

## YOGA AND BIRTH – YOGABIRTH LOLLY STIRK

***Lolly Stirk has been teaching yoga for 40 years in West London. She spearheaded the development of yoga for pregnancy and postnatal yoga in the 1970's and is the co-founder of YogaBirth.***

When I arrived in Swinging London in the late 60s from South Africa where I was born, Yoga was having its first wave of popularity and I was immediately drawn into that world. My first teacher was Donna Holleman with whom I trained for many years. She was a personal student of B.K.S. Iyengar at the time so my training was rigorous. Yoga sessions were at dawn and lasted hours. Donna was kind but stood no nonsense. Her motto was, “Don’t think, just do.” And we did! At the same time as studying yoga I opened a vegetarian restaurant with four girl friends in St. Johns Wood, London. The food was wonderful. We attracted many interesting customers from the worlds of psychoanalysis and yoga as well as famous musicians as the Abbey Road Studios were just down the road. There was such excitement the night that Donna invited Mr. Iyengar for dinner. We made him a very special meal, he was charming and charismatic.

My husband John Stirk, now an international yoga teacher and osteopath, was also attracted to the restaurant and very soon we were married. In 1974 our daughter Sarah was born at home. I understood how much my yoga practise helped me during the pregnancy, labour and birth and I really wanted to pass this on - my daughter’s birth was the trigger of what was to become my life’s work. I began taking more and more pregnant women into my general classes, and it didn’t take very long before I started classes for pregnant women only. This naturally led onto the postnatal classes. No one at that time was teaching specialised pregnancy or postnatal yoga. It was so exciting to be a pioneer developing a safe and effective form of yoga especially for women to help them through pregnancy, to use during labour and birth and as a means of recovery afterwards. It seemed that when specially adapted, yoga had been made for women during this period. What a discovery!

Birth was in trouble in the early 70s. Most women were being induced the day after their due date, always it seemed at the beginning of the week to give staff the weekend off. Continuous monitoring of the babies heart during labour was becoming the norm. This confined women to the bed. We were giving birth flat on our backs, sometimes in stirrups and the caesarean rate began to rocket. When things get this extreme there is always an opposite reaction and there was!

Federick Leboyer a French Obstetrician wrote a book “Birth without Violence” which popularised gentle birthing techniques. Sheila Kitzinger a natural birth activist wrote many books and gave lectures on natural birth and home birth. Michel Odent another French obstetrician popularised waterbirth. His research on hormones had and still has an enormous effect on the way women are treated during labour and birth. As the demand for the return of natural birth increased, hospitals began to change their policies. Lights were lowered and beds were banished and water pools were introduced. I was lucky to have Janet Balaskas in my group of friends. Janet was an NCT teacher at the time and I apprenticed myself to her. She wrote the ground breaking book “Active Birth”, which was pivotal in bringing birth back on its feet. A very special obstetrician called Yehudi Gordon was interested in our work with yoga and birth. He invited us to work with him and soon I was part of an innovative team of midwives and obstetricians at the Garden Hospital now St. Johns and St. Elizabeth Hospital. We designed the pregnancy and postnatal yoga classes for the hospital. The Birth Preparation or Active Birth Workshops were pioneering in reintroducing freedom of movement for women and upright positions for birth. If birth needed a helping hand to get back on its feet, yoga was the perfect remedy and the statistics for natural and water birth were extraordinary. For many years I lectured at Thames Valley University to student midwives on the physiology of birth and active birth and was always amazed when they told me as third year students that this was really the first lecture that they had had on normal upright birth.

Yvonne Moore, Janet Balaskas, and I joined forces in 1985 as co-directors of the Active Birth Teachers Training course. I was the director of yoga studies and over 15 years we trained scores of teachers who were taking the power of yoga combined with childbirth education to women. It was revolutionary and it was working.

In 1985 John and I met and studied with a wonderful Italian teacher called Sandra Sabatini. Sandra was a friend and student of Vanda Scaravelli and introduced us to Vanda. For many years we had the good fortune to have private yoga sessions with Vanda in her home in Fiesole just outside Florence. The way Vanda interpreted yoga was gentle yet powerful, constantly working with breath and with gravity. This was totally appropriate for my work with pregnant and post natal women and I embraced it.

Vanda was very interested when she heard that I worked with pregnant women and said to me. “Tell them it (birth) is the most natural thing on earth”. Simple words but Vanda’s messages were always simple and direct. One morning when I arrived for a class she handed me a photo of the ancient Egyptian hieroglyph of birth which is a woman half kneeling half squatting. She said, “You see, she didn’t lie down”.

In the year 2000 I co-founded “YogaBirth” with Yvonne Moore. YogaBirth is an association of independent professionally trained teachers of pregnancy yoga and childbirth education. This unique formula has been formulated over 30 years. The

pregnancy classes are infused with preparation for labour and birth, incorporating intelligent, gravity assisted positions and movements. During classes the constant awareness of the breath which we call “hypnobreathing” enables the woman, to instinctively use her breath to soothe, steady and guide herself through the contractions in labour.

Yogabirth brings commitment, community and research to the world of yoga and pregnancy to support women through the transformation of bringing their babies into the world.

When women come to our post natal classes, particularly if they have been in our pregnancy classes, we take them further. The focus of the post natal yoga is to bring women back to core strength and to release the tension.. We also remind them of the power of the breath for strength and relaxation during this wonderful yet stressful period of their lives.

It is additionally rewarding when women who have come to our classes having no previous yoga experience discover the potential of yoga and continue to practise and incorporate it into their lives. It is common to meet women many years after their pregnancy who have stayed with yoga and are still reaping the benefits of this wonderful work.

Yogabirth is now a strong group of dedicated, and hand picked women. As a group we have many years of experience which we share freely with one another to constantly refine and improve our classes and our personal practise. We sit in and observe each others classes to learn and give constructive criticism. Every year we have 2 study days and a study weekend which includes midwifery and obstetric updates, yoga, and other related subjects. This keeps our teaching fresh and up to date as well as giving us the opportunity to meet up and have fun.

Shoulder postures can be used from the moment the baby is born to release the tension created by carrying and feeding. Women should be reminded of this often in the pregnancy classes.

For the lower body one simple and effective posture and movement can be used very soon after the baby is born to strengthen the core muscles, abdominals, and pelvic floor.

Lie on your back with knees bent, feet hip width apart and slightly turned in. Place your hands on your lower abdomen with fingers pointing to your pubic bone and your elbows resting on the ground.

Begin by tuning into the breath and encourage the belly muscles to rise gently with the inhalation and draw back with the exhalation. This can be done almost immediately the

baby is born, but if you have had a c-section just tune into the breathing without activating the abdomen.

After a few days you will begin to feel the belly muscles suck back, the lower back drop and flatten and the pelvic floor draw up as you exhale. Let everything relax with the inhalation.

After a while you can take the posture further by encouraging the tailbone to tuck as you inhale – keep the tuck as you exhale and scoop a bit more with the next exhalation. Build up to 4 or 5 exhalations worth of scooping and tucking until the pelvis has rolled up off the ground. Then roll the spine down to the ground from the back of neck and as the pelvis touches the ground, totally let go. To increase the strengthening aspect of the movement place a soft block between your knees.

Rest for a few moments and repeat.

This simple movement which is a preparation for backbends, addresses core strength and spinal integrity.

[www.lollystirk.co.uk](http://www.lollystirk.co.uk)  
[www.yogabirth.co.uk](http://www.yogabirth.co.uk)