

Birth Stories.

For me, pregnancy was an initiatory experience that changed my body, shifted my consciousness, taught me surrender, and was the beginning of the dawning awareness of the physical, psychological, and spiritual demands and gifts that would come through being a mother. (Bolen 1994, p. 53)

It is my great pleasure to include these very personal stories from women who have practiced yoga during their pregnancies. As you will see from reading their stories, some women were very involved in yoga for the entire pregnancy, while others only discovered it during the last few months, yet all felt it played an important role in childbirth in so many different ways. It is a privilege to make their special journeys available to share with other new mothers and I hope they will prove to be valuable and insightful reading while you prepare for the birth of your baby.

When you are pregnant, it is very helpful to listen to other women speak about their birth experiences, especially how other women coped and handled the different stages of labour. It can help to build confidence and courage for your own special journey and relieve much of the mystery around childbirth and also answer the many questions that are inevitable during this time.

Obviously, there will be some labour stories that won't be as easy to listen to as others, being a fact of life that some women have an easier time giving birth than others. Even if a birth is not straight forward and required intervention it can still be a positive experience, especially in the case of needing a caesarian when a natural birth was planned. However, there are the few who seem to take it upon themselves to tell first time pregnant woman, often who they don't even know, the drama stories that sometimes accompany birth, which are of no benefit to her and only increase doubt and add to her fear of the unknown. But not all birth experiences are horrific. In fact, for some women, giving birth is one of life's most remarkable and inspiring times in their life. For this reason, I encourage women to listen to all stories, including the inevitable horror stories, but especially to seek out women who had a more positive and fulfilling time giving birth, and to draw strength from their encouraging stories. Finding the balance between all the possibilities of pregnancy, labour and childbirth, and being in touch with the realities of life, will make you more aware of what could happen and prepare you for your own individual circumstances.

Natalie's three boys.

When I fell pregnant with my first child I felt that I needed to prepare myself not only for the birth but for the pregnancy itself. I simply couldn't just turn up on the day and thrust that all would go well. Therefore I took the opportunity to try a yoga class. It quickly changed the way I thought and felt about my body and gave me an incredible connection to my growing baby. I so enjoyed my first experience that I continued to practice yoga for my three pregnancies and inbetween too. As well as the practices I also shared this experience with many other wonderful new mums and made great friends along the way. I learnt how to breathe, stretch, relax and focus my attention where I needed it most. I also used many of the yoga positions to relieve discomfort during pregnancy and during labour. I was able to focus on my breathing and completely relax inbetween contractions and I could visualise opening my pelvis and helping my baby to be born. Through using the yoga practices during these times I gained an enormous strength within myself that I never realised I had before. I felt empowered and am proud that I have dealt with the intensity of labour and given birth to my three sons naturally. After each birth I continued to use the throat breath and humming

to relax and calm my babies who I'm sure responded to the familiar sounds. Both my older sons would hum themselves to sleep. I also discovered how to relax and let go of tension in my body to allow my milk to flow easily while breast feeding. I have learnt so many valuable lessons that I continue to practice everyday. I believe that Theresa has created such a wonderful environment through her classes for so many of us expectant mothers. Practicing yoga during my pregnancies has enriched this very special time in my life and I will remember the beautiful times that I shared with each of my babies before they were born and after as well.

Geneveie's story.

I started yoga with Theresa when I was about 20 weeks pregnant with my third child. I was unable to exercise earlier due to a few problems so yoga seemed the logical choice. I needed a calm and relaxing approach to birth and I found the classes such a calming experience in comparison to my hectic life with two small children while they also allowed some time with my growing baby. Another great aspect of these classes was the interaction with other pregnant woman who were sharing their pregnancy journey with me. I especially liked the pelvic rocking on all fours and the child pose as these were very comfortable and relieved a lot of pressure from my back. I told Theresa I was going to spend some of my labour in the Sleeping Tortoise due to the wonderful relief it gave my back and thighs, and I did just that right up until the time came for me to push. I went in to labour two weeks early, I had strong contractions at home then my waters broke and I went straight to hospital. Once in hospital I headed to the shower and began deep squats and standing pelvic rocking to relieve back pain and to keep my body and baby moving. All the time I visualised a lily opening as an image of my cervix dilating as we had done in class. I did these movements and the visualisation to try and progress quickly and further into my labour. I moved to the spa and sat with my belly sitting in the warm water in the child pose as this gave me wonderful relief from back discomfort and also gave the rest of my body some rest. I had intended having a water birth but after only a short time in the spa I became very hot and flushed so I went back to the shower and continued with more pelvic rocking while standing and on my hands and knees. During this time I also leant against the wall of the shower to stretch my calf muscles and relieve my back. The contractions became quite intense so I gathered my thoughts and energy and sat in the sleeping tortoise again and continued with the lily visualisation and my cervix opening to birth my baby. When the contractions became too painful I rolled over onto my hands and knees, with my head in a pillow clenching my husbands hands. I breathed slowly and deeply and within 10 minutes I could feel my baby coming. I gave a few pushes and my beautiful baby girl Isabelle was born. The labour was a total of 2 hours 50 minutes and drug free. I had achieved the calm and controlled birth experience I had hoped for and felt elated with my baby daughter. Even though my labour was relatively fast it was also very intense and I was so pleased with how well I had handled my self. As well as this I now have a wonderful group of friends from my yoga classes who I catch up every fortnight, which is great for us and our babies have friends of their own age too. We have been a great support to each other and are sure we will be friends for the rest of our lives.

