

don't hold your breath

BREATHING MAY BE AUTOMATIC, BUT THINKING ABOUT EXACTLY HOW YOU DO IT CAN MAKE PREGNANCY MORE COMFORTABLE, AND GIVING BIRTH EASIER

As a mother of two and a yoga teacher specialising in pregnancy and birth, I know only too well how mastering the breath and, conversely, failing to master it can affect your experience of giving birth. The first time I gave birth I failed to control my breathing, for various reasons, and ended up having a Caesarean section. The second time, I succeeded in breathing healthily and delivered my son naturally at home. The first time, I remember actually holding my breath in fear as the contractions broke upon my body wave after wave; the second time, I

recall vividly how focused and grounded I was as I used my breath to carry me smoothly through each contraction.

Being pregnant means rediscovering your breath. Suddenly you are not only breathing for yourself but also for the new life you are carrying. The deeper you breathe, the more oxygen and 'prana', or vital energy, your baby receives, optimising its prospects for health and development. As your baby grows inside you and your lung space decreases proportionally, breathing fully

becomes even more important for your own comfort and health as well as that of your baby. Breathing properly during pregnancy also helps you to balance the often tricky and tumultuous emotional life that accompanies it, because correct breathing will help you to ground the emotions and calm the mind.

But the most important reason for rediscovering the breath during pregnancy is its crucial role during labour itself. Knowing how to breathe properly is the key to a gentle and successful labour. Deep, effective breathing will unlock the body and allow the

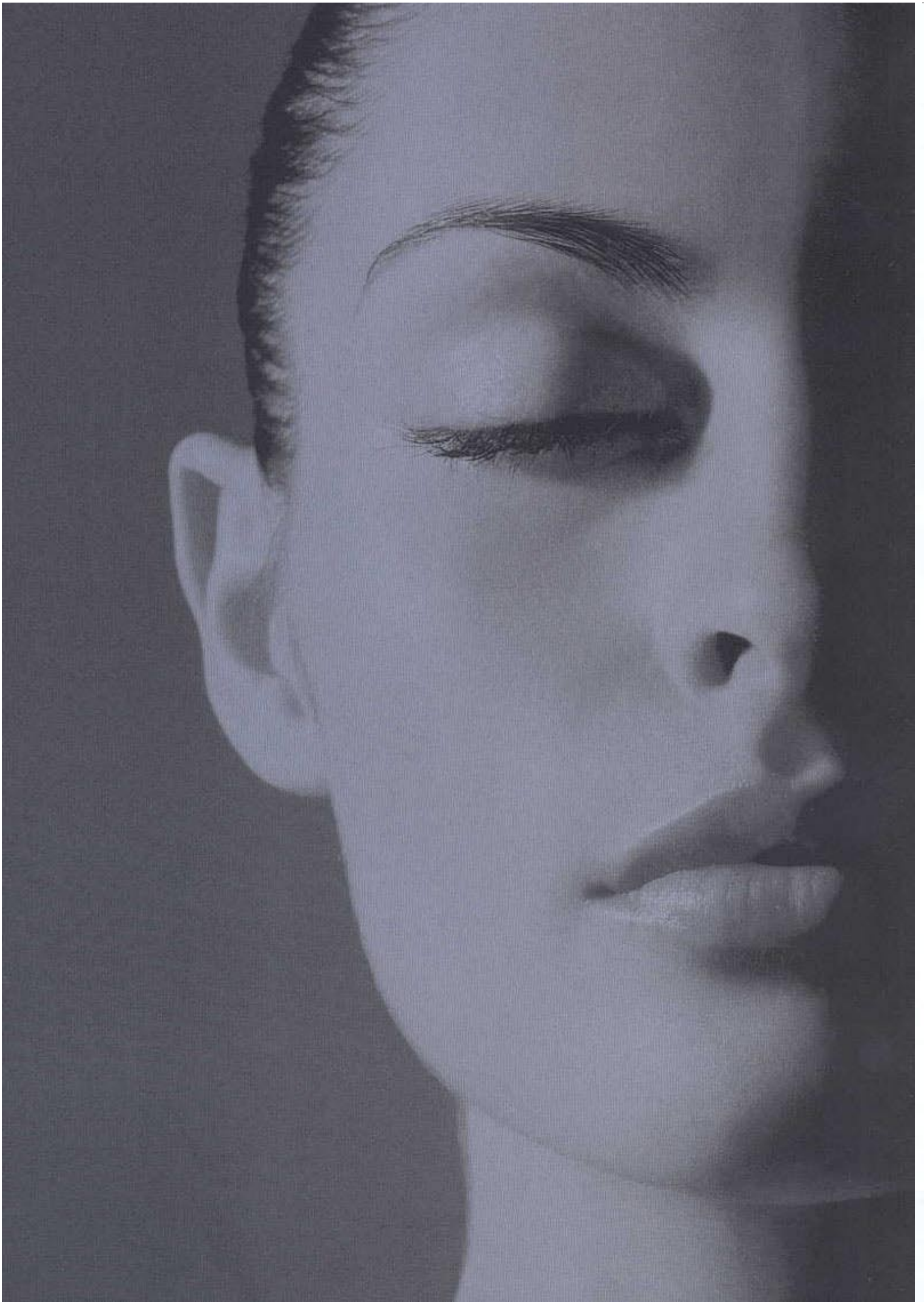
contractions to pass effectively, facilitating the descent of your baby.

