

ommm...

THE AGE-OLD PRACTICE OF CHANTING CAN HELP YOU ACHIEVE A PROFOUND SENSE OF RELAXATION DURING PREGNANCY AND CARRY YOU THROUGH LABOUR TOO

When I first discovered chanting, I wasn't a hemp-skirted, alfalfa sprout advocate, just another thirty-something yoga buff with a baby growing in her belly and an open mind. It took one session and I was hooked. So was my baby.

Chanting, until recently, has enjoyed little press: too esoteric, too left-field, too 'out there'. But suddenly this age-old practice is enjoying a huge renaissance – especially in relation to pregnancy and birth.

So what does it entail? Chanting is the practice of singing devotional songs or prayers in sound which bring a deep sense of solace to both the singer and the listener. It's a kind of vocalised meditation. And, just like meditation, it helps to manage stress and enhance your overall emotional well-being.

Faustomaria, director of the Innergy Yoga Centre in west London (where I first discovered chanting) was one of the first teachers in this country to introduce regular chanting sessions. He says that it

has a variety of benefits for pregnant women; "At a physical level, the act of singing loud and clear keeps the vocal chords in good health. At an emotional level, the tunes and harmonies of the chants open and purify the feeling channels of the heart through the vibrational power of the felt sounds, and at a social level it is fun and a reason to gather and 'bond' with others at a similar stage."

When chanting during pregnancy, the sounds of the mother-to-be's voice are experienced by her baby in the womb as a soothing form of 'sound massage'. "These felt sounds," says Faustomaria, "ensure that it is a comforting experience."

During labour most women naturally vocalise: usually a groan or a low-toned moan. Vocalisation gives the labouring woman the ability to respond to any pain, fear and tension she may be feeling. Chanting takes that one step further – it gives the mother a vehicle to contain and focus sound. It also enables her to relax between contractions. Physiologically, chanting relaxes the neck, throat, jaw and chest and helps release tension, enabling the labour to progress.

For me, chanting and pregnancy are inextricably entwined. I was first introduced to it when pregnant with my son Rohan. Already a keen yogi, I was very open to the experience but I still recall feeling apprehensive as I joined the circle of chanters at the Innergy Yoga

Centre in London's Notting Hill. After all, I hadn't sung since I was in the school choir aged nine.

In the candlelit yoga hall, 20 or so people were seated in a wide circle. Someone handed me a photocopy of the Sanskrit chants. I recognised the word 'om' and that was about it. After a short, silent meditation, Faustomaria led the opening chant. He chanted a line of what sounded like double Dutch. We chanted it back.

Initially I felt a bit ridiculous singing words I didn't understand but the chants, being short and repeated endlessly in rising momentum, soon become vehicles for the expression of pure sound.

Once I let my guard down and warmed to the experience, I was converted. It was truly transporting and uplifting to shut my eyes and let my voice contribute to the beautiful sound filling the hall.

Thereafter I returned many times to relax and enjoy this newfound form of devotional singing. It didn't matter that I didn't know what I was singing about. I was enjoying the pure joy of singing. I sang the chants to my swollen belly in bed late at night and my unborn baby seemed to like it. He would move around less – the chanting seemed to have a soothing effect on him.

When I went into labour, chanting in a hot bath was the only real pain relief I experienced. It worked better than gas and air. Later, after my son was born, I sang those same chants to him as lullabies. He would fall asleep immediately.

Today I am a yoga teacher. I have learned the meaning of the chants and recently chanted through my second pregnancy. I still attend Innergy's chanting circle and bring my toddler along too.

Anyone can chant. Some people fall into chanting naturally; others might feel embarrassed, intimidated or uncomfortable at first. But persevere. Remember you don't need voice lessons or a belief in foreign deities to chant. Just an open mind and voice. ●

CHANTING BRINGS A DEEP SENSE OF SOLACE TO BOTH THE SINGER AND THE LISTENER

RESOURCES

Yoga For Pregnancy by Françoise Barbira Freedman and Dorial Hall (Cassell, £9.99)

The following London yoga centres host chanting circles:

INNERGY YOGA CENTRE Tel: 020 8968 1178; www.innergy-yoga.com

SIVANANDA YOGA VEDANTA CENTRE Tel: 020 8780 0160;

www.sivananda.org/london

THE SITARAM PARTNERSHIP Tel: 020 8678 0054; www.sitaram.org –

hosts chanting circles for pregnant women at various locations

