



BHAKTI ROSE

EMBRACING THE MOON

YOGA TO SUPPORT FERTILITY, WOMEN'S
REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH & THE RHYTHM
OF THE MONTHLY CYCLES.

AN E-BOOK BY KATIE ROSE

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This e-book is inspired by a workshop I teach regularly in Sydney, Australia on the subject of Yoga and Menstruation. The workshop is called 'Embracing the Moon'.

HERE IS WHAT ONE PARTICIPANT HAD TO SAY:

"I wanted to write you a little belated note of thanks for the workshop you delivered on 'Embracing the Moon'. I didn't have a chance to stay back and thank you personally but I still want to communicate my gratitude to you. I really enjoyed the workshop. It was like experiencing a missing link. Not only was the information really relevant and easily digestible, it was also fun! Hopefully you already know this, but in my very humble opinion, you really are a wonderful presenter, so grounded and approachable."

I did not have a maternal influence in life and the conversation you facilitated is of the kind I imagine I would have had with my grandmothers, aunties, mother and female cousins. I now have some great knowledge I can build on and share with my own darling daughter. Thank you very much and I hope to see you again sometime in the near future."

**'The health of your menstrual cycle
depends on your ability to relax.'**

Yogi Bhajan [Kundalini Yoga Guru]

Welcome to *Embracing the Moon* - a journey of discovery towards reproductive and menstrual health. A journey of reclaiming your womanhood. In the pages to come I will share with you what I have learned about this area of women's health, particularly pertaining to the teachings of yoga and Ayurveda. This e-book is compiled from lecture notes and transcripts of the workshop I run 'Embracing the Moon'. Many students asked me to create a written form of the workshop for reference and for those who are unable to attend in person. As it is mainly written in transcript form the book is somewhat conversational in tone - I hope you will find this adds to it's charm, giving you the feeling you are joining us as a group of women in our healing circle.



'Peace must start within!
The cultivating of inner harmony is the most
critical accomplishment each woman can
endeavor to attain.'

Maya Tiwari

WISE EARTH SCHOOL OF AYURVEDA

When I started researching and learning about this subject I realised many women suffer from problems with menstruation, fertility and hormonal balance. These ailments are very prevalent, for women from many different walks of life and age groups but particularly in Western culture. Much of what I'm going to be sharing with you comes from my teacher Maya Tiwari (Mother Maya), who founded an Ayurvedic School called the Wise Earth School of Ayurveda. She has focused her whole life on women's health, particularly on women's reproductive health.

When she was 19, Maya was diagnosed with cancer of the uterus and she had to have a full hysterectomy at a very young age. The cancer was of a vigorous form, it was stage three when she was diagnosed, and doctors basically told her that she was going to die. Maya is Indian but was born in Guyana, and raised in a very traditional Indian way. In her mid-teens she left her traditional family home, moved to New York City and became a fashion designer. She started to live a very Western, busy, city-based, cosmopolitan lifestyle, leaving her traditional roots behind her.

When she found out that she had cancer, and the doctors were telling her she only had a few months to live, it gave her a wake up call. Maya went right back to her ancestral medicine and the teachings that her father and mother had given her. She became interested in and started to follow traditional diets, herbal medicine and all sorts of different protocols that her grandmothers and earlier generations before had followed. One of the things she identified was that she had never really had a good, healthy menstrual cycle. Her cycle had always been very irregular, very heavy or very light, erratic or painful. She had accepted that as normal, which is what a lot of women do because menstrual problems are a fairly universal experience. But actually it is not normal to have an irregular or painful cycle, it doesn't have to be like that. There are many different things that you can do to bring your menstrual cycle back into balance.

My beloved teacher Maya ended up having a hysterectomy because it was unavoidable, the cancer was so vigorous, her healing journey then took her to the mountains in Vermont where she spent a few months on her own, living in a cabin. She was literally on her own in the forest, surrounded by deer, growing her own food - actually just preparing to die. The original reason she did that pilgrimage was really to come to peace with the fact that she was going to pass and leave her body. In that time, she healed. She completely healed. When she came down out of the mountains a few months later and went to the doctors for tests, expecting to be told the cancer had progressed she was actually told that she was cancer free. It was a kind of a miracle.

Maya healed herself with the support of Ayurveda and through the natural medicine protocols. Since that time (she is now in her 60's) she has dedicated her life to passing on these traditional teachings. She has written many life-changing books. One that I would strongly recommend, which particularly relates to the work of women's healing is called 'Women's Power To Heal Through Inner Medicine'. It has a lot of really helpful information about reproductive health and menstrual cycle dysfunction. Another wonderful book is 'The Path of Practice', her most famous book, which talks about Ayurveda in general and where she shares in more detail the story of her remarkable cancer survival.

AYURVEDA AS SADHANA

Ayurveda was always practiced in what is known as Sadhana – which means conscious spiritual practice or protocols, meaning practices that you do in your life consciously with the intention of healing. So you could, for example, say that preparing a beautiful meal is a Sadhana. If you really put love and care into the food, using the best fresh ingredients, set the table nicely, light a candle – that is a Sadhana. Sadhana is to make a ritual out of something that would otherwise be quite mundane.

The idea in traditional Ayurveda is that basically your whole life can become a Sadhana. Your whole life can become that conscious, spiritual practice, from the moment you wake up in the morning, until the moment that you go to bed. That there would be some kind of routine, some kind of rhythm and an ability to find the ritual, find the magic in the most mundane things. Folding up the laundry, doing the washing up and doing these things with care, attention and love. This is a helpful teaching when you have a young family, like I do and you spend a lot of time doing housework, but for all of us it's a really helpful teaching.

Mother Tiwari's approach to Ayurveda is very much about that. It's about routine and lifestyle, rather than taking medicine. What has happened to Ayurveda, particularly since the English colonised India is that it has morphed into being part of the Western medicine model, so that now if you go and see an Ayurvedic doctor, very often it will be a similar experience to going to see a Western doctor. The doctor has all the power and you are the patient and you don't have much power. You talk about what your symptoms are and you are then given medicine or herbs to heal them. This situation is not really an interaction where YOU take responsibility for your own healing, it is more like the doctor says 'you take this pill and you will get better'.

That is not how Ayurveda was traditionally taught or practiced. Traditional Ayurveda is much more about looking at the whole picture of your life and changing your habits, routines and ultimately, your mind. You might take some herbs and special tonics, but that is almost like an aside or an addition to the foundation of YOU taking responsibility for your own healing.

Let me give you an example. For someone who is feeling very stagnant and low in energy, an approach in our Western culture might be to have a cup of coffee; in a severe case a doctor might offer vitamin shots or stimulants. An Ayurvedic doctor working within a similar model might offer herbal tonics. The Sadhana approach might be quite different. Wise Earth teachings might suggest for example going for a walk in a forest. The crunching of the leaves and brambles underfoot will wake up your subtle body and nervous system. The fresh air and wind will invigorate. The vast sky above will expand your horizons. In this way true and lasting healing takes place.

