

Pregnancy

a time to discover how less can be so much more

Prenatal yoga teacher and childbirth educator, Nina Isabella, provides tips on incorporating yogic breathing techniques into pregnancy.



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For the past five years, I have been experiencing the great blessing of teaching yoga for pregnancy. When new students start with me, they consistently ask about “that breathing for labour”. Seems like a reasonable request. When I started to think about what would serve my students best, it became clear that there are so many ways to move the breath through our bodies. It can be tricky to know just which one to offer a student who is already 35 weeks pregnant!

So I thought back to my experience of pregnancy. I had an established practice when I was pregnant with my son 10 years ago. Nothing prepared me for just how intense an emotional experience it was to go through the transition from independent woman to mother! Now that I teach yoga for pregnancy, I find that many of my students – whether they are established practitioners or entirely new to yoga – are experiencing this same emotional intensity. It is these extreme states of emotion that I call the amplifier effect of pregnancy. Events, thoughts, and feelings experienced before pregnancy that brought on a mere ripple of response, can take on extraordinary proportions when pregnant.

I’ve found many traditional yogic breathing techniques bring pregnant women too much into their heads and away from the place that really need support – the heart. With prenatal yoga, the challenge is to teach techniques that will take our students a long way in a

short amount of time. To be embraced, these techniques need to be immediately relevant and have the possibility of being taken into childbirth.

Students can come to us with very little or no experience in yoga, and stay for a journey that will last anywhere between three and 30 weeks. So I’ve found it is all about teaching practices that emphasise that less truly is more, and that we can derive extraordinary benefits that expend little energy when we focus on the subtleties of practice.

This principle, that less is more, applies to both new students and to students with an established practice. It is embracing this principle that often presents as one of the greatest challenges to experienced students, and in this, pregnancy offers us a great gift. The gift is to see a whole new way of practising, one that is compassion in action; learning to lovingly acknowledge our changing needs, while we continue to put our children’s welfare before our own.

In this article, I’d like to share with pregnant women and yoga teachers one of the most beautiful and effective breathing practices I know – breathing into the sacrum. It is a breathing technique, integrated with a supported forward bend, which will:

- bring you deeply into your body, to effortlessly connect with the innate rhythms of your pregnancy
- nourish your heart, sacral, and base centres

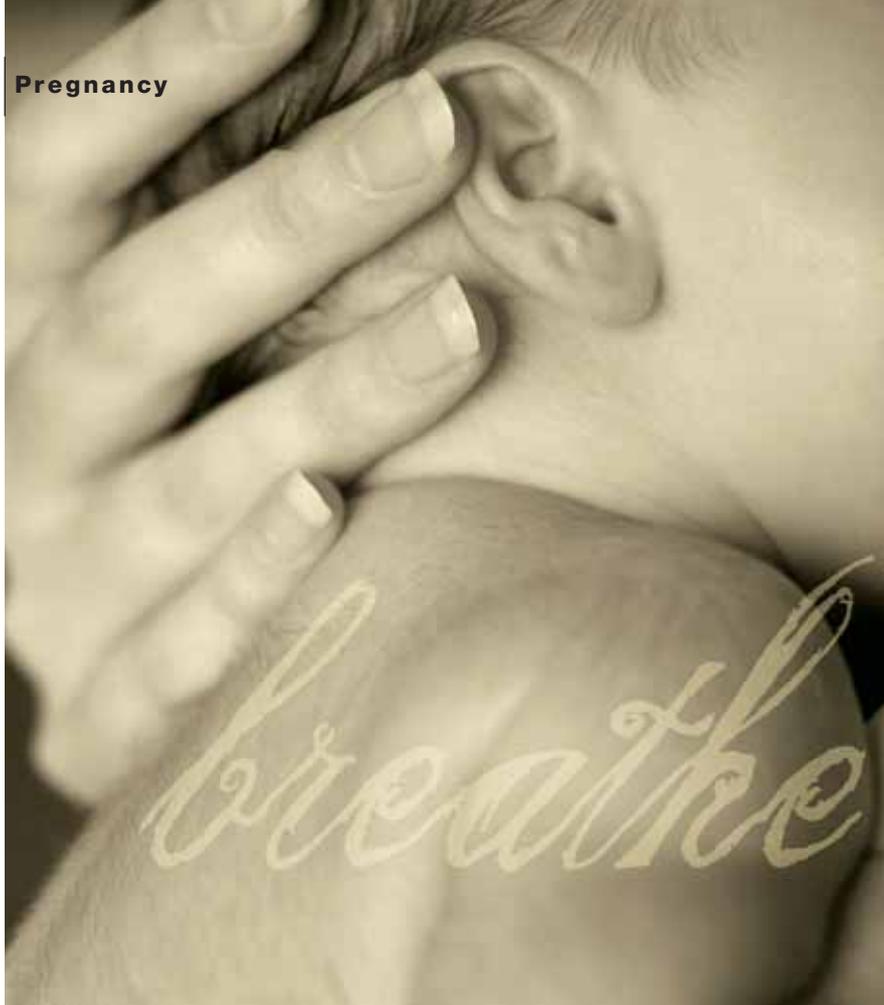
- trigger states of deep relaxation
- give you a taste of the altered state you may find yourself in when immersed in active labour
- relieve the intensity of lower back pain experienced during pregnancy and labour (especially as most of this originates from the sacroiliac joints)
- sustain pelvic stability
- encourage optimal fetal positioning
- help you to graciously soften your belly and create a spacious environment for your baby’s growth.

