful maternity dress, the vast amounts of time spent outdoors in lovely, cheerful sunlight and fresh air, and the great innate respect that the Hindu people have for all "mothers" is a reassuring, comforting and supportive atmosphere in which to bear one's child. I felt sorry for all those women in "less civilized countries" who found pregnancy so traumatic that they needed tranquillizers to get them through the experience I was finding so rewarding and spiritually enlightening!

Importance of Positive Emotions and Thoughts: I was fortunate to have my Guru as my husband, for it was he who really initiated me into the spiritual subtleties of "motherhood" and made me aware of the more subtle aspects of mother-child relationships. 'You must be very careful of your emotions and thoughts during this time", he said, "If you are happy and contented, your child will also feel those positive feelings as surely as if he is being bathed in sunlight. If you keep your mind on a high level of thought, your child will also imbibe those spiritual aspirations from his birth itself." He told me stories of the wives of Rishis in ancient days, and how they would sit for hours during their confinement, listening to their husbands chant the VEDAS and the sacred scriptures, deliberately exposing the unborn child to the holiest of vibrations. I especially loved the beautiful story of Ashtavakra, who, when he was but a child in his mother's womb, not only listened consciously to his father chanting the sacred scriptures, but actually called out one time, "Father, you are making a mistake! It is not chanted like that at all!" much to the amazement of all. Such charming stories with a moral such as that are common in India, and delightful paintings, drawings and sculptures of the various gods and goddesses in their infant stages abound, drawing the mind and the heart to rest on their beauty.

Folk Wisdom Is Sometimes Real Wisdom: Thus, my time drew near. I had no senior woman friend or advisor close to me in whom I could confide, and for those things that only women know I could turn only to my old Ayah, a village lady of considerable personality. I had some misgivings about emerging from my experience with a misshapen body, and was gratified to meet later in my pregnancy a young woman who not only looked trim and slim, but had returned to her practice of Bharat Natyam only four months after delivery. Meeting women like this, who had come through this experience intact, joyous and loving, had a profound effect upon my state of mind. I received advice from all quarters, however, and was always happy to listen to the experience and thoughts of others. One old Russian lady in particular pleased me with her folk wisdom and humour. "You should treat your son," (she naturally assumed my first born would be a son,) "as a god for the first six years of his life: like a king for the next six years; like a slave for the next six years, and as a friend ever after." This attitude towards the "ego development" of a child at various
stages I have found quite accurate and have seen its wisdom in the passing years. This same woman also gave me a formula for producing a genius. "If you want your child to be brilliant", she said, "you must breast feed him for three years and during that time have no sexual contact at all. This power from your own body will pass through your milk to the child". As things turned out, I later fulfilled these conditions and our little Ananda today does have a rare brilliance of mind. I used to ponder these concepts carefully, for they also had their harmonic thought in Yoga philosophy.

**Motherhood - Nature’s Way of Subjugation of the Ego:** The various students and friends passing through our Ashram used to share their experiences with me, and I slowly built up confidence that I too could go through what women since Eve have endured as their part in perpetuating the race. It was a sacrifice, giving up my own body to another being for nine months, and I understood full well why the Hindus had so much respect for motherhood. Is there any other human experience in the world in which one can so willingly and joyously put every single need and desire of another living being before one’s own welfare? This constant subjugation of one’s own ego to the needs of another is itself a spiritual discipline unparalleled. I slowly felt the presence of another life growing close to my own and empathized with the Biblical description of Mary, the mother of Jesus, who “kept these things in her heart and pondered them deeply”. One does feel an immense closeness to the Universe at this time, a feeling of the utter mystery of creating, the perfection of the unfoldment, which has nothing to do with one’s mind. I could never consciously “create a baby”; even the most brilliant scientist with all his test tubes could not create life. Yet, here I was, on automatic pilot, so to speak, bearing witness to the slow unfoldment of another human life within the protective cocoon of my own. I could not help but meet each new stage, each new development with awe and thanksgiving for this rare opportunity.