'Once we begin to appreciate our menstrual cycle as part of our inner guidance system. we begin to heal both hormonally and emotionally.'

Christiane Northrup

THE CONTRACEPTIVE PILL

In our culture, in Western medicine primarily - sometimes the way that we 'fix' problems with menstruation, particularly for young women is by putting them on contraceptive medication - the 'pill'. That is a common standard practice. Women go to doctors with problems like painful and or irregular periods which are too heavy or too light or possibly endometriosis etc. The doctor says we can fix this! For many women that is really good news and helps them with the major challenge that comes with their periods every month. So they go on the pill.

The contraceptive pill suppresses your body's own hormonal activity. It has a dual function: no matter what kind of contraceptive pill you are on, the first function of the pill is to suppress your own hormonal activity, and the second function is to replace it with synthetic hormonal input.

Taking the pill for reproductive or menstrual health problems can be thought of as a band-aid fix. Its not really a fix, all it does is suppress the problem and put something synthetic on top of it. What can happen, and is incredibly common (these are not isolated cases) is that women will be on the pill from the age of 14 to 15 years old and they will stay on the pill until they decide they want to have babies, which could be late 20's to early 30's (most women in the developed world are having babies older now). They come off the pill and all of that dysfunction; all of those problems and ailments are still there.

Once the synthetic hormones are gone all of those ailments come bubbling up to the surface. It is very common then to have fertility issues and can be difficult to get pregnant. Also problems like endometriosis can really flare up at that stage. Part of the reason for that is that the body hasn't had any time, or experience of life, of how to figure out to actually come into balance and be healthy. It is actually quite normal for young women, when they first start menstruating to have erratic, painful periods. To simply have a time where they are coming into balance. It can often take a few years. Probably most of you experienced that. But then your body figures it out. It is just like a baby learning how to walk. It takes time. Your body is an organic thing, it is not a machine, it is not like one day a switch goes on and you start enjoying a perfect reproductive system. You kind of grow into it.

If that process isn't allowed to happen because of taking synthetic hormones at a young age, then when you stop taking the pill you go back to the stage of crawling. Your body has to figure it out all over again. There have been times in my life when I have been on the pill and I'm not an anti-pill person, I am not saying its the worst thing in the world, but I think it is a really unhelpful way, long term of addressing problems with menstruation. It is really not the great fix it has been billed as and particularly not for an extended length of time. The pill would be better used for menstrual health problems perhaps, in extreme cases, for someone who really needs help, only as a short term band-aid.

A few other things I'd like to say about the pill, since we are talking about it. One of the worst things that I've noticed happening (and I've talked with a lot of women about this) is that a lot of women are taking the pill and NOT taking the break week, so that they won't menstruate at all. When you are on the pill you have a 3-week dose and then you take a break for a week so that you can have a period. Some doctors will even say... why have the inconvenience of having a period? Why not just keep taking it? It is a similar story with the little contraceptive implants that are available. With some of them the hormones are so strong that you just DON'T menstruate for anything up to a year, or two years....

What Ayurveda would say about that, and certainly what I believe about it, is that when you think about the CYCLES of life (and we talk about that a lot in the context of a yoga practice) and when you are in a menstrual cycle, the menstruation part is the SHEDDING. It is the de-tox.

Never having a period is like eating food and never having a bowel movement! It is the same principal. For people who have blocked bowels, the faecal matter ends up coming back into the body and being reabsorbed. You get a really high level of toxicity in the body. It's the same with menstruation. That 'matter' that is being shed, is toxic waste. It needs to come out. So if you are taking the pill, to not menstruate, you are still creating that menstrual 'matter'. Your body is still making it. All that happens is that it gets reabsorbed. From an Ayurvedic point of view its what we called 'ama', a Sanskrit word that literally means toxic waste. Its all the stuff you DO NOT want in your body. In these situations your body has to work really, really hard to get rid of it and, in the long term, it can make you sick and you will have to deal with larger health problems.

So I would strongly recommend, that if you are on the pill, that you don't do that. You need to have your periods. Also it is much better to go on the pill and take the week break rather than go for a hormonal implant that may mean you never have a period.

'Ayurveda teaches that menstruation purifies the body ... gathering all the toxins (called ama) that have built up over the month and moving them out of the body along with the menstrual blood.

This ama includes anything that hasn't been digested – food, emotions, stress.'

Lynda Sparrowe (Yoga for a Healthy Menstrual Cycle)

Something else to say about the pill. If you are on the pill, and you have made that decision, you also need to take a zinc supplement. The pill radically reduces the absorption of zinc. Zinc is one those things that you don't see a difference in a short amount of time, not like vitamin c (after a few weeks you very quickly feel depleted) zinc takes a long time to build up in your system and a long time to deplete. If it does get depleted it can take a long time to get those levels back up again.

You can do a simple test by going to a health food shop and buying a product which is a liquid which you put in your mouth to see if you are zinc deficient, and depending on how metallic it tastes will tell you how zinc deficient you are. So if you have been on the pill for a long time I would recommend you take one of those tests.

Zinc depletion is about immunity and also works on nerve function. Vegans also have to be careful, as the nervous system also needs the B vitamins B12 in particular. If you want to have children and you are on the pill, Western doctors usually say stop taking it 3 months before you want to conceive. I would strongly recommend that you take a year before you are actively trying to conceive. Your body needs that time for the synthetic hormones to completely leave and for your natural hormones to come back, so you can see what you are working with. There are things that you can use to support you during that time; protocols that can help you manage hormonal dysfunction. Herbal medicines can be extremely helpful. There is a herb called Chasteberry, (the latin is vitex agnus castus) known as a reproductive hormonal balancer. The tincture is the most potent, and you can need to see naturopath or herbalist to get that. It has been shown to be really effective as it works as a hormonal equaliser in the body. Again zinc is also helpful in all these situations.

The other thing that Ayurveda is really interested in, if we are looking to find balance through lifestyle and through natural means is ROUTINE. Daily habits. Particularly how that can have an impact on, and be supported by your yoga practice, more on that later.

'We can look at illness' as wake-up calls -
they brought us back to our bodies and
grounded us again in a consciousness
of what is important in life.'

Christiane Northrup

HORMONAL BALANCE

Perhaps the most important thing to say, as a foundation, is that menstruation is a little bit like having babies, in our culture in the sense that it is one of those things that we are expected to just get on with and not really talk about. We might talk to other women about it but we don't generally make a particularly sacred space for it within our lives. Certainly not outside of our intimate family circle, and I think that is a real shame. One of the things that could really help a lot of women to heal, in terms of fertility and reproductive health (which actually has a huge impact on your overall health) is to realise that this side of our health is a vital part of the bigger picture.