Learning a new way to move with the breath

As our babies grow, we often feel we’re running out of breathing space. Our uterus grows upwards, constricting lung capacity, and it gets easier to fall into the habit of short, rapid, shallow breathing into the upper chest. This shallow breath can bring on rapid heart beat, triggering states of anxiety – a common experience in pregnancy.

Directing your breath downwards to your sacrum will bring oxygen in contact with the deepest lobes of your lungs. Practicing habitually will help you to expand your lung capacity, by moving your breath consciously and subtly, rather than by trying to make space with exaggerated deep breathing, a reflex we often resort to when we feel short of breath.

Breathing into the sacrum can be applied to any position. Once you get



accustomed to this breathing technique, I encourage you to make it part of your everyday experience. It can be used symptomatically, to calm down your response to an intense experience. It can be used in any social setting, as it requires nothing more than softly directing your focus to your sacrum. The more time you spend connecting with this practice, the better able you will be to draw upon it when you really need to.

Optimal fetal positioning – don't leave this till the last minute!

Optimal fetal position (OFP) is a term coined by New Zealand's midwife Jean Sutton and childbirth educator Pauline Scott. The optimal fetal position for childbirth – the occiput anterior position – is when the narrowest part of your baby's head, which is the rear of your baby's crown, (occiput) is in contact with the top of your cervix and the heaviest part of your baby's body (back and shoulders) are leaning into your belly. Another simple description: babies-in-utero are natural yogis; your baby will happily spend the last weeks of pregnancy upside down and looking at your back!

Aspects of modern living such as car travel, sitting in office chairs, leaning

back into sofas, and tightening the muscles supporting the uterus, are no friends of OFP. To encourage OFP, we need to apply conscious effort from the middle of pregnancy onwards. Babies, just like adults, can become set in their ways. A baby that is used to not having enough space will settle higher in the abdomen, and take longer to encourage down into the pelvic cavity.

Optimal fetal positioning is created when we are guided to:

- breathe intuitively
- move rhythmically and with freedom from constriction
- cultivate spaciousness and softness through the pelvis
- learn how to release the grip on our belly muscles
- work with gravity by leaning forward as often as possible.

Without doubt, one of the best ways you can become familiar with these techniques, and learn to integrate them into your daily routine, is by attending yoga classes led by an experienced teacher. Practising regularly in the class setting and at home will give you the best chance of lining your baby up for birth.

Nourishing the heart, sacral, and base energy centres

By breathing into the sacrum, we are sending healing prana (life force energy) to the heart, sacral, and base chakras. It is easy to appreciate the intense emotions that are stirred up by pregnancy, when we consider the influence of our babies growing and resting their weight deeply into these lower chakras. The earth element of Muladhara chakra (base energy centre) rises up to disturb the watery element of Svadhisthana chakra (sacral energy centre), to bring on wild oscillations between feelings of great exhilaration and murky unease.

As we breathe into the lowest lobes of our lungs, we oxygenate our blood supply. This, in turn, nourishes the kidneys and adrenal glands and releases endorphins, creating a natural tranquilising effect. When endorphins are moving freely through our bodies, they dampen down the amplifier effect, softening our reaction to the intense emotional, physical, and energetic experiences of pregnancy. This tranquilising effect is felt through Anahata chakra, our heart centre, easing our fears around pregnancy, childbirth, and motherhood; helping us to face these unknowable experiences with grace and courage.

