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## **Prenatal Yoga, "Inner Bonding" and Natural Birth**

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You may be wondering how I began to teach childbirth education classes. It was not on purpose; rather, it was kind of an accident. Actually, it was a stroke of wonderful, wonderful luck. I was teaching yoga classes at my local YMCA and one day I walked into a new class and there were three pregnant women in it, very large pregnant woman—in the seventh month, eighth month, and ninth month! I didn't know anything about yoga for pregnant women at that time—that was seven years ago. I said to myself, "What am I going to do with these people?" So I looked to see if there was any information in the literature. Well, there was one book available at the time and that was it. There was nothing else seven years ago on exercise during pregnancy or yoga for pregnancy. We have really turned this whole area around in the last few years and it's very exciting to be part of the group that has developed information on this topic.

I did not help those first women in my class, but during that following summer, three other of my regular yoga students became pregnant and they asked me to do some more research to develop a program for them on prenatal yoga. So I thought to myself, "OK, I'll try to discover some guidelines." I spoke to the obstetricians in my town. They had no specific information for me but told me, "Whatever you want to do, that's fine with us."

Then I talked to a nursing professor at the University of Connecticut who was also a Lamaze teacher. She showed me the Lamaze physical exercises that were being taught at that time—there were a total of six exercises! So I just read up on anything I could find even remotely related to prenatal yoga and spent lots of time talking to pregnant women. That following September, I had wall-to-wall pregnant women in my first prenatal yoga class. It was very scary to me because I looked around and there were all these expectant faces. Then I looked around again and I imaged fifteen little sets of eyes, all the babies looking at me too. I wanted to leave. But I didn't do that. I took a very deep breath, yoga style, and began to teach. More importantly, I began to learn about the pregnancy experience.

You, by the way, will be learning that that breath saved me that first day in prenatal class a little later in this workshop. This is an experiential workshop. For a day and a half, presenters have been giving you information. In this workshop, you have to give us something, a little something, back. All of the breaths and exercises we will be sharing today have been part of my teaching and learning experience these past seven years. Seven very exciting and gratifying years, I might add. I would like to share with you today a little taste of what I am doing. I have a videotape of two of my students doing some exercises in my program, POSITIVE PREGNANCY FITNESS, that I would like you to see.

I'd just like to tell you before I show you the videotape, that the word "yoga" has a wonderful connection with pregnancy. "Yoga means union." It means union, unified or yoked together. Yoking together is really what the root sound of the word means from the ancient Sanskrit word. I thought to myself, "What a wonderful term to be applied to pregnancy when the mother and baby are in a state of physical and mental union." They are interdependent on each other. The term "yoga," unfortunately scared many people because they thought they would have to stand on their heads while they were pregnant! So I changed the name of my program to POSITIVE PREGNANCY FITNESS and I played down the terminology of yoga, although the entire program is based on regular yoga training. Fitness from my point of view is not only the body but rather the mind and body working together.

I'd like to talk a bit about "inner bonding." I am sure you are all familiar with what it is because it has been discussed by other presenters yesterday and today. "Inner bonding" is merely developing a *wonderful* relationship with the conscious person growing inside. Yesterday, I was talking to another childbirth educator who was kind of concerned about the negative aspect of "inner bonding." What if you bond with a baby and the baby doesn't make it? I have faced that situation in my own personal teaching experiences because I have worked with over 3,000 couple up until now, and naturally, you have some babies who don't make it through the birth process. It is not an outcome that you look forward to, but it is one which you have to face.

I have found a really *wonderful* aspect of inner bonding is in that situation. I have brought you a quote from a couple in my past class. They were a very unique couple. They had already had seven children prior to this pregnancy and the youngest one was 17. So this new baby was kind of an extra gift.

The woman, Joan, was 46 years old and had hypertension but was very excited about the new baby. This was the first time they had ever

taken childbirth education classes. Joan and her husband, Alex, attended class together, and the *wonderful* aspect of early and mid pregnancy childbirth preparation classes is the support of the couples for one another. The women are especially supportive of one another and that support is priceless.

