



CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

A WOMB-FRIENDLY YOGA MANIFESTO

EXCERPT FROM YONI SHAKTI 2020

FOUNDATION

Above and beyond all else, to practise womb-friendly yoga is to support and encourage women in their experience of appropriate yoga practice.

To that end, it is crucial not to support financially, or in any other manner, any organisation or individual known to exploit or manipulate women under the guise of teaching yoga.

PART 1/THE NEED FOR WOMB-FRIENDLINESS IN THE YOGA WORLD

- ◇ Most of the people on this planet who practise and teach yoga are women.
- ◇ Most of these women have wombs.
- ◇ And many of these women have little clear understanding about the effects of yoga practice upon their wombs.
- ◇ This is because yoga was originally developed by men for men's bodies, and has been, until only very recently, transmitted through exclusively male lineages.
- ◇ Traditional forms of teaching yoga are thus likely to have zero womb awareness, so there is much ignorance and confusion in the yoga world about what happens to our wombs when we practise yoga.





- ◇ The aim of the Womb-friendly yoga manifesto is to ensure that every woman who practises and teaches yoga is fully informed about the key techniques to avoid at certain times, so that she may fully respect and honour the health of her womb throughout her life.
- ◇ When a woman has correct and complete information then she has the power to make appropriate yoga choices for herself.
- ◇ The information provided overleaf sets out the aims and effects of certain yoga techniques and outlines the effects of these practices on the womb.
- ◇ Why bother?
- ◇ The healthful energies of a woman's womb are key to her lifelong wellbeing and vitality.
- ◇ In the yogic anatomy of the energy body, the womb is the seat of creativity, fertility and capacity to nurture and grow new life, new ideas—to manifest.
- ◇ It is literally the cosmic gateway for $\text{\textcircled{D}}$ akti (power) within.
- ◇ Yoga is all about refining awareness, of body, mind, breath, emotions and energies: it is about 'union' or re-connection with the source of all life.
- ◇ To pay no attention to the changing needs of womb cycles is to neglect the very place within that is the source of vitality and well being.
- ◇ Respect for womb cycles is the foundation of a refined and sensitive yoga practice for women.

I encourage you to make the inner harmony and health of your womb your first priority. I encourage you to practise womb-friendly yoga!

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WOMB-FRIENDLY YOGA MANIFESTO PART 2 / THE INFORMATION

‘CAUTION PLEASE—WOMBS PRESENT’

The following practices need to be handled with caution for female yoga practitioners at many times in their lives

INVERSIONS

One of the key purposes of inversions in *haṭha* yoga is to reverse the flow of *apāna*. Reversed *apāna* does not effectively release menstrual flow, so practising inversions during bleeding can lengthen the length of time that you bleed. Practising inversions during pregnancy has an unquantifiable effect on the blood flow to the womb. Since rectus abdominal muscles in pregnancy are necessarily stretched, they are unable to contract to provide the usual source of lower back support during inversions. Postnatal women rarely have the necessary abdominals strength to provide adequate lower back support for accurate practice of inversions

BANDHAS

The purpose of *bandhas* (locks) in yoga is to alter and contain the flow of energies in the body. *Mūlabandha* (root lock) when practised in the classical fashion with a lift on exhalation, is intended to reverse *apāna*, and this is the energy responsible for the release of menstrual blood flow and also the flow of blood during healing after birth. (There are alternative breath patterns which can be used to support this flow). Practising a strong or continuous *mūlabandha* during pregnancy can create a thickening of the pelvic muscles that may obstruct the passage of the baby in second stage labour.

Uḍḍiyāna bandha (abdominal lift) brings a powerful physical uplift to all the abdominal and pelvic organs, with the intention of reversing the flow of *apāna* and with the same effects on the release of blood from the womb as described above. This *bandha*, like *Jālandhara bandha* (chin lock) works synergistically with the pelvic muscles so that when *Uḍḍiyāna* and *Jālandhara* are practised correctly they tend to involve a simultaneous *mūlabandha*, which will lift the vulva and vagina and reverse the flow of *apāna* within.





Mahābandha is a combination of all three previous locks practised at once or in close connection to each other. The effects of all three locks when practised together are more intense than when they are practised singly.