Sarah and Joshua

I couldn't breathe before I met Theresa — well, not fully and deeply anyway. I am grateful to her for so many things, a very important one being her teaching me how to relax and breathe. She was an integral partner in my pregnancy and birth experience. Her pregnancy yoga classes were the highlight of my week when I was pregnant and I was lucky to take part in these for several months leading up to the birth of my first child. But they were so

much more than a typical yoga class. This class was a supportive, safe, nurturing environment where we not only learnt relevant yoga poses to help stretch and relieve our growing bodies, but we learnt relaxation techniques, meditation, postures for birthing, and breathing techniques. Being my first child, I had a lot of apprehension around what my birth experience would be like — how would I cope with the pain, how would I get through it? My husband Robert and I attended Theresa's special birth preparation class for couples in the weeks leading up to my due date. It helped put Robert's mind at ease as to how he could support me on the day with massage techniques, and assisting me with relaxation and breathing techniques. It also reassured me that he would know what to do as my birth partner. When my day came, I felt as prepared as I could be. Armed with my birth plan, I followed Theresa's suggestions and decorated my birthing room with open flowers, and drawings of the birth that Robert and I had done with her. When my "waves" became stronger and closer together, I spent several hours just sitting on a large pilates ball doing pelvic rocking to the waves I was feeling in my body. The pressure I felt on my lower back required strong massage at all times and Robert was a wonderful help to me during this time. My labour lasted approximately 7 hours and during this time, I focused solely on my breathing. Breathing into my waves, focusing on relaxing and opening and I did not use pain relief during my labour. Without a doubt, if I had not attended Pregnancy Yoga, I would not have been able to endure labour without pain relief. It was due to the breathing and relaxation techniques I learnt that I was able to do so. I also used these same techniques in the week following my son's birth when I was feeling overwhelmed in the hospital. I know these techniques will follow me through life, helping me to cope if I encounter stressful situations. I am now the proud mother of beautiful Joshua and I look forward to returning to Pregnancy Yoga during my next pregnancy.

Therese's girls - Allana & Makeisha

I started doing yoga in my first pregnancy when I was working a high pressure job and found it very fulfilling attending every week. It was my time for me. I also made time to go to classes in my second pregnancy and found it was my time to nurture myself and this amazing gift growing inside of me. While attending these classes I met a group of women who are now very good friends and are a support to each other and I would not have this great network if I had not attended yoga. The birth of my two children were entirely different and I want to share my stories as I found that listening to other women's experiences and reading about them helped me keep an open mind as to what might happen during labour and birth. Allana was 5 weeks early which was a big shock, I never imagined having a premature baby especially as we had just moved house that day and my waters broke early that evening. I had mild contractions for about four hours before I realised we had better go to hospital. I did some yoga postures from the classes and found the humming quite calming as it gave me something to focus on. I did pelvic rocking which was most beneficial to relieve back ache and rested in the child pose in between contractions. I also spent time in the spa to relieve pain in my back and my legs and did a lot of humming during that time also. I had wanted a drug free birth but just 'hit the wall' and asked for some pain relief. I used gas and a lot of humming to help me through transition and then around 4 am our darling baby daughter was born a healthy 6 pounds 4 ounces. The arrival of Makeisha was completely different. She attempted to be born 9 weeks early but as my waters hadn't broken the doctor was able to slow things down. I was ordered to rest until at least 37 weeks and surprisingly I managed to follow these orders. I was concerned she was going to be a

big baby because Allana was a good size even though she was 5 weeks early, and used acupuncture and other natural therapies to hopefully give birth any time after 37 weeks. But Makeisha had other plans and wasn't ready until I was a week overdue. I was induced and was hoping for a quick delivery and to have a water birth. I got into the birthing pool and did a lot of pelvic rocking because she was posterior and I was having a lot of back pain. I found humming helped again as it did the first time and after 7 hours in the pool I asked for my waters to be broken. It then became very intense and the doctor tried using the vacuum to help her be born, but this was not effective. In fact I was having what is known as an 'obstructive labour' and I was told she needed to be born by caesarian. I did my best to remain calm especially when the epidural was given and found it very helpful to use some other breathing exercises including the ujjayi breathing. She was born a very healthy 9 lb. 11 ounces. I found yoga to be very nurturing and valuable for both pregnancies and births and I will certainly be doing it again for any children we have in the future.

Note: The midwife told Therese after the birth that although she had gone through all stages of labour her baby was pushing forcefully on the walls of the cervix for many hours thereby causing swelling and obstructing the opening of the cervix, making a natural birth impossible as this had progressed too far. This is known as an obstructed labour and in Therese's situation a caesarian was a necessity and life saving. Obstructed labour is unfortunately very common in many underprivileged countries and with devastating consequences. If you are interested in knowing more about this, I recommend an inspiring true story in 'The hospital by the river. A story of hope.' by Dr. Catherine Hamlin (Macmillan) This is about the wonderful work done by a husband and wife doctor team who have dedicated their lives to reducing this problem for poor village women in Africa.