As a yoga teacher I cannot emphasise enough the importance of the breath in labour. Your breath is the link between your body and mind; it is the force that drives your body and drives you. Your breath is your anchor, the key to a fast, effective birth. If there is any birth preparation that you can do, it is learning to breathe properly.

"But why do we need to learn to do something we do automatically?" people often ask. The answer is because most of us do not know how to breathe. As active birth pioneer Janet Balaskas says in her book *Preparing For Birth With Yoga*, "There is a world of difference between breathing to stay alive and breathing to live." Most of us breathe automatically, without awareness, rapid shallow breaths that only use part of the space available in our lungs. If only we would learn to breathe properly – deep, full breaths that oxygenate the body and mind, balance the emotions and increase our vitality – our lives and our wellbeing would be hugely enhanced.

This is especially true in the labour room, where the difference between a shallow, unfocused breath and a deep, focused breath can make or break a natural birth. In labour, oxygen is the main fuel for the uterine muscles and for your energy levels. Breathing deeply and effectively is also the biggest antidote to fear and anxiety – affecting up to 80 per cent of women in birth – and will ensure that your body stays relaxed throughout labour, maximising the effectiveness of each contraction and speeding up the birth.

So how do we breathe correctly? There are three basic types of breathing. Clavicular breathing is the most shallow: the shoulders and collarbone are raised while the abdomen is contracted during inhalation. Maximum effort is made, but a minimum amount of air is obtained. Thoracic breathing is done with the rib muscles expanding the rib cage, and is the second type of incomplete breathing. Deep abdominal breathing is the best, for it brings air to the lowest and



largest part of the lungs. Breathing is slow and deep, and proper use is made of the diaphragm. The full yogic breath (*see exercises below*) uses all three parts of the lung, ensuring that a maximum amount of air and prana is obtained from each breath that is taken.

Breathing correctly also means breathing mindfully – in other words, bringing our attention to the breath – so it is no longer automatic. The more we breathe with awareness the more grounded, calm and focused we will begin to feel. Learning to breathe properly is a good habit for every stage of your life. Breathing to live, instead of just to stay alive, brings a quality of physical and mental life far beyond the shallow existence of a breath half-lived. It is an attitude that embraces life in its fullness and to its core.

There is a common misconception that the most important part of the breath is the inhalation – after all, that is the part that brings in the air. But it's the exhalation that counts: this empties the lungs, making way for fresh air. A deeper exhalation expels stale air and allows for a satisfying and effective inhalation.