PUMPING BREATHS (KAPALBHATI, BHASTRIKA, 'BREATH OF FIRE')

All these breaths use rhythmic abdominal and pelvic muscle contractions to facilitate forced exhalations (*kapālabhāti*) or forced inhalations and exhalations (*bhastrika*). They often activate rhythmic lifting and lowering of the pelvic muscles and are frequently followed in yoga practice by application of the *bandhas* described above to maintain a longer pause after exhalation (*bahir kumbhaka*). The accurate practice of these breaths both builds upon and requires abdominal strength, and so it can be impossible to practise them correctly during pregnancy. The action of these breaths directly and rhythmically compresses, lifts and releases the womb. This has an unquantifiable effect on the baby inside the womb, and upon the oxygen and carbon dioxide levels in the blood circulated to the placenta and the baby. It also has the effect of reversing *apāna*, so the same comments about menstrual flow made in relation to the *bandhas* apply to these breaths.

HOT AND/OR FAST YOGA

The practice of yoga *āsana* sequences which build heat, or which are done in a greatly heated environment are intended to promote greater flexibility and range of motion in the joints during *āsana* practice. This can be problematic pre-menstrually, during pregnancy or postnatally, especially when lactating, when hormonal changes promote softness in ligaments. Pregnant women tend to be several degrees hotter than usual anyway, and their resting heart rate is much higher than normal, so speed and heat are not particularly nurturing or comfortable at this time. Some perimenopausal women find hot yoga practice helpful in 'burning off' excessive heat, and others find it profoundly enervating and depleting. For women who are seeking to conceive but experiencing difficulties, then intense heat and speed in *āsana* may have a 'drying effect', depleting their vital energies and compromising fertility. Hot fast yoga during lactation can impact adversely on breast milk production and postnatal recovery.





YOGA AND WOMB LIFE: SPECIAL TIMES

At these special times the practices described above can be especially inappropriate.

1 When menstruating

During menstruation the womb is under the influence of a special *prāṇa* (or energy flow) called *apāna* that, amongst other things, controls the downward release of menstrual blood. The practice of vigorous pumping breaths and *bandhas* which reverse *apāna* can lengthen the time it takes to release the blood. Menstruation is a time when *prāṇa* naturally gravitates to the uterus to effect the shedding and renewal of the womb lining, so often before and during menstruation are times when there is simply less available *prāṇa* to put into a more externalised yoga practice such as *āsana*.

2 When your menstrual cycle is very erratic, or absent, and you are seeking to re-establish a more regular rhythm

At these times it can be wise to avoid the fast and hot yoga, and to focus the energies towards nourishing the body. This will encourage the menstrual cycle to return or to become more regular.

3 When using an IUD (intra-uterine device)

The correct positioning of an intra-uterine device is not only essential for its effective functioning, but also for comfort. Pumping breaths and *Uḍḍiyāna bandha* can sometimes dislodge IUDs from their correct position, causing pain, bleeding or losing 'the string'.





4 When seeking to conceive, or during early pregnancy

A woman who is seeking to conceive requires all of her energies to be available to nourish her womb and maintain her health. Very hot and fast yoga practices can compromise the rhythms of the cycle and use up the *prānas* needed for conception. Strong practice of *Uddīyāna bandha* can also be disruptive of these energies.

At the time of conception and during the first three months of pregnancy, all of a woman's *prānas* are mobilised in the astonishing job of creating new life. It is a delicate time. Great powers are at work within the womb, and so very little *prāna* is available for anything else.

5 During pregnancy (after 14 weeks)

As the pregnancy becomes securely established, many physiological adaptations are made by the mother's body to accommodate the growing baby. They effect every system of the body, and most significantly in terms of yoga practice, the cardiovascular system and the musculo-skeletal system. This means that specially modified yoga practices are best, either in yoga for pregnancy classes, or with a skilled and experienced teacher who has respect for the massive changes that occur in the mother's body, breath, mind and heart during pregnancy in preparation for birth and motherhood.





6 During the postnatal period

However her baby/ies arrived, a woman who has just given birth is in a vulnerable state, physically, emotionally and physiologically. Her joints may be unstable, her abdominal and pelvic muscles very weak, her emotional state very sensitive and her vitality low. Sleep deprivation and the displacement and malfunction of pelvic organs are also widespread experiences at this time. Yoga practice during this period can bring many healing benefits, but it needs to be handled very carefully by knowledgeable teachers who are aware that standard approaches to *āsana* and *prāṇāyāma*, including most of the practices on the ‘Caution please—wombs present’ list, can often do more harm than good. The same sensitive awareness should also be held during periods following miscarriage or stillbirth.

