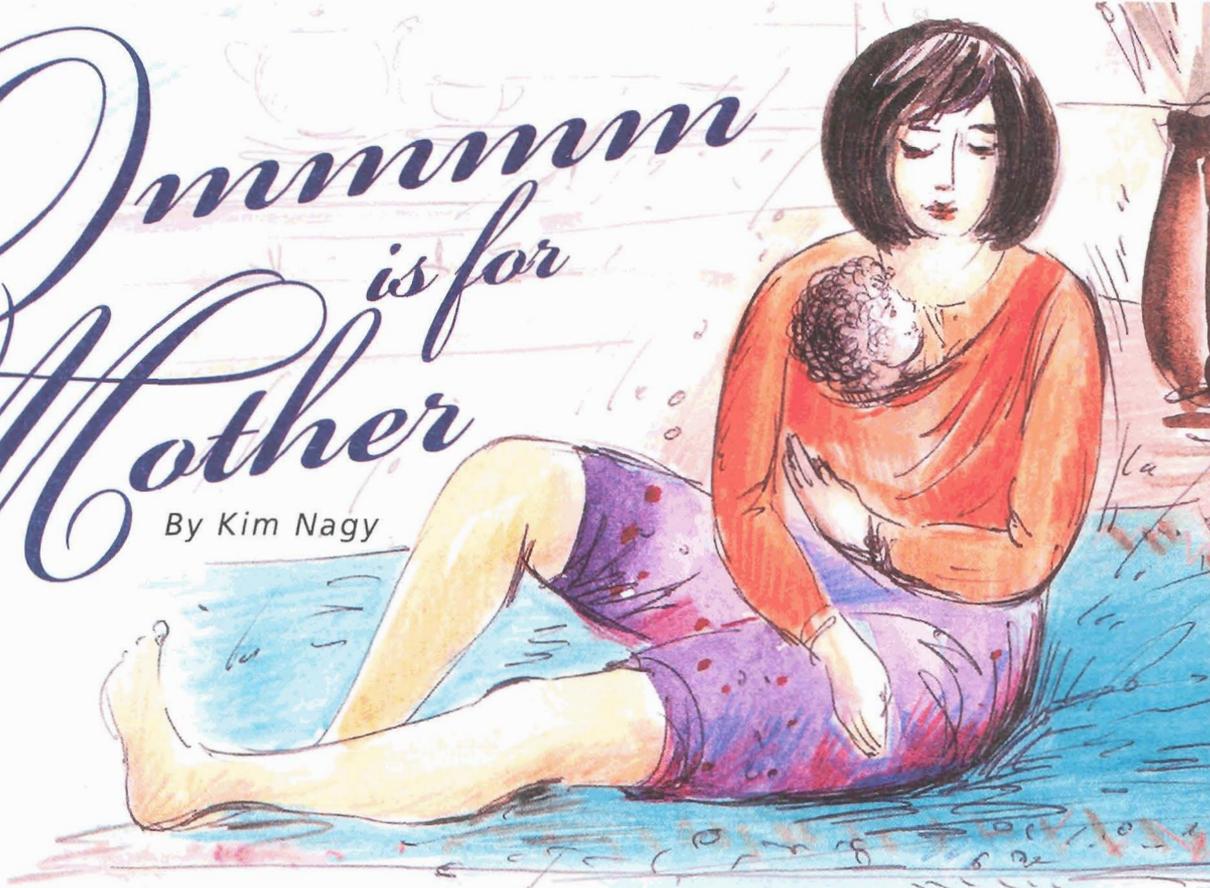


Ommmm is for Mother

By Kim Nagy



Somewhere in a messy, darkened bedroom, far away from the candles and neatly aligned mats in her neighborhood yoga studio, a woman walks in circles to soothe the crying baby in her arms. Her breath is even. Her eyes are closed. Exhausted but focused, she too is practicing yoga. Like yoga practice, motherhood (fatherhood, too, for that matter) can be a continual opportunity for inner growth, a sometimes uncomfortable realm to discover your emotional demons and physical boundaries, and a sanctuary for self-acceptance and the most profound sensations of love and gratitude.

While many women practice yoga throughout their pregnancy—albeit with increasing modifications—they often find themselves more than just physically limited during the first days and months after giving birth. During this period of adjustment and recovery, the inundation of practical demands can be overwhelming for even the most prepared and experienced of mothers. Sneaking in a yoga practice (let alone feeding yourself) can scarcely be scheduled in between the nearly constant and unpredictable needs of an infant—nursing, diaper changing, walking, holding, singing, rocking, bouncing, and, oh, did I mention nursing and diaper changing?

I spoke with several veteran mothers who practice and teach yoga to find out how parenthood changed their feelings about their practice. One theme became clear. Whether the endless demands of child rearing helped them better appreciate a few moments of peace or their intense love for their child cast the lessons of yoga in a new light, yoga became an even greater source of physical relief and emotional nurturing for these women. But becoming a mother also often transformed their

approach to yoga... for the better. In fact, their discoveries provide us all—parents and non-parents alike—with important reminders about how to approach the practice of yoga on and off the mat.

Getting Back to Your Practice?

“Getting back” to the physical aspects of your previous yoga practice after giving birth can be a prolonged, sometimes frustrating, process—but a shift of emphasis can open up new avenues of sensation. Jeremi Dilworth, Prenatal Iyengar yoga teacher, childbirth educator and mother of two (Rhyanna, four, and Auden, six weeks) had an intensely physical daily asana practice before her first pregnancy. After the birth of her daughter, Jeremi said, “The obvious change is that you just don’t have that full hour anymore.”