Riding the intensity of childbirth

Much of the intensity of labour is felt in the steady opening of the cervix and pelvis, as our babies make their journey through the birth canal and into our arms. Taking this breathing technique with you into labour will help you to ride through, rather than react to, this experience.

Yogic techniques, such as breathing into the sacrum, relax the central nervous system and calm your mind by facilitating the release of endorphins, your body's natural pain relief hormone. Endorphins, in turn, create a favourable environment for the release of oxytocin, the hormone of love and comfort. By sustaining levels of oxytocin, the progress of your labour will be supported.

The presence of fear and anxiety will bring down endorphin levels. When endorphin levels drop during labour, it makes way for adrenalin, kicking in our

most primitive survival mechanism – the fight or flight response. This inevitably leads to stalling the progress of labour. Returning your awareness to breathing into your sacrum and receiving lots of loving reassurance can turn this around pretty quickly. It is for this reason that I encourage my students to attend yoga for pregnancy classes with their partners. It's in these classes that couples learn techniques to support one another and sustain a loving connection in the face of the intensity of labour.

I encourage you to practise this breathing technique regularly throughout your pregnancy, especially in the presence of your birthing partners. By so doing, you will become so very familiar with this breathing technique that you will be able to draw upon it intuitively when you really need to – to help bring your baby into the world!

Now for the practice – the supported forward bend

- Sit with legs crossed, placing a chair within arm's reach.
- Place folded blankets or cushions

under each thigh to support the full weight of your legs.

- Sit upright, shifting the flesh away from your sitting bones. Roll your shoulders and feel yourself tall and comfortable.
- Bring the chair in front of you close to your crossed legs.
- Place your hands on the seat of the chair; take a big breath in, elongating your

Gift yourself often with moments of cultivated stillness.

spine. Sustain this length as you hinge forward from your hips, slowly breathing out – this is a very shallow forward bend.

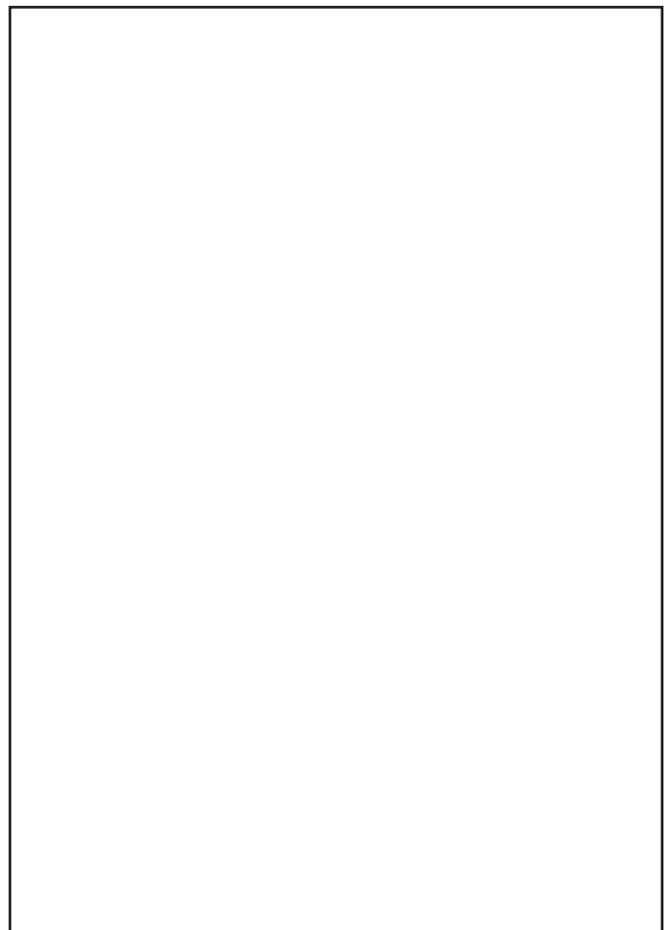
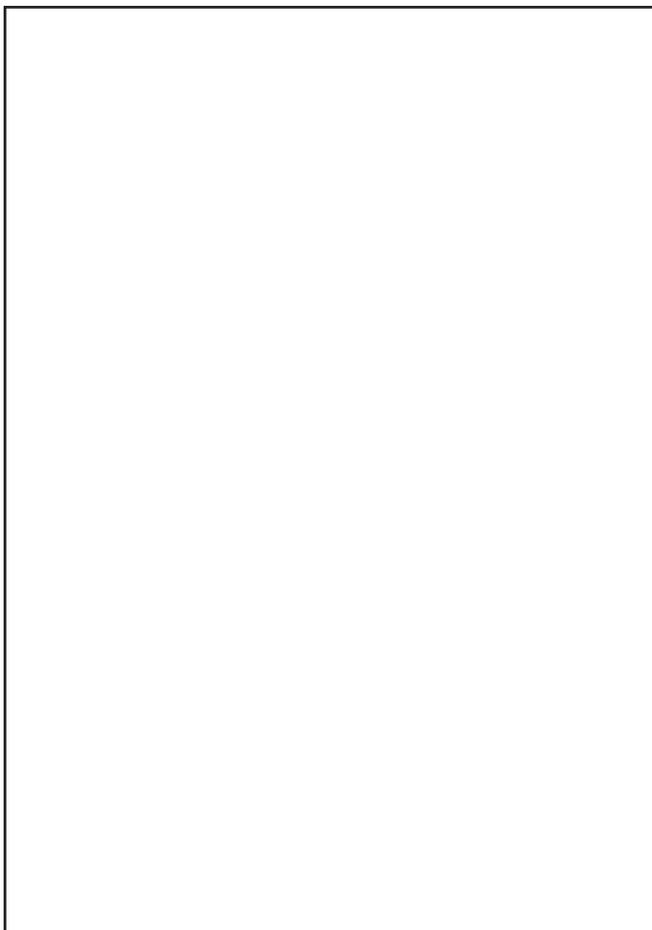
- Place your upper arms on the chair, lace your fingers to make a pad out of your thumbs, and rest your forehead.
- Take the first few moments to settle in, making any adjustments you need, to be able to rest here comfortably for the next few minutes.