In Joan and Alex's class, several couples were at the very end of pregnancy and so each week the couples would ask about the other couples who were not in class. I was out of town and had just come home from a trip when I learned from a message on my answering machine that Joan and Alex's baby had not made it through labor. He was stillborn. Our expectations were so high for this couple, it was a very difficult thing to accept. That evening I went over to the hospital to visit them. Joan had had an emergency Caesarian section after a very brief labor, but it was too late—the baby was born dead. I have a quote of theirs which I asked them permission to share with you here. It emphasizes the positive aspect of bonding even in a very negative situation. They wrote:

The emphasis on getting to know your baby during pregnancy was a whole new experience for us. When we were pregnant years back with our older children, you really didn't know your baby until you gave birth. Even the term we were pregnant seemed so natural and made the father so much a part of everything. Through this getting to know experience, we got to know Jonathan (that was the baby that was born stillborn) through talking to him and communicating through touch. Because of this experience, we came to know Jonathan very well. And these are memories that we will hold dear now. Even in death, he is still very close to us. The emphasis on naming the child early in pregnancy became very important to us because it made us very much aware of his personhood during pregnancy and now when we speak of him.

As you can see bonding is not a two edged sword. Some people noted that if couples become too attached to their babies, then if the outcome is not a positive one, they would grieve more. In this particular instance and several other times I can think of, "inner bonding" was particularly beneficial. Sheila, have you talked to people about this topic? Sheila Kit-zinger answers: "One of the great challenges in grieving is being able to say goodbye to a person. You can't grieve unless there is something, someone to grieve over. So where there is bonding with the baby in pregnancy, there is a real person of whom to take your leave. It won't save any pain. It is enabling grieving to take place." Thank you Sheila, I could not agree with you more. Now to get back to the positive aspects of "inner bonding," we will find that all we are really doing today is rediscovering what we already instinctually know. Women naturally talk to their unborn babies. I did when I was pregnant although no one told

me to. We have intuition. We have understandings. We know how to grow and birth babies. We really do. So the program that I have developed, and I am sure the ones that you teach as well, teach people about the pregnancy and birth process by giving people guideposts, information and reassurance. The POSITIVE PREGNANCY FITNESS program is a tuning in program. We learn to tune into our bodies, we learn to tune into our babies. We learn about our inner strengths and abilities.

Now I would like to share with you the basic breath we use to accomplish these goals. The breath is called "Rock the baby" breath because we keep the baby in our consciousness as we do our deep breathing. This breath is used throughout my program and it's really easy to learn and practice. I am going to stand up and demonstrate for you and then you will be able to learn to do it. I'm putting my hands on my abdomen and inhaling as I move my tummy forward, now exhaling and moving my abdomen back. In essence, I am rocking my phantom baby forward and back. Some of you in the audience are very lucky because you have babies growing inside right now. The baby may kick a little bit when you do this breath because there is four times the usual amount of oxygen coming into your system and obviously the baby's system too.

Those of you who would like to join me with learning "Rock the Baby" breath, placing your hands right on your abdomen and now move the abdomen forward—now move it back. Don't concentrate on the breathing yet, just feel the tummy move forward and then back. Now this time we are going to inhale through the nose and send the air down to our real or imaginary baby as we move the tummy forward. Now smoothly exhale, as you move your abdomen back. Did you notice that it took us about five seconds to inhale and about five to ten seconds to exhale?

Let's try it again. Let's inhale and rock the babies forward and exhale and rock the babies back. Now when you are rocking the baby back, especially if you have one inside, you are hugging or lovingly squeezing the baby. Make it an affectionate hug! The baby is going to be hugged a lot during labor by the uterus contracting, so this breath is a very beneficial movement for both mother and baby to prepare for labor.

Let's try it one more time. This time close your eyes, tune in and see how you feel when you do each breath. Notice the oxygen going into the nose, down into the lungs, then down to the baby, and then coming out of the lungs, out of the nose as you hug the baby. Let's try it now. Close your eyes. Relax the abdomen as you inhale and move the babies forward and then exhale and move the babies back. One more time. Inhale and move the baby forward. Make it smooth and even. Now exhale and move the baby back. (Note to readers: This breath should be done smoothly and slowly taking five seconds to inhale and five to ten seconds to exhale. It should be even with no jerks.)