Intuitively, Jeremi modified her expectations of herself and began to look for what she needed from yoga, rather than what she could do to improve her practice. “I became more open physically. I wasn’t trying to get through a whole Sun Salutation. I might just do a simple twist with a yogic mind. I was able to click into my breathing right away and my practice became more streamlined, more efficient, more pure.”

Her practice also helped her relax with her baby. “When my daughter was having a crying jag, I could relax my body while still being fully present for her. It was like magic happening.” Jeremi, a former dancer, also felt her recovery process led her to a new level of awareness for physical limitations, and ultimately a stronger empathy for her students.

For Jillian Pransky, Vinyasa yoga teacher and mother of

William, eight months, yogic breathing immediately became an essential tool for parenting her newborn. William suffered from severe colic for the first five months of his life. Often when Jillian held and rocked him, he would continue to cry out in pain. "When he would wake up screaming, all I could do was sit and hold him. There was a lot I could not do for him. I just kept breathing with him. I would just breathe him in. Meditation helped me mainly not to try to change things, but to simply be present and alert. In fact, the sleep that I didn't get was probably only okay because of my breathing," Jillian said. It also helped Jillian stay grounded enough to trust her own instincts amidst a torrent of conflicting advice over her son's physical condition. "I've always felt strongly that yoga is not just located on the mat...[motherhood] made it easier for me to feel that mindfulness."

Parenthood as Practice

In the years after the birth of her daughter, Carrie, Prenatal Vinyasa yoga teacher and mother of Sierra, two, came to realize that there was no "getting back" to her practice with the same physical intensity.

"For lots of people, yoga turns into an obsessive-compulsive thing. I may have had some confusion about this before having kids. Finding a sense of wholeness does not come from one hour a day on your mat. As a mother, you are forced to find that sense off the mat and you can see the bigger picture. Now, I feel like my yoga is all around me all the time. My practice has become a lot softer," said Carrie who is now pregnant again. And her mat, she added, is always on the floor.

Parenting can, hopefully, help lower our expectations and attachments to specific outcomes. To experience ten minutes of quiet can suddenly seem blissful—an amount of time you might have taken entirely for granted in the past. But, admittedly plenty of mothers and fathers struggle with different aspects of their children's behavior—sleep (or lack thereof) being perhaps the most painful example. As Carrie said, "Too often we look for solutions. My expectations just became much lower. Now I am happy just to take a hot shower at the end of the day."

Of course, all yoga practitioners strive to be fully present in every dimension of their lives. But for parents the practice of yoga is never easily compartmentalized. Creating internal peace of mind can be difficult in the most serene of environments. Add the frequent tears of a teething baby or the incessant complaints of a fractious two-year-old and the act of taking one full-bodied breath can be more challenging than, say, mastery of headstand or lifting yourself into bow after an exhausting day.

Learning to meet the trials of parenting with gentleness (for yourself and your children) comes in handy as children get older too. Sheryl Edsall, mother of two (Josh, 16, and Shan-

na, 13) teaches Vinyasa yoga to families with children age six and older. Here many families meet one another in an entirely brand new way on their mats—a place where falling can be an instrumental part of learning. In practicing balance games and sitting still together, parents and children can face their vulnerabilities without words in a safe, nurturing place.

"Parenting is like meeting a new pose on the mat every day. For instance, I've never parented a 17-year-old before. The trick is to play the edge. As when you are practicing yoga, it helps to gently push any openings but to also acknowledge and respect where closed, to listen with gentleness. Trying to control or force things is only going to make everyone suffer just as forcing postures in the physical practice of yoga causes injury," said Sheryl. "It is sometimes difficult to detach and not take things personally—to step away from our own wants and needs and see things as they really are, but doing so can really help us be in the moment and use conflicts to readjust our awareness."

Yoga Means Union

New parents are unprepared for (and sometimes frightened by) the strong feelings their children elicit from them—frustration, awe, fear, joy, impatience, gratitude, anger and adoration. "Parenthood exceeded my expectations in every realm. You love them one hundred times more than you thought and you are frustrated one hundred times more than you thought," Carrie reflected.

In the same way that postures employ physical dynamism, breathing and the gravitational pull of oppositional forces to achieve wholeness, parenthood forces us to engage all parts of ourselves to attain emotional balance. And as Sheryl expressed it, "...to surrender at the same time you rise up to each challenge." The potential for polarity or friction inherently contained in each yoga posture, each philosophical conundrum, and every opportunity to practice kindness is where we most often find our epiphanies in yoga, and so it is with parenting.

"Instead of saying, 'I hate this pose, I hate this pose,' find a space just to be fully in the pose. Treat yourself with the same love you treat your children and treat your children as intimate guests. Everything we learn takes hard work," Sheryl advised.

Often new mothers and fathers describe their most intense emotion as an unprecedented surge of unconditional love and a spiritual sense of enhanced connection. "I always thought I was teaching from this place, but it was more profound than I ever imagined. It is no longer words for me," said Jillian.

For the women I interviewed the life transforming event of giving birth led to a renewed compassion for others, increased tolerance and diminished judgments, more perspective and less self-importance, enhanced flexibility and fewer obsessions—and those sound a lot like the benefits of practicing yoga.

Kim Nagy is a freelance writer from Lambertville, New Jersey. She lives with her husband, Robert, and daughter, Isabel, who is twenty-two months old.