So if there is something wrong with your menstrual cycle, a pattern that is just not quite right, you need to step back and look at the wider picture and work on overall health protocols that can be healing. The other thing is that you never really know how bad things were until you start to come out of them. Sometimes really poor health can start to feel normal. For example women who suffer from endometriosis and have a lot of pain with their periods think it is normal to have to take lots of painkillers or to have to have a day off work every month. That sort of thing becomes accepted.

But when we look at what it means to experience health, that is not normal and we shouldn't be accepting that. Equally we shouldn't also be taking lots of drugs to mask the symptoms.

A big factor in Ayurveda for our health overall, is also the food that we eat. Maya Tiwari would also talk particularly about the foods that are high in hormones. We know that our water system is now basically full of hormones! Plastics leach chemicals into our water supply, so drinking filtered water might help (but please think of the environment and don't start buying lots of water in plastic bottles!). One of the worst places for getting a toxic supply of hormones through food is in dairy products. Dairy cows, that are factory farmed, are given HUGE amounts of synthetic hormones. Mind-blowing amounts. The farmers want them to keep lactating in order to produce a very high milk yield and in order to help keep them reproducing. Factory cows are constantly pregnant and lactating.

Those synthetic hormones filter down the food chain into the cow's milk. It is incredible what comes through in breast milk for both humans and cows. As breastfeeding mothers we think about what we eat and drink in terms of what will go through to our babies (alcohol or pharmaceutical drugs for example) but we don't often think about what a cow was forced to consume before making the milk we go on to drink. If we drink the milk of a cow that has been given lots of hormones (as well as having been living in terrible stressful conditions and eating less than optimal food) we are drinking all that poison.

If you absolutely must eat dairy food the only way to go is to eat organic dairy. It is one of the biggest choices for your and your family's reproductive health that you can make. My message would be to be to avoid cow's milk, but it's not always realistic or possible for everybody. In organic farms they don't use hormones, so going organic is a really important choice in this situation. You can completely avoid that whole issue, which is huge.

Maya Tiwari is actually pro drinking milk. From an Indian, Ayurvedic perspective cow's milk is seen as being like a 'food of the gods', but she would say that the milk from an organic cow is an elixir. The milk from a factory-farmed cow is literally poisoned. That's how far this difference is between them. If you are drinking a litre of milk (in your coffee, on cereal, in baking etc.) every day it really can have a major impact on your own hormonal stability.

And it is SO easy to choose organic milk. It's everywhere now, and only marginally more expensive than regular milk. This is a precious golden nugget that I hope you will change in your life immediately.

In general also, organic food is really much better than non organic. The overload of chemicals in our food is seriously contributing to hormonal dysfunction. We can see that particularly if we look at studies looking at levels of toxicity that are being consumed in China for example, where the food chain is really destroyed, with a lot of factory industry and plastics being made. The average Chinese person is consuming a very high level of artificial toxicity through their diet, atmosphere and lifestyle.

When you look at those areas, you can also see links with already high levels of infertility skyrocketing. Toxicity in the environment and in the body and fertility are very closely related. In Australia we are lucky we are living in a country where the air and water supply is basically clean. Reducing the toxicity in our lives is really important. On that subject, the presence of heavy metals and mercury is an issue. If you do eat fish try to eat fish from a sustainable source. Also if you have old metal fillings in your teeth (and you experience menstrual problems) get them removed and replaced with white ones. It is not that expensive to do and the mercury leaches into your system over time. Heavy metals have an impact on our hormonal balance.

THE MOON AND OUR MONTHLY CYCLE

I want to talk about now is what is absolutely optimum, a really specific ideal goal. In this optimum model we would have a 30-day cycle and according to Ayurvedic thinking about the cycles of the moon we are going to ovulate on the full moon and we are going to shed, or menstruate on the new moon. Mid-way through that cycle on day 15 you have ovulation happening. That is when, if you want to have a baby, you need to have intercourse and then you would hope that you conceive.

Full moon is a time of abundance or fullness as we ovulate at that time. The whole planet contains water which has a gravitational pull to the moon. Our bodies are the manifestation of that too. The liquid in our bodies has the same relationship to the moon as the tides of the ocean. So if we were really in tune, living a perfect Ayurvedic lifestyle, we would come into perfect synchronicity with cycles of the moon. We would be that sensitized. Most of us live so far from that ideal, the connection to the earth in that way, that this is kind of like a wild fantasy. But this is what Ayurveda teaches, about a kind of optimum outcome. So ideally you would conceive at full moon time, also astrologically and energetically this is a strong time, (a time of fullness and abundance) whereas the new moon is the shedding, the detoxing. So that is one marker, you can get a moon calendar and see where your menstrual cycle is in relation to moon's cycles.

There are some things you can do to bring your cycle into alignment with the moon, some Ayurvedic protocols. One of them is just starting to pay attention to the moon. Just noticing it, when it is full, when it is new, and observing in yourself what your menstrual relationship to the moon is. Observe if there is a pattern and if there is not. It can be a useful indicator of how in-tune you are with nature's cycles too. Sometimes we are in synch and sometimes it is completely the other way. After I had my first child I had a phase where I was menstruating on full moon and ovulating on new moon. If you have that problem you can try and slowly bring things back into order. One of the ways to do this is through a technique called Utara Vasti. Which is a vaginal douching technique: a cleansing wash of the vagina, at different times, using different herbs. Mother Tiwari writes about that in her book, "Women's Power to Heal through Inner Medicine" so please reference that for more details.

But before you get into those types of protocols, which can be really helpful, there are so many other things you can do to get back on track first, and they are all the things we talked about earlier, namely routine and diet.

I recommend the book 'The Red Tent'. It's an amazing book! A novel about menstruation. In the novel there is a tribal group of women who all menstruate at the same time, the story describes all the rituals around that and how they go off into a tent together for the 2 or 3 days of menstruation. They make it a beautiful time. They celebrate, and rest, have nice food and support each other. It is the acknowledgement of the fact that as women we have cycles in our lives. We acknowledge it to a certain extent with babies, like having baby showers or Christenings, so there are some rituals. But even then a lot of women just have a cesarean and plan when they are having the baby so they can go back to work... lack of ritual and acknowledgement of these cycles is very prevalent in our culture.

One other thing that Maya says, which may or may not be for you, is that it is good once in a while to not use tampons, to actually see your menstrual fluid. It's almost like we are too sterile and we are too removed from it generally. We don't want to touch our bodily fluids or see them, or have anything to do with them. She says that part of healing and reproductive health is actually engaging with the body's functions. So, just not being disgusted by your body and what it creates is actually part of that healing. The over sanitisation, over sterilization and our thoughts about menstruation is actually very unhelpful to being healthy in that area. Every so often instead of tampons use pads (you can even buy washable ones if you want to avoid disposables) or try the 'Moon Cup' method instead.

TWISTING ASANAS AND UTERUS HEALTH

If you want to conceive, the way in which you practice yoga could be really important too. The most vulnerable stage of the pregnancy is the first few weeks, specifically the first 6 weeks. This time is much more vulnerable than any other stage during the pregnancy in terms of the likelihood of miscarriage.