Fine tuning:

- With your eyes closed, tune in to the steady rhythm of your breath.
- Inhale through your nose. Each time you breath out, sigh your breath away, allowing yourself to become a little softer and a little heavier with each exhalation.
- Move your breath into the lowest part of the back of your ribs. To do this,

you will find you need to take in a little less oxygen than you're used to; your shoulders will hardly move.

- Progressively release the weight of your head, neck, jaw, shoulders, chest, upper, and middle spine; soften your belly muscles.
- Now bring your awareness to the muscles over your sacrum (the butterfly shaped bones between the



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back of your hips). It may help you to tune in by having a friend gently rest their hand over this area.

- Each time you breathe in, gently draw your breath down to your sacrum; each time you breathe out, feel the muscles over your sacrum gently release, creating a soft undulating sensation. This is quite a subtle feeling and may take a little while to sense.
- As you continue to feel your breath moving through your sacrum, your tailbone will steadily soften down towards the floor.
- Practise for three-five minutes.
- To release, place your hands on the seat of the chair, straighten your arms, and slowly draw your torso upright. Take a few breaths with your eyes closed; give yourself time to observe the influence of the practice.

Life after pregnancy?

It can take a while for our energy levels to stabilise after pregnancy. High personal expectations, sleep deprivation, plus everyday pressures of modern motherhood can take us from feeling tired to sliding down the slippery slope of adrenal depletion with little or no warning. It is with this in mind that we need to continue to embrace the philosophy that less is more.

If you had an established yoga practice before pregnancy, you may find yourself frustrated in your attempts to return to your known and loved practice. Whether or not you are experienced in yoga, the first couple of years of motherhood will test your resources. Taking time to work with practices such as breathing into the sacrum will help you to sustain your sense of equanimity.

Give yourself time to cultivate an understanding that yoga needs to

become an integrated part of your life. This understanding will help you to detach from the idea that it is only by devoting an entire hour and a half to practice that you are able to gain benefit. This is not to say that you shouldn't get to a restorative class as often as possible!

Gift yourself often with moments of cultivated stillness. Immerse yourself in the truth of compassion and loving acceptance. When you are able to do this, to lovingly support yourself, you will find within you the resources to graciously make your journey through pregnancy into motherhood.

Blessings for your journey.

Nina Isabella is the devoted mum of her fine young son and the founder of Mamashanti, mother peace yoga. Nina is a prenatal yoga teacher, childbirth educator, birth attendant, and passionate advocate for reclaiming women's trust in their innate wisdom to birth and raise their children consciously. She can be contacted on 0432 078 899. www.mamashanti.com.au