7 During lactation

In relation to yoga practice, it is important to know that hormones which control milk production and letdown can make ligaments very lax. Fast and heating practices can adversely effect milk production.





8 Perimenopause

In this time of uncertainty when menstrual cycles may be very erratic, very heavy, or sometimes continuous, yoga practice needs to be responsive to changing, sometimes rapidly changing, needs. Although some of the practices on the 'Caution please—wombs present' list, for example inversions and some pumping breaths, can certainly be beneficial outside of bleeding times, it is important to understand that responses to menopause are highly individualised. For example fast and heating practices may be superbly helpful for some women but deeply depleting for others.

9 Post-menopause

Yoga *āsana* (done slowly and steadily) is of proven benefit in the prevention and management of osteoporosis, and many of the pumping breaths and *bandhas* are of value in optimising vitality. Practice of inversions and fast or hot yoga needs to be cautiously evaluated according to the capacity of the student and her previous experience and encounters with the preceding 'special times' (in particular her experiences with pregnancy/ies, the quality of her postnatal recovery/ies and the nature of her menopause) which all influence the choice of appropriate yoga after menopause.





AT-A-GLANCE TABLE FOR WOMB-FRIENDLY YOGA PRACTICE

(For more subtlety and discussion see Part Three of Yoni Shakti)

Times of a woman's life / times in the menstrual cycle	Types of yoga practice (Key: ✓ = ok; X = avoid; ! = with care; ? with extreme caution)					
	<i>Pumping breaths</i>	<i>Mūlabandha</i>	<i>Uḍḍīyāna bandha</i>	<i>Jālandhara bandha</i>	Inversions	Hot or fast <i>āsana</i>
During menstruation	X	X only menstrual variation	X	X	X	X
When menstrual cycle erratic / absent and you are seeking to restore balance	X	✓	?	?	!	X
When you are seeking to conceive (including during IVF)	X	!	X	!	X	X
During first trimester of pregnancy	X	!	X	!	X	X
During second trimester of pregnancy	X	!	X	!	?	X
During third trimester of pregnancy	X	!	X	X	X	X
During immediate postnatal recovery period (first twelve weeks)	X	?	X	X	X	X
During extended postnatal recovery period (up to 2 years)	!	!	!	!	!	?
During lactation	!	!	?	!	!	?
With an IUD in place	X	!	X	!	!	!
Following miscarriage	X	!	X	!	X	X
With prolapsed pelvic organs	?	!	!	!	✓	!
During perimenopause	!	!	!	!	!	?
Post menopause, Age, desire and agility permitting!	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓





WOMB FRIENDLY YOGA MANIFESTO PART 3 / SHARING THIS INFORMATION

- ◇ Do you go to yoga classes?
- ◇ Are you a yoga teacher?
- ◇ Do you run a yoga studio/s?
- ◇ Do you employ yoga teachers in your gym or health club?
- ◇ Do you train yoga teachers?
- ◇ Do you recommend yoga classes to your female clients or patients?

If the answer to any of these questions is yes (or even ‘sometimes’), then you owe it to yourself and/or the women in the yoga classes you teach, provide or recommend, to be sufficiently informed about the effects of some yogic techniques upon the womb in order to respect the need for caution at certain times in a woman’s life.

If you are a yoga teacher trainer, then you have a special responsibility to ensure that your trainings make space to share this information with the teachers you are turning out; the health, well being and self-respect of thousands of women can be supported, compromised or seriously undermined by their choice of yoga practices, and their capacity to choose wisely depends upon their access to good information, which they may depend upon their yoga teachers to provide.

Small steps to womb-friendly yoga for teachers and studio managers
Simply ensure that all the women in your classes/yoga studio are provided with the following information when they come to class, for example by including it as part of any registration document or health questionnaire they may complete prior to taking the class. If possible make the information available on your website so women can engage with it before they arrive, and ideally have hard copies to distribute at the reception desk before women go into class.





There are many ways to share this information: for example, the points as set out on the previous pages, a summary table, or the 'voice from the womb' story below. You know the women who come to your classes, and what they're likely to respond to the best, so choose which version is most appropriate for your students/clients.

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