If you want to conceive, you have to make sure that your yoga practice in that really early phase of your monthly cycle is optimum for conception. That is where a lot of women go wrong. I often hear of women saying that they are trying to get pregnant and they just carry on the same yoga practice that they have always done, even in the first few weeks of pregnancy. ***A strong dynamic vinyasa practice is not an appropriate practice for the early phase of conception.***

When you first have a fertilized egg traveling down the fallopian tubes it will nestle into the uterus about week 2 or 3 after conception, and at this time many 'messages' are being given to your body from your hormones. Is this pregnancy viable? Can this fertilized egg attach to the wall of the uterus; can the uterus provide nourishment enough to build a baby? It is like your body is asking 'is this a home that will be an acceptable place for this baby to grow'?

So if you are doing lots of twists or really strong backbends, that are affecting the way the uterus is moving, physically the way the uterus is sitting in the pelvis, the messengers that are going to be given to that potential baby are not going to be the right type of messengers. They will not be the 'safe haven' messengers. Particularly with twists. Twists are really good if you have reproductive health issues, they are probably the best postures that you can be doing. Lying twists, seated twists, all kind of twists. Particularly if they work on the lower back, pelvis and the front of the body. But after conception they are amongst the worst postures too do. Let me explain why: when you are not pregnant your uterus is about the size of your fist and sits under your pubic bone, tucked under in the pelvis.

If you've had pregnancies before your uterus might be a bit bigger and it might be sitting a bit above the pelvis. People like me who have had more than one pregnancy will probably never have a really flat stomach again, sometimes the uterus has just expanded a bit and no matter how fit they are it just won't ever go back down again.

If you have never had children that is sort of where it sits. And so to get into that area twists really work in toning the uterus.

Your uterus has a really high concentration of circulatory blood. I'm not talking about the menstrual blood, that is something different. The uterus is like a sponge; imagine it like a dishwashing sponge, and its full of circulatory blood. If your circulation is poor the uterus will be experiencing an energetic stagnation. This is made worse if you are spending a lot of time sitting, perhaps you have an office type job and you're not very mobile. Circulatory blood is going to be quite compromised. There is not going to be a fresh oxygen supply coming into your body all the time, so when you come to yoga there a perfect opportunity to really nourish and revitalise the stagnant energy in your womb.

Twisting postures really work on this part of the body, having an effect that is literally like wringing out a dishcloth full of dirty water. If I come into a seated twist, which is NOT recommended in pregnancy, as I twist this area gets wrung out. All of the old circulatory blood that has stagnated, is emptied, goes back into my blood circulation to be processed by my heart and lungs. When I come out of the twist, fresh blood circulates. This is the same with every organ, but particularly true in seated or reclining twists for the uterus.

That is why, doing twisting postures if there are any fertility or menstrual issues, are really powerful. But if you are trying to make a baby, when that fertilized egg starts traveling down the fallopian tubes into the uterus, and moves towards the beginning of implantation is a critical time to back off in your practice. When that egg hits the uterus (and before the next menstrual cycle), you have the most critical time of the entire pregnancy. If you are doing lots of crazy twists during that time: backbends, jumping around or twisting or if you are just plain exhausted, depleted and not eating properly the pregnancy becomes less and less viable.

NOURISHING CONCEPTION (OPTIMUM FERTILITY)

This is when we might start to see some fertility problems. Hormonally your body is asking 'is this pregnancy viable'? In that situation of high 'stress' (depleted energy, inappropriate yoga movements etc.) the energetic or biofeedback within your body gives a resounding 'NO'. From a physical, energetic and nutritional point of view the pregnancy is vulnerable in this early stage and needs gentle nurturing. If there are things like fibroids or endometriosis present then there may be even more negative messengers. And this is why we are seeing (many Western doctors will also agree) fertility declining. The odds are just stacked against us. Too many factors are not supporting reproductive nourishment. You don't want your yoga practice to be one of those risk factors.

So the short message is, if you are trying to get pregnant, this window between possible conception and the due date of your next menstrual cycle needs to include a prenatal (pregnancy) yoga practice. You need to practice as if you already knew that you were pregnant. From straight after having tried to conceive, right up until you have a period. If you do then have a period you can go back to the beginning and you can do whatever you want to for 15 days. If you find that you are in fact pregnant then you continue on with your prenatal practice just as carefully as you would throughout your whole pregnancy.

By the time you get to being heavily pregnant there is really not very much you can do to upset this baby. You can't even twist properly any more, and you have to manage the yoga practice around it. This is not the vulnerable stage. Women and yoga teachers as well have an incorrect idea that it is late in pregnancy where you really have to start amending your practice and being careful. In reality it is very early on that you have to start amending your yoga practice in terms of protecting the baby.

THE MOON INSIDE YOU

I am going to tell you one story about menstruation that reflects the idea of routine and knowing our bodies. There are some tribes in Africa I have been reading about recently. They have such an incredible awareness of their menstrual cycles (which are perfectly in tune with the moon incidentally); they can feel the symptoms of ovulation so they know when to have intercourse and get pregnant just like that because they know exactly when they are fertile. They know when mensuration is going to happen (almost like we might know we are going to have a bowel movement) and they go off into a discreet area in the forest, squat down and menstruate like they are having a bowel movement. Passing the matter from their bodies in one go. They get up and wipe themselves and that is it. Done.

What an incredible concept! For us it's so different - like we don't know ourselves very well and it is often a surprise when a period comes and we don't know how long it's going to go on for. These women have got such an incredible self-awareness and deep wisdom. It doesn't come from just one generation. It is kind of handed down, they were probably taught and shown by their mothers and elders and because they saw certain methods they believed they were possible. It's similar with childbirth too; there are very similar kinds of patterns. It is very inspiring.

SEXUAL ACTIVITY

What impact does sexual activity have on your cycle? Ayurveda would say that we should really only be having sexual intercourse to ejaculation around full moon time. So there is around about an 8 day window where that is the best time (4 days before and 4 days after full moon). In between times you should have a break. It is a very old fashioned, reproduction oriented point of view. Basically saying the only time you want to have sex is when you want to make a baby, and that is quite limiting! So I wouldn't advocate that as being the first thing that you change in terms of your lifestyle and healing.

But on a different tack if there is sexual dysfunction or sexual trauma then that definitely has an impact. Unresolved history of sexual abuse or trauma is a big issue for many women (and men), particularly for younger women. Healing these issues is about taking responsibility for your own health. Counseling may be helpful and also nurturing asana practice, but suppressing trauma will lead to poor health.Suppressions get held in the body on a cellular level.

The other thing about sexual activity, if you are trying to conceive, it's better if your body has breaks from semen. You want to have times when there is a lot of semen coming into the female body and also times when there is none. It is something to do with those hormonal messengers and the way that the body talks, and gives biofeedback to the fertilized embryo. Science is showing it works better like that. That would be supported by the Ayurvedic point of view.