Debbie's story - The birth of Callan

As this was my first child, I wanted to prepare myself and I felt yoga would be the most ideal way to cater to the mental and physical demands of pregnancy and childbirth. I joined Theresa's yoga group at about 18 weeks into my pregnancy. The classes were designed for pregnancy, so the postures, meditation and relaxation techniques were ideally suited and specific to the needs of an advancing pregnancy. Also, you were able to work at your own level and pace which I feel is important.

The benefits were almost immediate, particularly if you were disciplined and practised at home on a daily basis. The interaction with other pregnant ladies was great and also quite social. My intention was to continue the classes until I was due, but mother nature was to chart her own course as I developed Pregnancy Induced Hypertension at 26 weeks.

At 32 weeks I was hospitalised, and the challenge I was faced with was to try and extend my pregnancy for as long as possible. It was at this point that yoga became particularly important for me, as I was surrounded by women having their babies and then going home. Quite the opposite for me however, as I was trying very hard not to have my baby and at the same time pass my time in hospital effectively and positively. So yoga became a very big part of my daily routine in hospital, and as it turned out enabled me to remain calm mentally, which in turn kept my blood pressure levels sufficiently low to gain valuable weeks for my baby to continue to grow and develop, until I was induced at 36 weeks.

During the initial stages of labour, I walked a lot and then retired to the spa in the birthing suite and seriously concentrated on the breathing techniques I had learnt at the yoga classes. I choose to spend a lot of this time alone, which allowed my mind to be incredibly focused and clear and afforded me a degree of control physically, to work with the contractions as my labour progressed to the transitional stage. At this point, I left the spa and tried various positions on the floor, maintaining my breathing the whole time. From

transition to the actual birth, everything proceeded very quickly and my husband and girlfriend joined me to witness the wondrous moment our baby boy arrived, healthy and beautiful. My labour was drug free which amazed me, as I am certainly no martyr and had decided, in advance, to take pain relief if and when I needed it.

A few days after the birth my midwife asked me if I would speak to her current ante natal class before I went home. I inquired why, and she told me that I had gone into a trance like state as soon as I got into the spa, concentrating on deep breathing, and remaining that way the entire time. She felt it was my knowledge of yoga that rewarded me with a very easy labour, as labour goes, and wanted me to share this with her class, which I did happily. Upon reflection, I now realise what an 'outer body experience' my labour had been, even though I was not aware of this at the time.

To be honest I thought my yoga had served its purpose during pregnancy and labour, so I moved on to the busy days ahead caring for our son, Callan. No one can really prepare you for labour, you must experience it. The same applies to the first weeks at home, when the days roll into nights of very little sleep and you seem to merely exist for your baby, constantly wondering if what you are doing is correct, while at the same time becoming familiar with your baby. It is during these early weeks you are really tested mentally and physically. Once again yoga came to my rescue and I was able to draw on my ability through meditation to remain calm mentally, and the relaxation techniques boosted me physically and emotionally.

Overall, I am convinced yoga was my saviour at times when I needed it most and still is on a daily basis, proving to me the benefits of yoga don't cease with labour. Applied daily or as often as time allows, yoga in all its forms continues to feed the mind, body and soul, at a time when our lives become so busy and stressful. In turn this flows on to contribute to a contented baby, so mother and father can both be more relaxed to enjoy the new role of parenting. I feel everyone should have access to the benefits of yoga if they so desire, especially during pregnancy.

Eva's Birth Experience

Ella's journey into the world stirred in me the deepest and most unexpected of emotions. I firmly believed in having an active birth and had prepared myself from the beginning of my pregnancy by reading whatever books I could find on active birth experiences. I was quite sure of what I wanted — no drugs, for example, and the freedom to move about and take up what ever position I wanted. As it turned out, things did not happen as expected and, in the end, medical intervention was, for me, not only necessary but even welcome.

Leaning forward into the back of a chair throughout my entire labour, I refused to move. Yet despite the physical intensity of labour, I felt remarkably calm and at peace with myself — a feeling I attribute largely to yoga and meditation practices which had become an essential part of my daily routine months before the birth. Practising yoga and meditation regularly helped me enormously in gathering my focus and centring my energy when I required it most. I imagined myself riding the crest of a wave with each contraction, knowing it would eventually subside. With the help of my partner and close girlfriend who offered continued encouragement, bringing me back to my point of focus when I appeared to be drifting, I was thus able to manage my contractions. At the most intense point of my labour, however, a very specific visualisation technique I had learnt in yoga unexpectedly came to me. I imagined myself enclosed in a pyramid, where nothing could harm me and, as my contractions increased, I found myself thinking of a spiral lifting me out of my physical body, through the top of the pyramid. It was a very powerful experience, especially considering I did not particularly take to this practice during the actual yoga classes.

I look back at my birth experience as a joyous one. While the labour itself was difficult it shall always remain captured in my memory in the most emotionally positive way.

Veronica's baby, Amber Mae.