In labour, exhaling helps you to release muscular tension and relax, countering the tendency to tense up as a reaction to the pain of the contractions. Exhaling through contractions enables you to bear them openly. You therefore work with them rather than against them. The truly focused mother locked into her breath during labour is like a captain navigating a boat through a storm; no matter how fast or furious the waves, she will not be tossed about. It is a sight worth seeing and an experience worth having.

There is some debate about the value of breathing techniques during childbirth. Many respected childbirth experts and educators,

including active birth pioneer Janet Balaskas, argue that the only breathing practice worth doing during childbirth is the instinctive one. They argue that, in fact, practising breathing techniques in labour could bring confusion to the mother and end up being detrimental to the labour process.

However, while it is certainly true that the ideal birthing breath is the instinctive birthing breath, that theory only really serves those practising an instinctive birth. As Uma Dinsmore-Tull, yoga teacher and author of *Perinatal Pranayama*, says, "These days it is difficult to even recognise instinctive behaviour, let alone be guided by it during labour."

So how do we help those women who are too anxious or untrusting to surrender themselves to their instincts on the big day, without bringing about confusion during labour? The answer is to learn these wonderful breathing techniques at the onset of pregnancy so that, by the time birth comes around, they are instinctive. And for this to happen, the mother needs to be practising regularly, ideally daily. Although these breathing techniques can be self-taught, it is preferable to learn them as part of a structured pregnancy yoga or prenatal training. As a teacher, the best feedback I receive from students postnatally concerns the breath; it is always, in retrospect, the portion of yogic knowledge they say they found most helpful ●

DEEP EXHALATION
EMPTIES THE
LUNGS OF STALE
AIR, MAKING WAY
FOR FRESH AIR

breathing exercises for birth

The following breathing exercises have been developed or adapted specifically for use in pregnancy and birth. They are all easy to do, safe and effective. It is important to remember that in learning these breathing practices we work with the natural rhythms of our own breath. Go with your own flow.

First, get comfortable. You can practise these breaths either lying or sitting.

LYING For the full yogic breath it is easier to lie down. Up to 30 weeks it is safe to lie on your back, either flat out with palms upturned towards the ceiling, your arms about 45° from your side and your legs at least hip-width apart, or with the knees bent and the soles of the feet together. After 30 weeks it is advisable to lie on your left side with your head on cushions and your right knee bent and supported by a cushion in front of your body.

SITTING Upright sitting is preferable for the birthing breath and alternate nostril breathing. There are a variety of comfortable sitting options. Either butterfly sitting with the soles of the feet pressed together and the knees opening outwards, supporting the knees with cushions and perhaps your spine against the wall; or sitting cross-legged on the floor with a cushion placed underneath the buttocks so that the hips are higher than the knees. You can also sit in a straight-backed chair with your knees wide, as long as the soles of the feet are on the floor.

FULL YOGIC BREATH

A full yogic breath combines all three types of breath and thus uses every part of your lungs, beginning with a deep abdominal breath and continuing the inhalation through the inter-costal and clavicular areas.

ABDOMINAL BREATHING

- 1 To get the feel of proper diaphragmatic breathing, place a hand on the upper part of your abdomen, where the diaphragm is located.
- 2 Breathe in and out slowly. Your abdomen should expand outward as you inhale and contract as you exhale. Try to get the feeling of this motion.
- 3 You know you are breathing correctly if your hand rises as you inhale and falls as you exhale. Keep watching the breath and feeling the motion of the breath in your body.

FULL YOGIC BREATHING

Once you feel proficient in the practice of the abdominal breathing you will be ready to learn full yogic breathing.

- 1 Breathe in slowly; expand the abdomen, then the ribcage, and finally the upper part of the lungs.

breathing exercises for birth

2 Breathe out in the same manner, letting the abdomen cave in as you exhale.

THE GOLDEN THREAD BREATH

Use the full yogic breath as the basis for this breath, so that you tune in to a gentle rhythm of breathing that is effortless.

Tip: the heart of this practice is softness.