THE SAFE ASANA PRACTICE DURING MENSTRUATION

We've already looked at twists but let's look now in more detail at inversions, backbends and nervous system support in terms of asana.

Props and supports are good!



ACTION / ISSUE	ASANA / POSES RECOMMENDED
Soften abdomen	Downward dog Wide leg forward bend Pyramid
Maintain vital energy (good for cramps / soreness etc.)	Reclining hero Reclining butterfly (supta badukonasana) Fish pose Reclined leg extension (could use straps)
When heavy bleeding is present	Reclined leg extension Half moon pose Practice inversions a lot when you are not menstruating
Headache	Seated forward bend Seated forward bend one knee bent (janu shirsasana)
For general nervous system rest	Legs up the wall Supported bridge Relaxation with bolster under knees (supported shavasana)
When periods are absent or light	Squats
	Horse stance
	Avoid inversions or do short round when you are not menstruating

<p>TWISTS are always tonifying for the reproductive system but strong twists are best avoided when actually menstruating.</p>
<p>If there is constipation practice postures which stimulate energy to flow downwards (apana vayu) If there is loose bowel practice postures which stimulate energy to move upwards (prana vayu).</p>
<p>Reclining butterfly (supta badukonasana) deserves special mention as perhaps the most healing of all postures for menstrual health. It calms the nervous system, releases and relaxes the uterus, it brings prana to the reproductive area, and eases cramps and sluggishness. If you only have five minutes to practice a long hold in this posture will probably serve you best.</p>

INVERSIONS (VAYUS AND MOVEMENTS OF PRANA)

We hear a lot that we shouldn't do inversions during menstruation, its pretty much the only thing that everyone knows about yoga when you are menstruating. Particularly shoulderstand because it's a longer inversion, meaning we tend to hold it for a longer period of time. There is a common misconception that says that the reason for that (which is completely incorrect!) is that when you turn your self upside down the menstrual fluid goes back into the body, potentially being reabsorbed back into the body and that that could cause endometriosis. This is just not true. Going into a shoulderstand is not going to cause endometriosis. But it is recommended that we don't do inversions when we are menstruating. Let's look at why.

The reason has to do with prana - the life force or energy that moves through the body, which is present in breath, food, sleep, exercise and our relationships. The best relationships are 'satsang' they inspire us and are mutually uplifting of prana.

Hopefully there is plenty of this energy, this life force, because you need it. When you die, with the last exhalation prana leaves your body and then the body becomes an empty shell. When you are born the first thing you do is inhale. You take prana in. We can actually live with incredibly low levels of prana. But to thrive, to really live like a vibrant, healthy nourished person, we need to have optimum prana. Most of us are somewhere in the middle. And we kind of live with that as being okay.

So for most of us there is huge potential to increase our prana levels and quality with just a few little tweaks to diet, to routine, to sleep and to our relationships. And one of the markers for where you are at with this is your menstrual health. It's not the only one, don't go away thinking that if your menstrual health is not up to scratch your life is really terrible, but it is one of the markers of how you are doing. Just like if you keep getting sick, that's another indicator.

So this energy or prana comes in, mainly through our food and breathing and it moves around the body in different directions. For example there is one movement of prana, which is the energy of digestion. Some of us have good strong digestion; some of us have weak digestion. That is one of the 'winds' or movements of prana. If you were to go and see an Ayurvedic doctor for a particular ailment one of the things that practitioner would be interested in is which movements of prana we are working with. There is another prana 'wind' or movement that works in the mental realm; any mental health issues are up there. For the purposes of talking about menstruation there are two pranic 'winds' that are very important. Very confusingly one of them is called prana prana! The other one is called apana prana. Prana prana is the upward moving energy in the body and apana prana is the downward moving energy. In order to be in completely optimum health, we need to have both. We need the prana prana to elevate us above the animalistic approach to life. This movement of prana upwards allows us to be human beings who make choices beyond base instincts of survival and reproduction. There is a spiritual seeking in this energy. When we practice yoga, primarily on an energy level what we are interested in is taking energy from the base of the spine, and having it rise up through the chakra system, spinal column, towards enabling elevated mental states.

The primary objective of the yoga practice, from an energetic point of view is to bring prana up, from the earth to the realm of infinite possibility.

However also essential to life and good health is apana the downward movement of energy. This energy connects us to the earth, it's what allows us to reproduce, it also allows us to perform normal bodily functions like bowel movements or urination. If you are really constipated, you haven't got enough apana Vayu (vayu means wind and describes the movement of energy). If you have diarrhea, then you have too much! So we need a perfect balance of both of these energies.

It is in the realm of menstruation that we really see how the movements of these energies play out. A person who has really light, short or irregular periods, does not have enough apana vayu. That person would need to do yoga practices, that stimulate connection to the earth and the downward moving energy.

That means lots of squats, seated postures, postures where the spine is upright and not so many inversions. Also avoid 'flying' postures, jump backs, handstands etc. where you need a lot of lightness in the body. You are trying to create a feeling of heaviness, a connection to the earth rather than that 'flying' feeling. Also avoid mulha bandha, the energy lock through the pelvic floor.

A person who has very heavy painful, frequent periods has probably got too much downward moving energy. They need to do the opposite. Poses that are lightening, uplifting and reversing that tendency to get stuck to the earth. They would want to do more dynamic practices and particularly lots of inversions. Inversions are anything where your head is lower than the level of your heart. So the people with the heavy painful, frequent menstruation want to be working on inversions.

The exception to that for everyone is when you are actually having your period. The reason is that when you are menstruating, you need apana vayu to be really strong. The tribal women that I just talked about who are able to just go off into the bush to have a menstrual experience, they have really clear control over their apana vayu.

There are yogis who can control their digestion to such a point that they can eat very small amounts of food, or control the prana around the heart so they can actually stop the heart beating and then switch it back on again. It is incredible. The level of control that we are able to have over this human form, if we pay careful attention is mind-blowing. But most of us are not there yet!

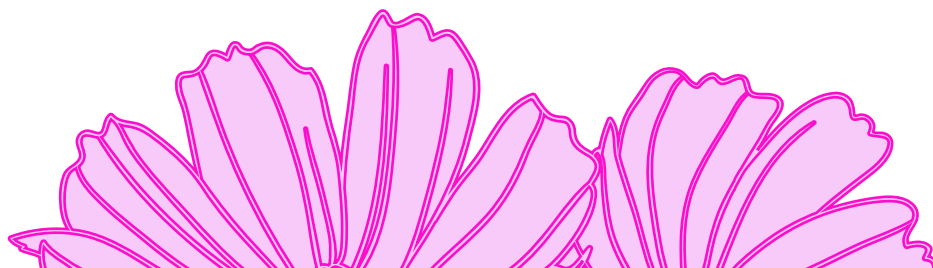
So a basic protocol when you are in menstruation is to not reverse that energetic pattern by turning your body upside down. In doing so you kind of give mixed messages, when you go into an inversion you really stimulate prana vayu and you don't want to do that when you menstruate. Particularly if you have light or irregular periods.