When I found out I was pregnant with my fourth child, I was in shock. Not only was I a busy career mum with three active children, I was also newly separated from my husband. I had promised myself that I would never go through labour again, as my other three experiences had been long and tedious, the last one being over 30 hours long and extremely painful. I couldn't believe that I had to face it all again . . . and this time on my own.

After the panic had subsided I decided to confront the problem. I began by researching all aspects of childbirth so as to ease the agony that I felt I was sure to endure. It was my favourite aunt who suggested yoga, and desperate as I was I decided to give it a go, anything could help. I was fortunate to have first called Theresa, who ran classes for pregnancy. From the first class I knew I had found the answer, as yoga was everything I was looking for. The exercises were perfect for my changing body, they felt really great, and the meditations did wonders for my mind. I was starting to feel fit and well, both physically and mentally. I continued to do the stretches and the meditations at home throughout the week and looked forward to the next class. Most importantly, I felt confident that I would at least survive my approaching ordeal.

And survive I did. The breathing exercises that had been so beneficial during my pregnancy proved fabulous during my labour, keeping me both relaxed and focused, while the deep relaxation was exactly what I needed during pregnancy and especially during labour. The most amazing aspect of the whole ordeal was the fact that my labour was only one and a quarter hours long from start to finish. I barely made it to the delivery suite, when my healthy baby girl Amber Mae arrived into the world. While labour would by no means be my most favourite experience in life, I can clearly say that yoga was of great benefit to me, making the birth easier, quicker and bearable. My recovery was also aided by yoga, as I continued on with some gentle stretching exercises and pelvic floor exercises, as well as listening to my relaxation tapes and doing my yoga breathing. I have since been proclaiming the benefits that yoga has had on all aspects of childbirth and I can highly recommend it to any pregnant mum.

Actually, I recommend it to any mum, as the techniques that got me through labour, are also an important part of coping with the day to day stresses of being a mother, especially if you're a single mother to four active children and moving along the challenging path of recreating a career. Yoga has been an amazing experience for my family and me, and I know it will be great for others too.

The birth of Ebony-Jayne

My son was born 10 years earlier in a relatively short time, lasting only four hours from the first twinge of labour to less than an hour for the second stage, and all my friends teased me saying I needed to experience a 'real birth'. Even though at that time, I was extremely fit and had been active up until the birth, I found that I needed to use gas as I had not learned to calm and control myself during the pregnancy. When it came to the final minutes of the birth, my mind wandered and focused on the pain, hence the tensing of muscles and the need to be cut to allow the baby free. Even though all births are a wonderful experience, taking the time to learn to relax the mind and body throughout this pregnancy, made the comparison between both births obvious.

The birth of our daughter Ebony-Jayne was a wonderful experience, even though my labour lasted a total of 17 hours, definitely a 'real birth', after

being induced due to the rise in my blood pressure. I went into true labour quite excited after a false labour lasting 10 days, when I had lost the mucus plug and had been mildly labouring ever since with several false starts. I was now pleased my contractions were coming at a regular 7 to 10 minutes apart. My labour was progressing slowly and my friend Sharon gave me homeopathic drops, which helped the intensity of the contractions. After trying several positions for labour, I found lying on my side the most comfortable. After much time and really getting nowhere fast, my waters were broken by my doctor and from then on the contractions were close together and very intense, as well as the desire to push. I found that the pain was easier to handle on my hands and knees, relaxing into the Child Pose in between contractions to allow the weight and gravity to take the pressure off my back. At this point there was a change of shifts and Tina became my midwife, a calm and skilled woman who encouraged me to breathe through the pain of each contraction. I wanted to push, but Tina told me I had at least 10 contractions to go, at which point my strength waned and I felt I couldn't last the distance — really telling myself I can't do this! But I pulled myself together and concentrated on the breathing I had been taught in yoga class, relaxing while breathing in and releasing all pain and discomfort while breathing out. I was able to push the panic I was feeling away, and started to relax as much as possible. Tina was encouraging me all the way, telling me to continue with what I was doing, but if I was to push at that time the baby's head would push against the cervix causing it to swell, which could cause complications if the swelling became too great. I remember Theresa telling me that the Mountain pose in a modified version was an effective way to relieve that pressure, as it allowed the baby to move slightly away from the cervix, reducing extra pressure and also my desire to push. So at the start of the next contraction in the all fours position, I straightened my legs and breathed and breathed and breathed. The overwhelming desire to push lessened as the baby fell with gravity away from the cervix, and after two more contractions Tina said I could push as I was completely dilated. So I began to push and after several contractions my husband Brett said, 'I can see the head'. With Sharon on one side whispering encouragement and Dianne on the other massaging my back to relieve the pain — a pain I can only relate to as a chinese burn, Ebony came into the world with no tears, no stitches or drugs. A healthy 7 lb 2 oz baby girl. They handed my beautiful daughter to me and as I focused on her I felt an enormous resurgence of energy, and I cried tears of love, joy, exhaustion and relief as I realised I had a daughter, Ebony-Jayne.

