

My Birth Stories.

The idea for this book came about when I was pregnant with my first son Ezra. I had been practising yoga for many years and continuing on with it during pregnancy seemed the logical thing to do. At that time I was fortunate enough to be under the guidance of an excellent teacher, Swami Shantimurti and I spoke to him about a specific yoga program that would prepare my body for conception, the changes that would occur during pregnancy and as a birth preparation. I wanted to be as healthy and strong as I could be before conception, not only through a healthy diet and lifestyle but also with the assistance of yoga.

I was one of those lucky people who had decided to conceive in three months time and I did just that. At that time I was also completing my naturopathic studies at a college in Auckland and to qualify, I was required to do a thesis. I remember knowing I wanted to do mine on yoga and pregnancy and I was thrilled when Angela, the lecturer in charge of thesis topics, accepted my choice.

And so began my long journey with this book. To complete more studies in Australia I provided an enlarged and more detailed update of the original thesis, which became the background for this book. In many ways the book has had its own growth in utero as it slowly took form over time, growing and developing, maturing and becoming whole, until its 'birth' when it was finally completed.

My own experience with yoga began in Melbourne where I attended classes for some years. Later on, I had the opportunity to delve deeper while travelling in India particularly in the extraordinary city of Bombay, now known by the original name Mumbai, and then later while living in London. After returning to Australia for a brief time, I moved to New Zealand and unexpectedly found myself teaching a large group in a provincial town, which continued for a couple of years before moving to Auckland where I met one of my most influential teachers, Shantimurti and later Bhaktimurti.

My initiation into teaching yoga for pregnancy seemed to come about as something I was meant to do rather than something I had the time to actually consider. After a happy and healthy pregnancy and a fairly straightforward birth with Ezra using my yoga breathing practices and postures, my doctor suggested — while I was still in the delivery room — that I start classes for pregnant women as soon as I was ready. It was not really something I was thinking about 15 minutes after giving birth however, his suggestion that day became a small class of women six months later who were all referred by him. That was in 1984.

My second son, Reuben, was to have quite a different experience from his brother both in utero and for his birth. We were living aboard our yacht when I conceived and we were sailing the Pacific during the last five months of his pregnancy. Due to engine problems we were forced to stop for repairs at the island of Espiritu Santo in northern Vanuatu when I was about 32 weeks.

On visiting the very basic and unsophisticated local hospital there, which is as polite as I can be, I was told by the local doctor that he would not interfere with the birth as this was the domain of the midwives and that there were no analgesics handed out for normal deliveries. He told me that in Vanuatu, if a caesarian was required the incision was from the top of the abdomen to the pubic bone. He also told me no real fuss was made about labour and birth in Vanuatu because women had babies all the time and they just got on with it as well as they could. Although I realise that giving birth and having babies is a very natural part of life and something that does happen all the time, it was still a bit of a shock that his approach was so simplistic. So being forewarned with the reality of the situation, I armed myself

with all the skills I knew, practising my yoga postures and especially the breathing exercises and daily meditation intensely for the remaining 8 weeks of my pregnancy.

I also knew that it was considered taboo for men to be present at the birth in Vanuatu and without that support from my husband Jeff, I had to find all the strength I needed from within myself. With this in mind I relied heavily on meditation and visualisation techniques, the yoga postures I had enjoyed the most as well as plain positive thinking, all of which I feel played a big part in what turned out to be a very straightforward delivery. I used the deep yoga breathing before and after a contraction, and sometimes deep cleansing breaths to blow away tension and to clear my mind. I also relied on having my breath and firm awareness in the abdomen, breathing out through my mouth which kept me focused, relaxed and my attention with Reuben. My favourite breathing had always been the Ujjayi technique in its traditional form as well as with deep breathing etc. and found it held me in a clear and present mind space and was an excellent focus point. I also relied on simple breath awareness, being as conscious as possible of the natural breath and importantly the potential in it. These breathing practices were what helped me stay centred and calm and even though I had been practicing yoga and teaching it for some time, it was very apparent to me just how valuable these simple practices were and how they were really working for me, they were even more important and beneficial than I had realised. Maybe I was lucky, but I know I would not have handled such unusual circumstances or been so relaxed, if I had not physically, and most importantly, mentally and emotionally, prepared myself beforehand with yoga and trusted in these techniques as my labour progressed.

