



YOGA & Women's health



Well Woman Yoga Therapist Uma Dinsmore-Tuli explains the power of using yoga to reconnect women with their life cycles

Many women discover that appropriate yoga practice is a natural support for a healthy menstrual cycle. After twenty years of supporting women's life cycles with yoga therapy, it's clear to me that there are some key practices that help re-connect women with the rhythms of their cycles, and it is this reconnection that can nourish us; an honouring of the rhythms of women's experiences of menstruation, conception, pregnancy, miscarriage, postnatal recovery, lactation and (peri) menopause as female siddhis. Rather than regarding these experiences to be peripheral or incidental (or indeed, as many find them to be, inimical) to yoga practice, my particular personal and professional perspective has enabled me to put these initiatory experiences at the very centre of an evolving yoga practice: womb yoga, which nourishes every aspect of our lives as women, whether we have a womb, or not, whether we menstruate, or not.

Womb yoga offers feminine practices that help us to dance in tune with our cycles, and support women in developing the courage to practise self-kindness and self-acceptance. They also help to foster the states of mind and heart that enable us to make the most of the opportunities for self-evaluation, feminine intuition, connection, creativity and nurture.

The Female siddhis

The fantastical stories of yogis' mystical abilities in the classical yoga texts give us a powerful new way to understand the deep relation between yoga and the rhythms of human lives, in particular the often intense cyclical experiences of female bodies.

These magical powers are called siddhis – supernatural abilities that come to dedicated yogis either as side effects, or as the intended goal of their yoga practice. Siddhi is a Sanskrit noun that can be translated as 'attainment' or

'accomplishment', in the sense of successfully perfecting a skill or power.

I identify the eight female siddhis as those apparently purely biological functions of the human body that are exclusively female. I say 'apparently purely biological', because a crucial feature of all these functions is that they are hormonally driven, and thus powerfully under the influence of a woman's emotional life, her familial, cultural and social milieu, her environment, nutrition, general health, occupation and the nature of her spiritual awareness. This means that conscious experience of the eight female siddhis can be suppressed, overlooked, refused or otherwise altered for many reasons and by many factors.

In the order in which they are encountered in a woman's life, these eight female siddhis are:

1. onset of menstruation at menarche
2. monthly lunar rhythm of menstrual cycles
3. female orgasm
4. pregnancy
5. miscarriage
6. labour and birth
7. lactation
8. menopause

Because four or five of these eight female siddhis are experienced by nearly all females, the numbers of women who can encounter these potential siddhis is huge. The female siddhis are naturally arising physical experiences; it is important to notice the difference between experiencing their physiological aspects as bodily functions, and recognizing these experiences as potential siddhis. It is conscious recognition that transforms the physical experience into a siddhi. What is crucial here is the level of awareness required to perceive that the hormonal, emotional and physical experiences of the female siddhis have the capacity to be experienced as spiritual initiations into power.

To honour the female siddhis as the powerful sources of initiation and wisdom that they have the potential to be, requires a willingness to bring them into the light of conscious awareness. It is through the experiences we have gained by the practice of yoga that women can now bring consciousness to the female siddhis in our own lives. For example, the practice of pregnancy yoga encourages conscious awareness of birth as an initiatory encounter with cosmic power, and the practice of womb yoga encourages reverent honour and respect for the experiences of perimenopause and for the subtle shifts in consciousness through the menstrual cycle – especially the capacity for visionary insight in the time preceding and surrounding menstruation itself.

Yoga Nidra

Yoga nidra has a crucial part to play in women's health. Literally, Yoga Nidra means 'yoga sleep' and it is an astonishing, accessible and totally effortless yoga practice that anyone can do, by ourselves, in a class, in a one-to-one yoga/therapy session, or by using audio recordings. This deep process of total relaxation doesn't require any physical movement, just the capacity to rest still and to listen. Because it promotes our body's natural tendency towards homeostasis, it enables those systems of the body which are often out of synch or disturbed to move towards optimum balance and cyclical functioning. The combination of deep physical rest, revitalization and the settling of emotions and thoughts can result in improved productivity, heightened intelligence, enhanced creativity and an openness to guidance, wisdom and insight. So yoga Nidra is effective in the relief of insomnia, anxiety, depression, panic attacks and other stress-related problems, as well as the management of chronic and acute pain, the treatment of infertility, to relieve menstrual cramps and pre-menstrual tension, and as a tool for self-enquiry.

The easiest way to access the practice is to download Total Yoga Nidra practices from the Yoga Nidra Network. It can be especially nourishing to choose practices with a focus on menstruality and reconnection to earth's nourishment, for example; these free yoga nidras are created to connect with the deep feminine knowing of cyclical wisdom in the form of the seasonal life of the womb's cycles.

All you need to do is to lie down comfortably and listen!