I then put her to my breast to encourage the birth of the placenta. Ebony's cord had now stopped pulsating and Brett cut the umbilical cord while she was in my arms, the joy and trepidation on his face was obvious as he hesitated, fearing he would hurt this tiny perfect baby who had just been born to us. He then held her in his arms and bonded with her. Tina pressed down onto the abdomen and the placenta was delivered in a few minutes, being a wonderful experience both physically and emotionally, a completion and cleansing after the whole birthing process. I recommend all women be allowed to enjoy this part of birth as naturally as possible, without the use of hormones to hurry on the process. Ebony's placenta is now feeding a Candlenut tree that continues to grow in our yard, Ebony's tree. I recommend yoga to any pregnant woman, for the benefits it gives to the body and the mind.

Author's note: Tina Neff was the midwife attending Trish, for the birth of Ebony and she wrote this report about the experience.

I had the privilege of assisting Trish and Brett in the birth of their beautiful daughter, Ebony-Jayne. Once Trish was established in labour, she worked extremely well with her support person Dianne. During this time, she was encouraged to remain focused on her breathing and spontaneously changed positions to be on all fours. Even though Trish's labour was intense, she was

able to remain in control and focus on her deeper rhythmic breathing. This control and focus certainly did a great deal to aid the process of labour. Trish did so well with her breathing and focusing, that I would encourage anyone and everyone who is contemplating yoga training during their pregnancies, to certainly follow it through. Both the inner control and positioning greatly assisted Trish and Brett in achieving a wonderful birth experience.

Trish's support person Dianne, also did a lot of back massage which helped in relaxing the back muscles and shifted the focus off the 'pain'. Stimulating the sacral points also helped to dissipate the pain and shift the centre of focus. A pain that is more 'dilute' and not so concentrated, is easier to deal with and get through.

After being privileged enough to assist Trish and Brett in their labour experience and share the wonderful, joyous moments of Ebony's birth, I would thoroughly and wholeheartedly recommend the practice of yoga and the breathing techniques to everyone. I can see that it not only assists in managing labour and birth, but also aides the person's inner strength and well being.

Wendy Allen - Sarah Joy Allen's 'Birth Day'

Sarah's conception was a honeymoon surprise. Delighted as I was, I knew nothing of what to expect of pregnancy or babies. So this was the beginning of an enormous and continuing learning experience. I wanted to have as healthy and natural pregnancy and birth as possible, and I focused on my physical and spiritual well being. Yoga and hypnotherapy played a major part in my preparation program along with a healthy life style, with particular attention to diet and exercise.

Sarah's expected date of arrival, 20th of August, came and went. Rob and I saw our doctor after every five day's, and after two and a half weeks of waiting we decided to induce Sarah on the 6th of September. Over those final days of waiting we exhausted all the natural methods of inducement including hypnotherapy, yoga, acupuncture, massage, lots of exercise, love making and wishful thinking!

On the evening of the 5th, after checking into the hospital, the nurses inserted the progesterone jelly at 10 p.m. and 4 a.m. My contractions were slow and I found I was able to use various yoga poses during this time, including Squatting and the Butterfly Pose in particular. At 1 p.m. my doctor arrived and as things were progressing very slowly, my waters were broken and the drip was inserted. I thought I was prepared for this but I found myself feeling very uncomfortable, anxious and fearful. Once the drip was inserted the show started without me, and the intensity of the pain took me by surprise.

At this time I really wanted a Caesar, but the strength and compassion I found in Joy's voice (the midwife) convinced me I didn't need one or really want one. She gave me the faith and strength I needed in myself and everything changed from that moment on. I realised I had to help myself and that I was going nowhere with my negativity, accepting there was no way out but forward, being strong and positive.

All the techniques I had learnt in the previous months came flooding back to me, and I became focused on my breathing, finding the ujjayi breathing technique was most valuable. Both the midwives present commented on the ease and depth of the relaxation I was achieving in between contractions. I was able to visualise the opening of my womb and see each contraction as a positive part of the process. Time vanished, I felt removed from those around me and I remember gazing out of the window towards the mountains and feeling very relaxed and dreamy. It was transition, and at this point and I completely surrendered myself, realising nature was taking over, giving the body time to recover and prepare for the next stage of labour.

I soon felt a slight pressure on the anal area as though I needed to move my bowels and after being examined, I was ready to push as I had completely dilated. I got off the bed and into a squatting position leaning over the bed and found I had an incredible urge to push. I was then supported in a squatting position with Rob supporting me from behind. The contractions were at their peak and I felt in control, but not in control — in the sense that nature and instinct had taken over. My mind and body were working as one following their natural course, the inner strength of this process was truly amazing. My throat quickly became sore and hoarse with the effort and I was surprised how physically demanding this was, as I was using all my stamina and strength to stay with it. The midwife placed a mirror so I could watch the birth, and the sight of Sarah coming into the world is one I will never forget. When she was born she looked surprised laying on her back, arms and legs spread open, obviously wondering what on earth was happening. I couldn't take my eyes off her and Rob cut the cord.

The first touch, the first cuddle, no words can ever describe the awe of this moment. Time seemed to have stopped and I was lost in a state of disbelief gazing at Sarah, before realising I had the daughter I hardly dared to dream of, for wanting too much. She was soon in Rob's arms, a very special time for both of them as they looked at each other for the first time, becoming completely absorbed in one another. We then spent wonderful hours enjoying ourselves snuggling and enjoying the euphoria.