There is one other variation on this breath which I sometimes find difficult to teach, but my students find very beneficial. It's called Sighing Breath. The first half is the same as "Rock the Baby" breath, but during the exhalation, you use a sighing sound. You open your mouth, you open your throat, you let a sigh come out with the exhalation. Let's try it. Let's just inhale, through the nose, rocking the kids forward, imaginary or real ones, now exhale, open your mouth and a-a-a-h-h it out. Try to make a sound. You were terrific! You didn't even need much coaching . . . Some of my students are very proper—past conditioning, I would imagine. Often I have to work very hard to teach them how to SIGH! I tell them if they do not learn how to make noise during pregnancy, then they will not naturally make any noise during labor. Making sound helps the body to open up during labor, it is a natural bodily response IF we allow it to occur. Making noises, guttural sounds, is a very intimate part of giving birth and being pregnant too. So let's try one more Sighing Breath. Inhale, move the tummy forward. Now exhale, pull the tummy back as you open up and sigh out a-a-a-a-h-h. What a terrific group. You are doing very well.

I brought a short videotape with me—only 10 minutes long—that shows you some short segments from the POSITIVE PREGNANCY FITNESS Program that I share with my women and couples. One of the women in the tape is nine months pregnant and a dancer as you will notice when she does some of the leg exercises. The other woman is four months pregnant. Seeing some of the exercises yourself will give you a better grasp of my prenatal fitness program. After the videotape, we will experience some of the exercises the two pregnant women practice in the tape.

Contents of 10 minute videotape on POSITIVE PREGNANCY FITNESS:

1. "Rock the Baby" breath demonstrated by a woman in the 9th month of pregnancy. Benefits: brings mother and baby into contact and conscious awareness; increases oxygen supply to mother and baby; centers, quiets and calms both mother and baby.

Neck Rolls: teaches pregnant women to keep mouth loose in preparation for labor; releases tension and tightness from neck and shoulders; helps naturally eliminate headaches.

Pelvic Rocking with the Bridge: eliminates pregnancy back aches.

Anal Lock: tones and firms pelvic floor muscles in preparation for birth.

Sitting Spiral Twist: releases tightness in upper back and shoulders thereby eliminating backache.

Chest expansion standing: strengthens the pectoral muscles, stretches and strengthens thighs.

Complete relaxation with "inner bonding" visualization: women learn to consciously relax their muscles and focus inside onto their growing baby. They learn to share energy and love with the growing baby as well as learning about their own inner strengths and abilities.

When you work in prenatal classes with the unborn, the babies learn to know your voice. When I finally meet the little ones after they are born, they act as if they know me . . . or at least my voice. I teach a postpartum program and meet the babies when they are three weeks old. Often they will look towards me the first day of class thinking, "Aha, that's where that calm voice comes from!" It's really quite wonderful but in the beginning, I was taken aback by it. It was sort of a funny feeling to have a little baby looking at you as if he knew you.

But then, it just confirms what we already know. They have consciousness, they have awareness inside. I have audio cassette practice tapes available that my students use to practice some of the exercises that were on the videotape. The unborn babies become accustomed to my voice from that as well. The other phenomenon that occurs is that they grow to associate my voice with their mother relaxing and letting go of tension while quieting down. I think's why when they hear my voice again once they are on the outside, they look so intently at me. Some of them even begin to smile when they are old enough to become a bit socialized.

Are you ready to try out some of our POSITIVE PREGNANCY FITNESS Exercises? They will enable you to know yourself a bit better. Right now, just close your eyes for a second or two to see where you are tight. If I am going to work with you, we should work with the situation at hand. (Audience takes 1-2 minutes to look inside as lights are dimmed and soft music is played in background. They are sitting in chairs with their heads up and back straight.)

Let's explore where we are tight. Are you tight in the shoulders? Tight in the neck? Is your abdominal area tight? Check out all the different parts of your bodies and give me some feedback. Audience response: Neck is tight; left shoulder; lower back; around the mouth; pelvis; inner thighs.

Now you are tuning in and finding out where you are tight. Most people don't take the time to do that. If you do tune in and find out where you are tight, and you learn how to eliminate the tightness and tension, then you can give much more to the world and enjoy it at the same time, because you feel better. The energy which you give out to the world—which is the way we spend most of our waking hours—can be better utilized if you take some time each day to go into your own inner space.