So that is why we say to avoid inversions during menstruation and also to avoid twisting as well.

In between periods, if your periods are light and irregular then twists will be good because they are stimulating, but if you are having heavy or painful periods twists are like poking a stick at a problem that already exists. You don't want to do that. You want to back off.

In pregnancy you need tons of apana vayu. That's why we don't tend to do a lot of inversions during pregnancy. Pregnancy is all about the energy moving down into the pelvic area, and giving birth is the ultimate manifestation of apana vayu. When your body starts to have contractions to birth the baby, there is nothing you can do to stop that happening. That is apana vayu in full expression.

In terms of movements 'vayu' is the word for movement happening in the body. There are somethings that affect the vayus very badly. If you have a lifestyle where you spend a lot of time on aeroplanes this has a bad affect the prana in the body. Flying is very disorienting for the bodies energetic system, in terms of feeling grounded where you are on the planet, and steady in your body. Energetically your body can't keep up with changing time zones. You may also be dehydrated. Generally Ayurveda is not a fan of lifestyles where there is lots of time spent in different time zones as it affects the vayus particularly badly.



ASANA FOR NERVOUS SYSTEM SUPPORT

The nervous system is very taxed during menstruation, which is why we feel more emotional. Generally speaking in a traditional Indian household when a woman is menstruating she doesn't cook food, or go to temple, (Western women take exception to that and may see it as a judgment along the lines that if they are menstruating they are seen as unclean in some way but this is not the reason why).

In traditional Indian culture when you menstruate you are 'off duty' for a bit. You are allowed that time to relax. It is an acknowledgement of the fact that your nervous system is heightened, and you are more sensitive. It is a support for that, it's not a criticism. So when you need that nervous system boost, either a couple of days before menstruation, or during, legs up the wall pose is the best nervous system relaxer. Its also good of you have just had a big adrenaline rush such as an accident or argument.

Other nerve 'tonics' include supported bridge (with props), and shavasana (with knees bent and bolster underneath knees to increase blood flow into uterus). These two are great in general for menstruation. For headaches try a seated forward bend, and forward bend variations. It increases blood supply to the brain.

Some women have the experience of the abdomen becoming very tight and hard. Downward dog is really good for softening the abdomen and internal organs. Practice deep breathing and focus on releasing the abdomen. Downward dog is also a good posture for sexual trauma, if there is any gripping in the body. Practice it while breathing very long and slow, softening the abdomen area focusing on softness. Using a heat pack or hot water bottle is another way of releasing 'cellular' holding.

For people who have had any kind of trauma, in any part of the body heat can help with releasing. Focus on bringing healing energy and release, to whatever part of the body is needed. In terms of reproductive health it is really important because we can hold onto stuff for years and years. It has impact in our lives emotionally and physically.

APPENDIX 1: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

(TAKEN FROM MY WORKSHOPS ON THIS SUBJECT)

Q: In terms of wanting to get pregnant what about the health of the male partner? For example with toxicity in the body such as heavy metals?

A: Yes, in the area of sperm count, definitely. The difference is that while both partners can be affected, the male plays a role in the whole 'package' only briefly (conception) while the female body has to carry the baby through to full term. What we know now is that for most couples, conception is not usually the problem, it is retention of the baby, what we call the 'viability' of the pregnancy. Quite often women are falling pregnant but then they get their next period so that they didn't even know that they were pregnant. It is too early to even do a pregnancy test. The conception occurs, but the 'container' the reproductive body isn't ready to hold the baby. I have written a lot about this in my book 'The Yoga of Birth', so you can read about this whole area of fertility, in there.

Q: What is the deal with switching to soy milk? I've heard that its not that good for you either?

A: Yes, there is a lot of controversy about that. Some people say the soy isn't so good for boys, because it reduces testosterone. Soy is not great if you have too much of it in your diet, however in my opinion in moderation it's fine. Possibly the dairy industry has latched onto any negative press about soy, since they have a vested interest in people drinking cows milk. I would personally say that organic soy milk is much better than cow's milk, any day.

Q: How can toxicity affect fertility?

A: I can't quite answer scientifically about the affect of heavy metals in the body (but if you internet search it you will get the science) but all of these heavy metals, if levels are too high, deplete reproductive health. Water that is heavily polluted with heavy metals causes all kinds of health problems to fish populations. Symptoms in humans are the slowing down of the whole menstrual cycle and lighter, less frequent periods. I don't want to pick on China but there are a few generations of women now who are living through a complete toxic overload. Menstrual cycle just stops altogether so they can't reproduce. Its not a permanent form of infertility because its not biologically fixed, but you have a lot of work to do, in those situations to bring the health back into balance, so that the menstruation will start again and who knows what the effects will be over a few generations.

Q: What can you say about fibroids and endometriosis?

A: In Ayurveda both of these conditions are treated very similarly. Fibroids are growths that happen within the fallopian tubes and/or uterus. There is a huge range within these growths. They can be cancerous, non cancerous, create pain, not create pain, there is a wide spectrum of types. Endometriosis (for those of you who don't know) is where the type of cells that you have within the lining of your uterus, which are of a particular and unique nature, go a little bit wrong. These cells have messengers within them that every month fire off a message to the lining of the uterus to shed. Endometriosis is a condition where some of those types of cells, these message-bearing cells, get stuck in other parts of the body. Normally around the reproductive organs. So that at some point, they try to tell the menstrual fluid to shed, but they are in a place in the body where there is no menstrual fluid, so basically the body starts to eat away at itself. It is trying to shed an area that has nothing there. It's irritating and can cause a lot of pain.

A body can have tiny or large amounts of endometriosis. The cells are asking healthy cells to shed, a type of auto immune disease where the body ends up attacking itself. What Western doctors currently do to fix endometriosis is a surgery which involves scraping all the areas that are affected, to remove the foreign cells. Sometimes they come back, sometimes they don't. It is an area that very little is known about. The same surgery is often done with fibroids to remove them but sometimes doctors don't actually know why the fibroid was there, when it will come back or if it will come back. Ayurveda would see these things as symptomatic of lack of overall reproductive health.

Something really important is that these problems are also generational. It might not be anything that you have done in your life, but it's more likely your ancestry, your female lineage that plays a major contributing factor. Not just physically, but also energetically.

Here is an example: my husband is Greek. After the Second World War in Greece, there was a very high infant mortality rate, because of widespread malnourishment. They just didn't have enough food to eat, as well as poor hygiene standards. Also a particular virus went through Greece at that time, transmitted by mosquitos, which killed a huge amount of infants.

All these things happened and it meant that almost 1 in 3 babies that were born at that time died. The result was that the women of that generation lived for a period of almost 20 years in complete grief and mourning. So that even now when we look at Greek women they have one of the lowest fertility rates in the world. Their current health is great, they are eating good diet, have a clean standard of living, but the fertility rate is still low. From a Western medicine point of view there is no rhyme or reason for this, but according to Ayurveda is the energetic legacy, the chain reaction of that intense experience of grief, mourning and the fear that their babies will die is an ancestral pattern and can give us a really clear marker as to why the fertility rate is so low in that cultural group.