Pregnancy and childbirth have been a truly wonderful experience, one that I feel thankful to have enjoyed. Although it has offered various challenges, none have been as great or demanding as those that are faced now as a new mother, nor as rewarding. Motherhood adds a new dimension to the word 'Love'.

For anyone reading this who is preparing for labour and birth, I could not recommend strongly enough the practice of yoga. It can help you with so many aspects of pregnancy, labour and birth, everything from breathing, relaxation, mental approach, physical suppleness, strength and stamina. It has been, and still is invaluable to me.

Lindsay Welch - Morgan's birth

I had been doing yoga throughout my pregnancy and felt really well prepared, relaxed and ready. I had attended my last class when I was more than a week overdue but still did all the postures and enjoyed the class. On the day Morgan was born I woke early with period-like pains, my pelvic floor muscles were tightening and it felt as though a fist was pushing down inside me. At 11.30 I remember thinking to myself that Morgan was going to arrive today!!

The discomfort continued all day and by mid-afternoon the contractions were five minutes apart, although only lasting a short time. I was able to walk around and was getting very excited at the thought that soon I would see my baby. During Yoga I had often visualised my 'special place' as Fleays nature reserve which is behind our home, and it always made me feel relaxed and close to the beauty of nature. So with it being so close to my home, my husband and I went for a lovely walk to help get things moving. Later in the afternoon the contractions were getting much stronger and I was having difficulty coping with backache. I found sitting in the Child Pose was the most comfortable at this time, and it also allowed my husband Phill easy access to my lower back for some firm massage.

At 9.00 my waters broke and I hopped into a warm bath. It was a very relaxing atmosphere with the warm water, candlelight, soft music and the gentle smell of Lavender. I hardly noticed the contractions while I was in the bath and I concentrated on slow deep breathing, counting steadily while breathing in and breathing out. I honestly could have stayed there all night, and when I did get out I felt like a new person, so calm and content. The

thing that helped my backache and gave me the most relief when I got out of the bath was Phill tapping very firmly on my lower back, again in the Child Pose.

We arrived at the hospital at 10.30, and although I had to spend most of the time on my back for the midwife to monitor Morgan's heart beat, I concentrated on my breathing and my 'special place' Fleays, and stayed focused during the contractions. This took my mind off the pain while Phill continued to massage my back until I started to push. Having spent time in my 'special place' that afternoon was a fantastic help, not only was it fresh in my mind and much easier to imagine, but also because Phill was helping me to visualise by talking about the animals we had seen on our walk. Also the image of my baby in my arms seemed to make everything worthwhile and it also put the time frame into perspective, when I thought of how long I had waited for this moment in my life, it seemed reasonable to wait a few hours more.

With the CTG monitor still attached I rested in the Child Pose in between contractions, and leant on the back of the bed on all fours to push, with gravity helping me. I found it really easy to push from this position and after Julie the midwife felt the head descending, she suggested bringing a mirror so I could watch the birth, which I thought was a fantastic idea. With my back against the raised bed, I had a perfect view and seeing Morgan's head appearing was unbelievably motivating. First a little grey spot, then Phill said, 'I can see hair'. I reached down and felt his head — it was hard to believe I was actually touching my baby!!

At 2.05 a.m., out tumbled Morgan. From my angle all I saw was two legs and testicles!! 'It's a boy!' It was the most wonderful, most amazing thing I have ever experienced. Words cannot express my feelings. I can't wait to do it again!!

Author's note: A very proud and elated Lindsay brought tiny Morgan back to the yoga class when he was just five days old, to show all the other pregnant mums to be. It was very encouraging for the other women to see Morgan and Lindsay so soon after the birth, especially as they were all first time mums. It was also very helpful for them to hear how her labour and birth had gone, especially as she had enjoyed it so much and had used the yoga breathing, visualisation techniques and some yoga positions to great benefit during labour.

Ebony Jade and Luke

I first became interested in yoga about eight years ago, after realising the benefits yoga can bring, physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually, and I practised daily through both my pregnancies.

All the squatting postures were wonderful, as were the Pelvic Floor exercises for toning and I really loved bending forward from the Wide-A Leg Stretch. I really appreciated the extra strength during labour, as I gave birth both times in a squatting position and both times my legs felt really strong. I practised all the other gentle yoga asanas and I particularly enjoyed lying in the Flapping Fish Pose when I was feeling really big in the tummy, as I found it very comfortable for relaxation and tuning inwards to be with my baby. The breathing exercises I found the most useful were the Cooling Breath and the Alternate Nostril Breathing. I also loved the Humming and felt the warm vibrations going to my baby.

My first labour with Ebony was a home birth. When I went into the labour, we discovered she was shoulder dystotia, which meant she was stuck by the shoulder behind my pubic bone. This meant a lot more pushing and a lot more time to move her beyond this point. I used a lot of slow, deep breathing throughout the labour which I felt helped me immensely as progress was very slow. After a 25 hour labour, 13 hours of that being second stage, Ebony Jade was finally born, 9 lb and a beautiful little angel. I never

expected the birth to be like it was, but there are no rules with birth and you just don't know until you get there.