1 Take a yawn, release your jaw, throat and teeth, close your eyes. Set the teeth slightly apart, part your lips – just enough of a gap to omit a thread; have the cheeks, face and lips relaxed. Breathe in through the nose.

2 Breathe out between the lightly parted lips. Feel a fine cool breeze passing between the lips; imagine that the cool breeze is a fine golden thread spinning out between the lips.

3 Allow the exhalation to gradually lengthen each time, without forcing or pushing – simply letting the out-breath increase in length as the imaginary golden thread spins out into the air in front of you.

COUNTED BREATHS

Many women find counting helpful in labour.

1 Try, as you breathe in, to count slowly up to three or four (or whatever number seems comfortable for you).

2 As you breathe out, count to six or eight again. The longer the exhalation, the better, as it is the exhalation that dissipates the pain and keeps you focused during the contraction.

STRAW BREATHING

This is possibly the simplest and most effective technique for managing contractions.

1 Have your cheeks, lips and face relaxed. Breathe in through the nose.

2 Imagine you are breathing out through a straw, so that your lips are slightly parted. Feel a fine breeze slowly passing through your lips as you gently exhale.

3 Extend that out-breath for as long as possible, allowing the exhalation to lengthen each time without forcing or pushing.

4 Allow the breath to return through your nose.

5 Repeat as often as you need.

SOUNDED BREATH

Many women like to make noise during labour and birth. Vocalisation (such as moaning and groaning) can be a tension release, an affirmation or an attention-getting device. Vocalisation is often substituted for blowing during transition or in the second stage of labour.

1 Place your hands on your knees and bring your awareness to your breath.

2 Keeping your teeth in contact, begin to make a hissing sound with the exhalation. Continue to the end of the breath, pause and relax. Let the new breath come in slowly. Repeat for several more breaths.

3 Now try making the 'ooo' sound. Feel the sound coming from deep in your abdomen. Take the sound to the end of the breath. Pause and let the breath return slowly. Continue for a few more breaths.

4 Now try with the 'aah' sound, followed by 'aw', 'ee' and 'eh'. End with 'om'.

5 As practice for labour you can try sound breathing on all fours or in different upright labour positions.

ALTERNATE NOSTRIL BREATHING

In hatha yoga, 'ha' means sun and refers to the right nostril (positive force); 'tha' means moon and refers to the left nostril (negative force). Alternate nostril breathing brings the left and right sides of the brain into balance. It clears blockages and removes impurities from the system.

1 Place the thumb of your right hand beside your right nostril and the ring finger of the same hand beside the left. You are going to breathe in and out alternately through each nostril.

2 Close your right nostril with your thumb and keep your left nostril open. Inhale through the left nostril for a count of four. Cover the left nostril with your ring finger, release your thumb and exhale through your right nostril for a count of eight, keeping the left closed. Inhale again through the right for a count of four.

3 Now close the right and exhale through the left for a count of eight, then inhale through the left for a count of four. Close the left and exhale through the right for a count of eight.

4 Continue in this way for a few minutes until the breath is flowing clearly through both nostrils.

RESOURCES

BOOKS

Perinatal Pranayama by Uma Dinsmore-Tuli (Sitaram & Sons, £6) – available through www.yogamatters.com, an excellent online store for all things yoga and active birth-related (also offers Sitaram partnership audio CD *Yoga Birth 1*, £13)

Preparing For Birth With Yoga by Janet Balaskas (Element, £14.99)

Yoga For Pregnancy, Birth And Beyond by Françoise Barbira Freedman (Dorling Kindersley, £9.99)

Step-By-Step Yoga For Pregnancy by Wendy Teasdill (Gaia, £8.99)

WEB RESOURCES

www.sitaram.org – for more articles and pictures on pregnancy yoga

www.birthlight.com – for details of pre-natal yoga-based classes (including aquanatal yoga) and teachers nationwide

www.hypnogyoga.co.uk – for pregnancy classes in south-west London and more pregnancy and birth articles by the author of this feature

www.activebirthcentre.com – for pre-natal classes in north-west London and a list of active birth teachers