Let's work with the neck area first. Close your eyes and let's start off with a "Rock the Baby" breath. Put your hands on your abdomen and inhale as we rock our babies forward and now exhale and rock the baby back. Good. Now one more time, relax your tummy muscles and inhale deeply, and when you are ready, exhale smoothly as you contract your tummy. Now let your hands drop. Let your chin come near your chest. Let go of the back of your neck. Become aware of your jaw muscles. Especially if you are pregnant. If you keep your jaw muscles relaxed during pregnancy, it really helps you during the birthing process because relaxing the jaw area relaxes the birth canal as well. Now move your lower jaw side to side. Move all your facial muscles around. Wiggle your nose, squeeze your eyes a bit. Get your face to move. (10 sec. wait.) Let the face become still. Take a deep breath into your face. Now sigh it out a-a-a-h-h. You sound wonderful.

Do it one more time. Inhale and move the tummy forward and let the tension drain out of your face as you exhale. Now keep your face as loose as you can as you let your right ear hang down near the your right shoulder. Don't cheat by moving your shoulder up your ear! Let the right shoulder relax. Good. (Hold 10 sec.) Now hang your head back. (Hold 10 sec.) Now place the left ear near the left shoulder. Keep your jaw muscles loose. (Hold 10 sec.) Notice how you feel—look inside. If you are cracking and crunching, don't get upset. You get a gold star, if you crack in this class! Let your head come back to the center and begin to make rotations two times in each direction, 360° around taking 20 seconds for each rotation. Slow down—take your time—look inside and see how you feel. Notice all the accumulated calcium deposits breaking up. Keep your awareness on what you are feeling. Let your shoulders go more—don't hold them up so tight. (2 minutes to practice Neck Rolls exercise.) Come back to the center when you are ready. Go at your own pace. Slowly bring the head back up straight. Make it feel good. Again take a deep breath. If you have a baby inside, send some energy down to your baby. Exhale the tiredness and fatigue in your body. Inhale again. Inhale energy, vitality and exhale tiredness, heaviness. Good.

Let's get our awareness on our shoulders as we inhale and squeeze the shoulders up near the ears and exhale and push them gently down and away from the neck. Stretch them down. Inhale and bring the shoulders up and when you are ready to exhale, gently push the shoulders down. One more time inhaling the shoulders up and exhaling down. Take a moment now to look inside, see how you feel. Notice your thoughts. Don't stop the thoughts, but notice how they float across your mind. If you have a baby inside keep your awareness on the baby for a moment or two. Be aware of the baby's movements.

Focus your attention on your left hand and bring your left hand to the outside of your right knee. Now extend your right arm straight out being careful of your neighbor and pushing it straight out from the shoulder in back of you. Push the extended arm as far behind you as you can to release tension in the upper back. Look towards your back hand. When you twist around as far as you can in this sitting spinal twist, relax your jaw muscles. Usually they tighten up. Open your chest up a little bit more. Relax your front arm a little bit more. Now relax around the stretch, as you will have to do in labor around your contractions. Good. Release when you choose to, sweeping your arm gently back to the front. Take your time and feel your arm moving through the air. Notice the lightness in your upper back and arm. Take a deep breath rocking the babies forward; now let it go with a sighing sound a-a-a-h-h. Let's put the opposite arm on the opposite leg and bring the other arm out in back. Look at your hand extended out in back. Be aware if you are tighter on this side or looser. Hold as long as is comfortable. Now slowly sweep the arm back. Take a deep, slow breath and encircle the imaginary or real baby inside with light, energy, vitality and vigor. Now sigh out the breath releasing tension, fatigue, tiredness from yours and the baby's body. One final breath now at your own pace inhaling lightness and energy and exhaling tension. Become aware of your shoulders, your facial muscles, your upper back. Tune into the areas we have worked with. Notice how your body feels as you begin to open your eyes and focus on the outer world. You may feel a bit fatigued for the next five minutes or so since your body is not used to slowing down consciously. But then all of a sudden you will feel a nice surge of energy coming up and through your body. You will feel refreshed, recharged, invigorated.

I would like to thank you all for sharing time and energy with me this morning. I believe that the more we work with inner space during pregnancy, the more we will learn about the intuitive, natural facets of the experience.