Luke's birth was much easier, lasting 8 hours and fairly smooth. I spent a lot of time in a warm bath all fours and the water definitely helped soothe the pain. The second stage was only one hour long, but still incredibly intense. Those last, final pushes where Luke's head and body were delivered were quite amazing. I remember feeling the bulge of his head between my legs and the total strength it took to achieve that, and then the relief on the final push when his whole body followed. Luke was 8 lb 10 oz, and a gentle soul. Once it is over, it's hard to recall the pain and discomfort, and of course we have the joy of our baby in our arms. Pregnancy has been the healthiest time in my life and it put me in such a mellow space, which was complemented by yoga. I found by practising 30 minutes each day I became really toned up and it helped me to stay focused throughout the whole pregnancy and birth.

Birth and yoga: Sharman Okan's story

I have always been convinced that the female body knows, innately, how to give birth and so any process that helps to awaken, or tune into, that natural potential ought to be as widely advocated as possible. Yoga, for me, is one of the most compatible of these natural modalities for assisting the body, mind, emotions and spirit to birth gracefully, and in harmony with nature.

I have two children and two completely different birth stories. When first pregnant with my daughter Lo-Arna, my long time partner departed the relationship for greener pastures. I spent the entire pregnancy and most of the first year of my daughter's life emotionally devastated. The one thing I kept returning to, for some kind of balance, was my yoga practise, which became my solace and my source of regeneration. From the age of 17 to 28 I had lived in a yoga Ashram as a Swami, studying and practising many techniques of yoga as a way of life. This was what I naturally fell back on during pregnancy, as a means to stay in touch with the greater picture, the universal quality of the experience of gestation and birth. Yoga helped me keep some kind of equilibrium so I did not get swamped in the emotional desolation of my situation.

I gave birth to Lo-Arna at home with a midwife and a couple of close friends. In retrospect, I see that the postpartum haemorrhage I suffered was emotionally precipitated due to the extent of the grief I had been experiencing. However, I did manage to give birth successfully in isolated conditions and, during the recovery from loss of blood, it was solely my understanding of yogic breath awareness which got me through the ordeal. I think it probably saved my life actually and I did not lose consciousness at all, even though my blood pressure fell to an alarming 40/0! It was only my 'second nature' ability to focus, unwavering, on my incoming and outgoing breath, that kept me from going through the tunnel of death into the light at the other end, which I could see beckoning me. My midwife was incredible during all of this and supported me and tiny Lo-Arna through a hairy ride, from my mountain top home to hospital.

I would never have thought, at the time of this fateful dash into the arms of a recriminating faction of the medical profession, that less than three years hence, I would be giving birth again, to my son, Jevaan, in a hospital! However, give birth I did under completely different and happier circumstances. My midwife and dear friend, Pip, was once again with me, in the country town hospital of Murwillumbah, to help Jevaan into the world. She was as pregnant as I was, which was why we had opted for hospital. The midwives at the hospital were brilliant and greatly restored my appreciation of the best of the medical profession. My beloved partner Guy, Jevaan's father, was a tower of gentle strength and love, and the whole experience was a great healing for me. During my second pregnancy and birth I didn't need to use

my yogic knowledge to just survive — I had the joy of performing the wonderful postures, breathing, relaxation and meditation techniques to have an easy, harmonious and transcendental experience of growing and birthing my son. I cannot imagine ever approaching birth — indeed life and death, without the illumination of yoga.

Sandra's story. The birth of Jessie Ry Stevens

I began practising yoga during my first pregnancy when I was about 26 weeks and continued going to the classes weekly until I was well and truly due. I loved the squatting exercises because they felt so good as well as the breathing, and especially enjoyed the meditations and visualisations. I felt I was learning skills that would enable me to be more in control and that I could take into the labour with me. Having practised the various breathing and visualisation techniques during my pregnancy, I was therefore prepared when I finally went into labour. The skills I had learnt all came back to me so easily. When I closed my eyes I was totally centred on myself and the process of labour and I was able to be at peace with myself. Even though I had the support of Jake and the hospital staff, when you are in labour you are really on your own and it was at this time that the visualisation of colour was such a great advantage.

We went off to Allamanda Hospital at 7.30 p.m. along with my yoga info and poses, ante natal books, massage oils, music, etc.; and with a birth plan floating around in my head. My husband and I had discussed what we wanted to do, walking, squatting, breathing, massage . . . I was preparing myself mentally for a long day of moving around in labour.

By 2.30 a.m. I was up and walking around, feeling a little uncomfortable, and once I had a show I was confident to call the nurses in for assistance and soon after the nurses decided that we had better phone my husband and to move into the delivery room. My waters broke and I was full -on into labour, it was all happening so fast that the tapes, massage oils and other accessories I wanted to use were in the corner of the room unused.

However, I used the controlled deep yoga breathing which I felt was really helpful and I visualised my baby moving down through the birth canal as I did this breathing. With the help of a little gas, it was a marvellous experience and I found it all so easy, while the breathing helped me to stay focused and able to cope. Jake's role was to keep me cool with wet washes and an aromatherapy atomiser occasionally sprayed onto my face. At 5 a.m. my doctor was called in and with a lot of pushing and encouragement our son, Jessie Ry Stevens was born at 5.35 that Thursday morning.