Conscious Menstruality

The first step towards freedom from the limitations of patriarchal cultural expectations, and towards a full encounter with the powerful siddhi of conscious menstruation, is to develop respect and honouring for the rhythms of our cycles. There are as many

different routes to encountering consciousness of menstrual cycles as there are women in the world. Charting and journaling, ritual observance of the bleed, keeping track of the cycle in calendars and diaries, using phone apps and text reminders and wall charts, can all help to grow an inner understanding of the particular rhythms of one's cycle. All these means serve to honour the cycles of womb-life, and to create a state of self-awareness that fosters a deep sense of self-respect. This self-respect is the foundation for growing confidence in one's capacity to live in freedom.

Seasonal awareness

One of the simplest and most effective ways to grow one's own sense of cycle awareness is to become attentive to the unfolding of the inner seasons of the menstrual cycle with the same spirit of observance and delight that we may bring to the turning of the cycles of the year. Alexandra Pope describes this as the 'inner yoga of women'. Her guidance for encouraging this form of awareness is to sense the quality of feeling during the pre-ovulatory time as an inner Spring, to recognise ovulation as an inner Summer, to see that the pre-menstruum corresponds to Autumn, and to understand menstruation itself as an inner Winter.

At the level of living in freedom with one's cycle, awareness of the importance of inner balance provides opportunities for self care. Cycle awareness empowers each woman to attend to her own needs and enjoy her own unique powers at every point in the cycle.

This can be a liberating discovery: it enables us to acknowledge the particular experiences, challenges and gifts at each point in the cycle, thus helping us to recognise pattern and rhythm instead of despairing at what appears to be chaos and unpredictability. Getting in tune with the inner rhythms of our own cycles helps us to create a powerfully nurturing sense of nourishment and rightness in the unfolding of each monthly cycle and also to see clearly how these cycles are foundational to our experiences of the interlinked energies of sexuality and creativity.

At times when the regular patterns of the menstrual cycle gives way to other rhythms, for example during pregnancy or lactation or during peri-menopause, then our capacity to adapt and adjust to different patterns and cycles is enhanced by having developed an intimate and easy familiarity with our 'usual' pattern of menstrual rhythms. Overall, cycle awareness makes it possible for us to see that the remedy for any imbalance lies within and not without, and to realise that the source of inner harmony and optimal balance rests with the capacity of our own conscious awareness to respond to the needs of our own cycles. »

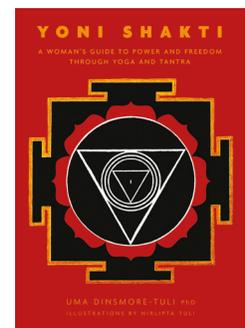
Find out more...

* Yoga Nidra Network:
yoganidranetwork.org/downloads
* yoganidranetwork.org/mp3/yonishakti-cyclical-wisdom
* yoganidranetwork.org/mp3/abundant-life-pregnancy-and-fertility-yoga-nidra
* yoganidranetwork.org/mp3/rhythmically-attuned-dance-moon

* There are links to images of the Womb Honouring practice here: yonishakti.co/resources/video

* *Yoni Shakti: A woman's guide to power and freedom through yoga and tantra* by Uma Dinsmore-Tulli (£25) has more details of these and many other beautiful practices, along with suggested yogic responses and remedies to women's health issues.

* yonishakti.co





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WOMB HONOURING YOGA PRACTICES

So, if you are looking to ensure that your yoga practice is attuned to your cycle, a regular practice of the womb greetings and honourings below are of especial value in establishing the free flow of loving and respectful energy to the womb. Also, this way menstrual difficulties can be eradicated at source rather than treating symptoms like menstrual cramps and pre-menstrual tension.

1 The Heart-Womb practice optimises the energetic flow of loving connection between the heart and womb, and this is one of the fundamentals for supporting fertility. It is a simple practice, and can be done lying down or seated, or even integrated into a standing flow.

When this link between the heart and womb is strong, love flows freely down into the source, vital energy is nourished and we re-connect to our intuitive wisdom and optimal fertility:

Sit comfortably, bring hands to heart in prayer position
 EXHALE, move hands down in yoni mudra (downward pointing triangle with the index fingers touching and the thumb tips touching)
 INHALE, return hands to heart
 Repeat, synchronizing breath and movement with awareness

2 The Seed-Flower Flow is a deeply nourishing and calming practice that optimises fertility and menstrual health and here's how to do it:

EXHALE as you settle yourself so that your knees are bent, feet flat on the floor under your knees. Let your inner knees and ankles be touching. Have your hands on your belly in yoni mudra as for the previous practice
 INHALE reach both arms up, hands extending towards the ceiling and then back above your head, coming to rest on the floor above your head. At the same time as the arms move up, allow for the knees to drop wide out to the sides so that the soles of the feet turn towards each other to touch
 EXHALE and reverse the opening movement: bring the hands back over the body to return to yoni mudra, and squeeze the legs closed so that the knees and ankles are touching again. Continue to repeat the opening movement with each inhalation, and the closing movement with each exhalation ●

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