**The Yogic Experience of “Labour”:** One day in the middle of April, the 16th of the month, 1972, I was wakened about 3 a.m. with strange rippling sensations in my lower back. They were pleasant; my mind was drawn naturally to dwell on them, to contemplate their movement in my body. They were similar to the swells of the ocean, the mighty rhythm of waves beating upon the shore. I lay awake till dawn, absorbed in the sensations, which were like none I had ever felt. I attended the Hatha Yoga class and participated in whatever postures were possible for me in that state. After breakfast, I sat at my typewriter to take dictation from my husband, for we were working on several books, our monthly magazine as well and had to do several pieces of mail before lunch. The ‘rolling sensations’ in my lower back became more and more pronounced, but they were not painful and I wondered if this could possibly be the “labour pains” about which all women speak. There was nothing painful about them, but they were becoming more and more intense. I started to squirm somewhat uneasily in my chair, but continued with the typing. Finally, when I felt they were becoming too powerful to sit still, I told my husband. “I think the labour pains have started, though they don’t hurt.” They were coming very closely by then, about one minute apart. “I think we had better go to the nursing home”, I said. My husband sent for a taxi and by 10 a.m. we were on our way to the nursing home, about five kilometers away. This clinic was run by Catholic nuns in Pondicherry, and they took one look at me, and directed me to the delivery room. By 11 a.m. the sensations had become very intense, by that time breaking through the pain threshold and I became conscious of very powerful, now painful muscular thrusts of the body. I was "working very hard" even involuntarily and could appreciate the significance of the term "labour" pains. The body was hard at work to sever a connection, which it had maintained so intimately between two bodies for the last nine months and the partition would not be easy. The nuns did not give me any medication nor did I ask for it. I wanted to be conscious and aware. I walked around the delivery
I did the Kukkriya Pranayama, much to the astonishment of the attendants, who had to be reassured that it was a Yoga practice and I had not indeed gone mad. I performed some shallow Nasarga Bhastrika and Nasarga Mukha Bhastrikas. I even got down on my hands and knees and crawled about the delivery room. These were rather strange antics for the staff and I suppose I should have prepared them better for the sight. I simply gasped, "Yoga practice" between breaths, through my clenched teeth, and they relaxed their anxious glances in my direction. I was in the delivery room for one hour, when at 12:45, the little one made his "big break" into Karma Bhumi, and let out a lusty cry to let us all know that he had arrived. My husband was standing directly outside the room on the balcony of the second floor of the clinic, and rushed into the room at the sound. The nursing sister put the small red bundle with an immense mop of black hair on its head into his hands, and he took it to the balcony and showed his child to the sun, chanting appropriate Mantra all the while.

**Sahaja Samadhi – A Natural State of Bliss:** I really felt as though I had slipped into a Samadhi by mistake. Completely drained, relaxed, limp, receptive, I felt a bliss, which I had never felt before in my whole life. As though a purpose had been accomplished, as though I had achieved what I had set out to do, difficult though the task had been, as though I had somehow repaid a debt, which I had contracted by my own birth. I felt tremendous love for everyone, for my husband, for the doctors, for the nurses, for the Universe, for the good green earth, and the beautiful warm sun... but most all, I felt an immense, overpowering love and devotion to the small little creature that the doctors immediately put into my arms. It was mine, and from that day, I would be responsible for the growth into light of another little human soul. My baby smiled at me, he really did, even though he could not see, and I smiled and smiled back at him, for surely, he was the most beautiful, perfect, intelligent and fantastic child ever born to the Universe! And even as I thought that thought, I realised how many others must have experienced the same feelings, looking for the first time at the first child born to them, and I felt wonderful communion with all mothers who had ever lived and all those who would ever pass through this marvelous experience. Certainly, we shared a secret; certainly, we had something more precious than the rarest of gems; certainly, we were blessed by life itself to be brought so close to that mystical core which creates, out of nothing but a few cells of matter and a few sparks of energy, such a marvelous creature as the new-born child.

Little Ananda, whose name means the "Universal, Blissful State of Cosmic Consciousness-slept." I laid him carefully by my side, for in Indian clinics and nursing homes, the child is given to the mother immediately after delivery and never separated from her again. I took my pen to paper and wrote these words. "I was given life... I gave life... a debt repaid with interest... I have returned what I was given a hundred-fold. Was there such perfect beauty in my own body... once, long, long ago...Did my mother also see...God move one step beyond herself...in me?"

And thus, on the crest of these overpowering, ecstatic emotions, did the Yoga of Motherhood rush into my life... a whole new phase of my Yoga Sadhana had begun... with Ananda!