We forgot to ask the staff to lower the mirror so that we could both witness the birth. However, using visualisation techniques I had learned in yoga classes, I visualised his entry into this world. I felt like I'd seen my son long before I laid eyes on him for real, during some meditations I had done in yoga. It was quite a powerful feeling. Jessie weighed 8 lb 3 oz, and I required 3 stitches, but all was well. We had our son!

Jera Conan

I was 35, pregnant for the first time and in a state of shock! Fortunately, I had 15 years of yoga experience within me to help and the same amount of years teaching yoga, including (luckily) ante natal courses. Through these classes I had become aware that each pregnancy and birth was distinct and that, with time and practise, each woman intuitively chose different yoga practices for her particular needs and focus. The important thing seemed to be knowing a variety of postures, pranayama, relaxation and meditation techniques in order to keep up with one's changing body and feelings, thereby enabling the spontaneous choice of what practice to use at any time. I was now to prove this for myself over the next 9 months!

Throughout the first 4 months I continued most asanas and pranayama I'd always used, adding more butterfly and squats, yoga nidra relaxation and Om

chanting meditation. As soon as I felt uncomfortable with any posture I stopped it (or in some cases adapted it) and gradually simplified the breathing practices so I always felt at ease with my breath. I had very little physical discomfort throughout my pregnancy and feel that this was because of my daily practice of asanas, a knowledge of how to relax when I became tired or tense and a healthy vegetarian diet.

I was lucky enough to have a home birth with both doctor and midwife who advocated yoga. My labour was about 10 hours. During a lot of this time my awareness automatically went to my natural breath. I rarely consciously changed my breathing patterns (unless directed to), simply followed the spontaneous changes that naturally occurred throughout. I could not have done this had I not regularly practised the different pranayamas. As well as physically helping with pain and giving energy, breath awareness became my source of balance and focus.

After Leuke was born I needed these yoga practices even more - to learn about my 'new' baby yet again, cope with 'new' feelings and to go patiently with myself so as not to be overwhelmed with being a mother. I made myself continue straight away with a very shortened, simple version of what I'd been doing in my last months of pregnancy, gradually adding more as I felt possible. Yoga remains at the centre of my life, especially as a mother, just as in those first 9 months of pregnancy.

Jessica Reilly: Pregnancy, birth and yoga

I decided to begin yoga classes during the second trimester of my pregnancy and I found it to be so valuable in many ways. So why did I decide to try yoga classes during pregnancy?

There were a number of reasons for this decision. Firstly, my husband was trying to get me to learn to relax after years of stress, poor eating habits and lack of exercise while I was working as a Pharmaceutical Sales Representative and then another short stint back in the classroom in my previous role of a Secondary Science Teacher. I found it difficult to relax and would often find myself clenching my teeth as I slept. I was also taking short rapid breaths while sleeping, and waking up in the morning not feeling refreshed from sleep, even though I may have slept for 7-8 hours. I realised that for my own sake and also my unborn child's I really needed to rectify this problem. The solution was to try yoga to learn to relax and breathe correctly. There was an added benefit in the stretching exercises, which helped to improve my suppleness in preparation for the birth. This led me to Theresa's classes.

These classes differed from those I had done at the gym in that the exercises and breathing techniques were all aimed at the pregnant woman and her requirements. I found them much easier and finally felt I had found somewhere, which would help me learn to breathe correctly, not only for the birth, but also for life. I think we all found these classes wonderful, and I am sure we all managed to drop off to sleep on more than one occasion! The result! My breathing improved, I found myself more relaxed and my husband told me that my breathing at night was much better. I was actually starting to feel as though I had a good night's sleep (as much as you can when you are entering the final stages of pregnancy!) I found that the meditations were the best. My particular favourite was the candle meditation, which would relax me almost instantly and I also found it the easiest to focus on.

How did yoga help me? I went into labour on a Sunday afternoon and had to go to hospital immediately as my waters had broken. I did not use any pain relief at all through the afternoon and night. I was very focused on what I was doing and also used the different breathing techniques I was shown to help me through the contractions as they increased in intensity (ante natal classes so not teach breathing techniques anymore). My husband and I attended the partners' class with Theresa where he was shown some of the

breathing and meditation techniques I had been learning, and massage. This proved very beneficial as he helped me (reminded me) what I had learnt and encouraged me to use those breathing techniques. It was unfortunate that the candle could not be used in the labour ward (no open flames are permitted in the hospital rooms), but I did focus on a light, which helped. At 6 a.m. the following morning, I began on the gas, as the contractions were becoming much more intense. Then one and a half hours later there was bedlam in the room as my son was in distress and we had to have an emergency caesarean with a general anaesthetic but I awoke to a very healthy young boy whom we called Loughlin Thomas Reilly.

Loughlin is a very placid and relaxed child. I feel within myself that part of this is because I learnt to relax with the yoga classes during my pregnancy, and I am still using the basic techniques I learnt whenever I become uptight again. There was another bonus to these classes. I met a number of wonderful ladies whom I am still in contact with. We meet on a regular basis and continue the friendship that was begun in the classes. These classes were also an avenue to discuss our pregnancy and discuss our feelings with a group of people who were also going through the same changes in their lives. It was a wonderful support network and I would highly recommend it to any pregnancy woman!