Which can also give us a perspective on our own reproductive health. The story is not just about you. It goes back generations and you can look at your own genealogy for clues about your own life. Sexual trauma can play a big part in that history, if it was there in any part of your history, it can also have an impact on your own reproductive health. But it doesn't mean it can't be fixed! It just means we have to look at what is really going on, on a holistic level.

That is where we come to yoga. Yoga is interested in 'the whole'. We have to be really open to all of the different aspects that are playing into our experience. Who we are and who we are evolving to be. One element that is very helpful is that of what we might call 'routines and rhythms'. A lot of these protocols are things that are just helpful in your daily life, regardless of whether you have reproductive or menstrual issues.

One of the biggest things that Ayurveda recognises is the importance of a daily routine. Regardless of your 'dosha' (your unique blend of the 3 main constitution/metabolic types).

The imbalance in your body are often related to your constitutional type, for example pitta people tend to have conditions that relate to inflammation and overheating like acne. Also the body is often warm. Pitta people are driven, fast moving and likely to be in a rush. Fire is the element.

Each of us has a different combination of the three dosha types. (Vata and Kapha are the other two). You could be really strongly one, or really strongly two but if you are completely even with all three then you are enlightened or 'tri-doshic' in perfect balance. Most of us have a tendency in one direction and usually we can see in our menstrual cycle what they tendency is. This is where Mother Tiwari's book 'Women's Power To Heal Through Inner Medicine' is really helpful, as it will give you the ability to identify which is your dosha tendencies.

To give further examples kapha people have very heavy and frequent periods. Vata tend towards light and less frequent periods and pitta people are somewhere in the middle. Pitta people generally find conception the easiest because they have a tendency towards a more balanced cycle.

But across all these doshas, Ayurveda says that a steady routine will really serve you.

Here is another example, again from my husband's ancestry. My father-in-law is a great example of how Ayurveda works in this way. Mother Maya has visited us and actually stayed with my family and met my father-in-law a few times. He fascinates her because he is an anomaly of modern science. He has been smoking since he was 13 and he is now 86. He chain smokes! You never see him without a cigarette in his hand. And he is as fit as a fiddle, living completely independently, playing soccer games with my kids as well as being mentally also completely switched on as well. He is a happy, easy going and laid back person.

So Mother Tiwari has been trying to find out what is his secret! His favourite story is that throughout his life two different doctors have told him that if he doesn't stop smoking he is going to die. Both of those doctors are dead now! His secret is routine. He gets up at exactly the same time every day, he goes to bed at the same time, he eats the same foods every day. Everything is absolutely moderated. Even when there are special family functions, like weddings he won't break his routine. It has to fit in with his day routine or he won't be there. In every other way he is completely laid back and easy going, and there he is at 86 and quite vibrant.

This is a classic example, Ayurveda would say, of how the stability within the body and mind respond so well to routine. The only time he gets sick, is when he goes back to Greece and when he has to fly, when his time zones are all out and the food is all out, plus they don't let him smoke on the plane...

The doctors have actually told him now NOT to stop smoking, if he stopped smoking it would kill him! The reason why I'm telling you this story is that most of us live so far from that. We eat a huge range of very different foods, at different times, get up at different times, go to bed at different times, we mix it all up. We might go from drinking heavily, then not at all, working shifts, flying around the world - from an Ayurvedic perspective all of these elements lead to dis-ease, stress and ill-health. Ayurveda would say that lack of routine and rhythm is the number one crisis in our health, for all of us.

The same is very true for children as well. There are some interesting studies done in Ayurveda now that shows that a lot of the health issues in children: from mental health issues like autism and ADHD, to physical problems like irritable bowel syndrome. These problems respond incredibly well to an enforced, predictable daily routine. It is interesting, the research is positive. It is not saying that because of lack of routine these problems are occurring, but what we can show is that when a routine (the main things are sleep and diet) is implemented, incredible transformation happens to health.

So I just want you to think about that. If you have any health issues at all, in your life, I really think a lot of it has to do with these understandings about routine and rhythm.

You can start simply. It can be things like trying to eat at the same times every day, and also the size of the meal, whatever suits you. It doesn't matter as much what the components of the routine is - it just matters that the routine exists. That there is some routine around food and definitely some routine around sleep. So much research shows that if you have a consistent sleep time and wake time, your overall health and wellbeing is dramatically improved. Ayurveda absolutely supports that.

Finally, as part of that overall advice, is taking proper time for rest and relaxation. Most of us are just exhausted. It is really difficult to ask your body to work hard for you and be at your optimum level. Ultimately what healthy menstruation is about is the potential to make a baby. Whether you choose to do that or not is a different thing.

When we look at ourselves as animals, having a healthy reproductive system, means that you have the potential to manifest life. You have to be full of prana. Energy, life force, zing! If that zing is really depleted you can't create another being. That is why pregnancy is exhausting, all that prana literally goes into your baby, everything that comes into the body goes to the baby first. And it is the same when you are even thinking about having a baby or bringing your hormonal function into balance. You need extra energy for that. If you are really tired, as MOST of us are, (most of the time if we are really honest), if you are not sleeping enough and getting a good quality of sleep the healing is just not going to happen.

Q: What about stress? Does that play a big role in reproductive health?

A: Absolutely. It is an important piece of the puzzle. The problem is there is often a whole cycle for women who are trying to conceive and who are having fertility issues - the longer it takes to conceive, or if you have had miscarriages for example; the more stressed out you get. We have all heard those stories about people who have tried for years and years to get pregnant and given up, and the next month, they are pregnant. Or gone to sign up to do adoption and suddenly they are pregnant. In the 'letting go' and stress release, the body says 'ok I can do this now'. Deep and long term stress, if we look at it energetically, is like a holding on. It is a drawing in and tightening. In order to conceive and nurture a baby, there is a letting go. We have to become a container, an open space where something can happen. You can't be that container if you are totally uptight and stressed out. So that is where yoga can be very helpful. Not only can it do things like nourish and tonify the womb, physically allow the muscles to open and create space, but it also really helps with overall stress. Yoga allows the spaciousness of the container to happen.

Q: What is your advice around miscarriage? How about allowing the body to recover before trying to conceive again?

A: I think allow at least 3 months. Doctors often just say one cycle, but I think 3 months is needed from an emotional perspective. It takes time for your body and mind to heal before you start the cycle again. It also depends whether the experience is of multiple miscarriages or just a one off. The trauma gets deeper and deeper and it gets harder to really heal if there are multiple miscarriages. So probably then, even longer breaks would be beneficial, even though that could be hard advice, because if a couple wants a baby so much they don't want to wait. But it is best to give your body as much time as possible to recover. A good book I recommend on this topic is by Francesca Naish it's called 'The Natural Way to Better Babies' it has useful advice on this topic as well as general preconception care.