I have warm and pleasant memories of the day Reuben was born. I was feeling very relaxed about what was happening and felt so calm as I progressed through the contractions, completely focused on my breathing and going with the whole birthing process. I was definitely helped out by nature on that cool September evening. For most of the first stage I was on the beach where the yacht was moored then, later that evening, I moved through the more intense contractions on the hill outside the hospital which overlooked the sea, a lot of the time leaning against a coconut tree for support and gravity to assist me. All the while, I was being cooled by a light breeze that swayed the coconut palms. In many ways it was perfect, just me and Reuben moving through the birthing process together in this quiet natural setting. My circumstances meant that this labour was going to be very different from Ezra's but it was a very calm and peaceful experience. I was able to become absorbed in the natural birthing processes and connect with my inner feminine wisdom and be there completely with Reuben. I believe this situation gave me the courage to trust in my body and to surrender to the way my labour was progressing, and was how I truly came to realise the incredible potential of yoga.

At the time, I think I would have been quite happy to have stayed outside because it was very peaceful and quiet but eventually I went inside the small hospital, and even though it was not a completely ideal situation in that I had to go it alone without the support of Jeff, I knew I was safe and I am glad for the experience. I am especially grateful for the knowledge that yoga played such a significant role in helping me manage and for Reuben to come into the world in a calm and gentle way.

There were definitely no luxuries offered at that small hospital, not even a cup of tea, a warm shower after the delivery or a bath for Reuben so we came back to the boat early the next day for a peaceful time together with our new family member, on the still waters of Pelacula Bay. Although we had no family or friends there to visit us and welcome Reuben to the world, we did receive radio calls from other boats in the Pacific area, wishing us all well and Reuben welcome aboard. Reuben lived the first 12 months of his

life on the water before we moved back onto land and it was not long after that I began teaching again.

I have been teaching yoga and meditation to pregnant women since 1984 and hope to continue this work for many years to come. Yoga has always been a strong and supportive base for women during their pregnancies and as a birth preparation and over the years has grown and developed into a simple and very useable structure. I have complete faith and trust in the practices, especially as I have seen how incredibly valuable they have been to so many women including myself. I often wonder at how fortunate I am to be in the remarkable position of teaching yoga as a profession and especially to have the good fortune to be teaching women at such a unique and precious time in their lives. Not only do I love this work and see it more as a blessing than a job, but it has also given me the opportunity to meet and make close friends with many beautiful and inspiring women, who have taught me so much more about the value of yoga during the brief time of their pregnancies. Of course, there is the additional joy of finally meeting their newborns, often only days after being born and occasionally being at the birth of a new life. It is always a very emotional experience for me after observing them move and grow in their mother's abdomen for so many months. These are my birth stories. Without doubt every mother has her own unique birth story, all very different and each a transformation event in her life as a woman. For this reason I have included a special chapter dedicated to personal birth journeys, in which very different women have shared their special moments and thoughts about how yoga played a significant role during pregnancy and in preparation for labour and birth, as well as how valuable the different techniques proved to be after the birth.

About me.

Theresa was born in Melbourne and first practiced yoga in 1975 at the Gita School there. While travelling in India she studied traditional yoga extensively in Bombay where her interest in the more spiritual aspects of life and especially Tibetan Buddhism intensified. It was during her year in India that the plight of the poor and homeless made an enormous and lasting impression on her and it has since been her intention to help those who are not as privileged, thus her decision to donate the royalties from her books to those in need. She first became aware of the desperately poor of India, during her first year of schooling at Catholic Ladies College when a group of Indian nuns from Mother Teresa's refuge for the dying in Calcutta spoke at her school all those years ago, and since then she has always wanted to fulfill that desire to help those less fortunate.

Her interest in yoga continued while living London and she first began teaching yoga in New Zealand in 1981. After her first son Ezra was born in 1984 she began teaching what was to become her main focus in yoga, teaching pregnant women in preparation for birth. At that time she also completed a three year course in Naturopathy writing her thesis on yoga for pregnancy.

She travelled the Pacific with her husband and Ezra on their yacht, and during this time Reuben was born in Espiritu Santo in Northern Vanuatu. On their return the family settled on the Gold Coast where she completed more diplomas in massage, Herbal Medicine, Hypnosis and a B.A.Sc. in Traditional Medicine. She has also studied counselling extensively and Hypnobirthing and other aspects of healing.

Her first book 'The complete book of yoga and meditation for pregnancy' was published in 2000 followed in 2004 by Yoga for pregnancy, a DVD and book box set published by Hinkler. She currently lives in the Gold Coast hinterland with her sons and dogs where she has her yoga studio and naturopathic clinic. She continues to teach yoga and meditation classes, specialising in pregnancy care and stress management.