Q: Can you talk about IVF?

A: I am not against IVF (I want to start by being clear about) but for me it is a little like the baby making equivalent of going on the pill. It is the 'band aid'. Something that makes me feel sad is if a couple uses IVF without having tried all the things we have talked about. There are so many things you can do to improve your fertility, and a lot of them involve taking personal responsibility and doing the work and it can take time. Changing your diet, changing your lifestyle, dealing with sexual trauma ... the list goes on. For a lot of women that just all falls into the 'too hard' basket. So IVF is the quick fix. And sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't. But there are also so many women who have healed themselves and put themselves in a better place for motherhood, by taking on those types of protocols and fallen pregnant so quickly and easily, that it seems to me a real shame that we don't try all these things first.

Natural conception can lead to better consciousness on the planet and healing for ourselves as individuals creating a legacy for the next generation. If you are a woman who has started menstruating, gone straight on the pill, off the pill, tries for two or three months to conceive, failed and your partner has a lowish sperm count you might decide to go straight for IVF, it seems to me that is not a healing journey.

The legacy, the ancestry that you will pass on is eroded reproductive health. We could choose to do the work, each one of us, or not. Breaking the negative cycles that our culture is locked into, so that for future generations there is some healing happening. Of course once the natural options have been tried IVF might be a great option. I have a similar perspective with natural childbirth. Try the best you can for natural and if it doesn't work out make use of what modern medicine has to offer. 80 - 90% of women have the potential to have a really good healthy natural birth. And then maybe 10 - 15% need an intervention, like a C-section or similar in order to save life. In those cases what a blessing modern medicine is! I'm so grateful that those opportunities exist. But at the moment the intervention rate is a ridiculously high 92%!!!!

Q: Sounds like we could start to view the human body like a machine?

A: Yes, it is the Western medicine model, your body is a machine, and has these functions we can change or interfere with. We don't have time for it not to work. We all fall into that, I've taken painkillers because I've got my period. I'm not going to say every time I have had period pain I go home, have a hot bath and lie in bed with a hot water bottle and a lavender oil burner! We are busy, we have got things to do and we have to get on with it ... it is more to do with the overall mindset, if we just keep doing that, generation after generation, if we just keep in that negative cycle, something is going to break. The whole system is going to break down. I do also think we see it in the types of diseases, like cancer is a big one we are dealing with. Its not the individuals 'fault' its just as a collective we are eroding our health. IVF is a huge part of that. We go into it way too easily, not really understanding the side effects. I feel like so much more could be done to help women.

I have already mentioned Francesca Naish and she is doing some very interesting work in this field - she runs a health clinic in Sydney. She is an incredible woman. She educates about all the natural protocols, everything I have talked about, and then if it doesn't work she will recommend IVF. She ticks every box first. She gets the couple taking responsibility for what is happening and then as a final option IVF is good if it is really necessary.

Q: In our culture we are having babies at an older age, does Ayurveda say something about that?

A: Yes it does. Basically it is not optimum. Our optimum breeding time is from about 19 years old. It is definitely much harder work to have babies when you're older. Depending on levels of stress and levels of toxicity, it is harder too. You can look at young people and even if they have an appalling diet and don't sleep properly they still look amazing, but fast forward 20 years and poor lifestyle starts to take it's toll. When you are young you just get away with so much more. Your body is so much more resilient. It is the same with reproduction, somehow your body can just do it when you are young...

I did some doula work with teenage girls who were having babies, supporting them through that journey, and they just had babies so easily! I think it is partly because they didn't know what to expect, they didn't have all the educational trappings (we know too much sometimes!) a lot of these girls were literally just popping out babies. Which goes to show again that the body knows what to do. But of course from a social and practical perspective I'm not recommending everyone has a baby so young. What we do have to do is be aware that the older we are as mothers the more toll it will take on our health and the harder we will have to work to stay healthy.

Q: In regard to the mental health angle, can you recommend any texts?

A: David Frawley. He writes a lot about Ayurveda and mental health. His work is a little heavy going though. He is also a medical doctor, he is very, very knowledgeable about Western medicine but you have to wade through it a bit. He is the expert in this field.

APPENDIX 2:

BRINGING MENSTRUATION BACK INTO BALANCE,

HIGHLIGHT NOTES:

Nourish, tonify and support the womb

Protocols which may help include Chasteberry, zinc and drinking only filtered water and organic dairy products.

Stop taking contraceptive pill as a band-aid to symptoms

The suggestion to stop taking the contraceptive pill is because when a woman stops taking the pill she will have a chance to see what her true symptoms are unmasked by synthetic hormonal input. We then have the opportunity to start addressing her reproductive health in a more holistic and supportive manner. Zinc is often depleted when taking the pill.

De-Tox your life! Lots of modern research shows that endometriosis may be linked to the constant input of toxins into the sensitive female system. By de-toxing on every level the natural hormonal balance of the female system can be regained. From toothpaste to shampoo and of course food choices organic, low tox and chemical free will be an important choice for women with menstrual problems.

Always eat a nourishing meal for dinner; don't skip a meal - but you can eat lightly at the end of the day if you prefer.

Take proper time for rest and relaxation make sure you have at least 1 full day off per week. Practices such as yoga nidra, yin yoga and meditation are important.

Mother Maya reminds us that all of life can be holy Sadhana - filled with beauty and mindful joy if we take a grounded approach to our health and wellbeing.

'Sadhana are aware-full practices that evoke
our Inner Medicine healing potential, and
keep our inner rhythms in alignment with
the whole universe.'

Maya Tiwari

It has not been my intention in this e-book to offer comprehensive details about which asanas are useful for which menstrual conditions. Many other teachers have done excellent work in this area.

RECOMMENDED READING AND REFERENCES:

'Yoga for a Healthy Menstrual Cycle' by Linda Sparrowe and Patricia Walden - this is a gem of a little book, so much useful information and a very down to earth approach to the teachings. Useful for asana sequencing described in more detail than I offer here. Highly recommended.

'Women's Power to Heal Through Inner Medicine' Swamini Mayatitanana - I reference this book often in these pages, Maya Tiwari is the founder of the Wise Earth School of Ayurveda and my teacher.

'A Woman's Book of Yoga' by Michelle Seibel and Hari Kaur Khalsa - a book offering teachings from the Kundalini Yoga lineage, full of useful information and inspiration.

'Women's Bodies, Women's Wisdom' by Christiane Northrup - this book is a classic and is well known and loved by many health practitioners. Essential reading for yoga teachers, Christiane has a particularly clear and accessible way of writing about the subtle body.

'The Woman's Yoga Book' by Bobby Clennell - this book is full of teachings from the Iyengar method. It is useful as a detailed guide for asana in regard to menstruation and goes through many of the main yoga asana discussing their role in menstrual health (with clear illustrations).

