
**Sarah:** You have been teaching prenatal yoga and training prenatal yoga teachers for close to 30 years, and you describe it as one of the most important things you do. Can you discuss why it is so important to you?
Gurmukh: I think yoga and meditation is probably the strongest offering that anyone can give to pregnant women. To actively move your body, to breathe, to close your eyes, to meditate, to go inside where your baby is—out of that you come to know your own truth. You start hearing your inner voice of how you want to have your pregnancy, your birth. It doesn’t come just with intellectual knowledge, it has to come experientially, and the best way is through breath. To ease tension, fears, anxiety—to get clarity, to get strong—it all comes through breath, and the best way I’ve found breath is through yoga and meditation.

In every prenatal yoga class we have something called the “three-minute keep-up” exercises. We hold our arms out, fully extended in opposite directions, and make small circles or move them up and down slightly for three minutes. This can be very challenging; however, it is never harmful or injurious to the body. The pregnant woman experiences the way to move beyond the pain and discomfort. She can learn to zone into the non-thinking part of her, the sensational part of her, through her breath.

If you’ve ever had an animal that has broken a limb, they don’t carry on like a human being. They go inside to a deeper, richer, more instinctual, primordial place; they don’t have the intelligence to say, “This is pain, I’ve got to get out of it.” It’s a whole different way they handle it, and that’s a place we can go into. A woman can move into an altered state of consciousness—but it takes practice. People will say, “I have a low threshold for pain,” kind of like it’s a disease that they couldn’t help having—like it flew in from outer space. It’s really a choice. But if a woman isn’t conscious, she doesn’t know she has a choice. Same as believing “it’s genetic—it’s all in my family.” Do you believe that? Well, if you believe it, it will manifest.

Sarah: You often say, “As a woman lives, so shall she birth,” but you also make it clear that you don’t mean that if she lives in loving kindness with compassion and goodness, that she’ll have an easy birth and/or a healthy baby; you explain that you are talking about consciousness, not outcome. Can you talk about this a bit?

Gurmukh: To become conscious is the best thing you can do as a parent. And if, after studying and becoming conscious during those nine months, you end up with a c-section, and you do it consciously, there’s such a victory there. It’s not a greater victory to say—“Oh, I had a baby in two and a half hours, it just came out, da-da-da.”—So what? Feather in your hat? If your baby is happy and your baby is healthy, that’s the blessing. Sometimes mothers learn for the first time
in their lives to sacrifice. Sacrifice means taking yourself out of the middle of the circle. It’s the beginning of your commitment to something beyond just you. And, hopefully, we are coming into more of an awareness that we get that which we need to learn.

Sarah: You often talk about the importance of women taking good childbirth classes. Can you discuss why?

Gurmukh: Most of us Western women need a childbirth education class. We have lost the benefits of communal living, where your mother was next door, and your grandmother, your sisters and aunts were down the street. Everybody helped you birth, helped you nurse, helped you care for your new baby. Now so many people don’t even live in the same town, the same state, or the same side of the world as their mothers, and many of their mothers did not birth naturally or breastfeed, anyway. When I teach and talk to women about natural birth, nursing for longer periods of time, the family bed, all of a sudden I actually can hear a bell ring and see lights going on. When you teach and inspire a woman, she comes back to her true remembrance. It’s a recapturing of that which a woman already knows. She just has to be reminded.

In my experience, one thing you don’t want to do is take your childbirth education at a hospital. You don’t go to a Ford dealer if want to know all about Chevys; they won’t tell you about a Chevrolet, because they want you to buy the Ford. In the same way, a hospital childbirth class is not going to encourage you to explore having your baby at home or in a birthing center, and they don’t educate you about many of your other options.

Often I teach classes for after the baby is born and many of the women have no idea what to do. They’ve planned all these nine months to try to get through the birth without very much pain. “Now what?” It’s very simple. What does your baby need the most? Your arms, your face and your breasts. That’s all they need. That’s all they care about. Everything else, you think you need. When I had my daughter, thank God, we hardly had any money. It makes it so easy. Then you don’t have the choice of a layette and all this fancy stuff. You just change your baby on the bed. What do they need for clothing? Diapers, maybe a little T-shirt, a blanket. They certainly don’t need booties. Not one kid likes booties and they’ll kick them off the best they can. Arms, breasts, face. You know what they do for the first year, what they look at the most? The mother’s face, and that’s how they size up if their world is a good place to live. Their outlook on life is your face. And what happens is this: If the mother’s tired, stressed, anxious, afraid, then that’s what they see the world to be.
Sarah: What do you recommend women do to best prepare for becoming a new mother?

Gurmukh: How can a mother feel and look beautiful to her child and not be worried, stressed and tired? She needs to take care of herself, honorably take care of herself through good food, through enough rest, and with a plan. It’s 24/7, what you do with these children, especially at the onset, and if you don’t know that, you’re not going to be prepared. So many women have no plan. When are you going to rest? And do you know that your milk will dry up if you’re tired? I can remember the temptation that, when my daughter would take a nap, I was going to get up and do the laundry, clean, talk on the phone and do all this other stuff.

When she’s nursing, more than at any time in her life, a woman needs rest and good, nourishing, warm, prepared food. Now, how do we plan on this? Well, instead of getting the pram and the fancy this and that from people, get money. This way you can hire a postpartum doula who will come into your home, do light cleaning, do your laundry, fix you wonderful food. Not a nanny—a nanny takes the baby down the hall so you can get your rest and gives her a bottle. You want to be within nine feet of your baby for 40 days after the baby is born, and you need to be taken care of so you can concentrate on mothering your baby. When I have workshops with the men, I say, “This is not a luxury; this is a priority. This is mandatory.”

Sarah: The overall theme throughout the Happy Healthy Child childbirth series is the importance of women learning to tap into and trust their intuition. You often share a great tip for new mothers on finding the time to meditate and connect with their inner voice.

Gurmukh: After the baby is born, mothers will say, “I never have time to meditate.” Mothers have more time than any other woman on the planet. “When?” When you’re nursing. Close your eyes, listen to your breath, listen to mantra, look into your baby’s eyes. The mother’s milk is going to be so sweet for her baby. If every mother meditated during nursing, there would be no child with colic. Quiet your mind; listen to yourself, learn to trust what you are saying on the inside. Nothing is more important for parenting—nothing.

So many of us, through the great intellectualism of the West, have stepped away from the realm of intuition, so we don’t trust how we feel; we don’t trust the sensations in our body.
Every decade there’s a different parenting trend— for instance, the recommendation to let your babies “cry it out.” A mother shouldn’t let her baby just cry themselves to sleep for the mother’s convenience. Children are not designed to sleep through the night. Their little bellies need to be nourished. And if the mother says, “Well, they’re not even hungry, they nursed an hour ago,” they’re hungry for your love. Their tummy may hurt or they may have a headache or they don’t feel good. You don’t really know; they can’t tell you. Just carry them with you. They just want to feel you. They miss being in the womb. Otherwise, if you ignore their cries, emotionally they will shut down.

Children are a lot of work. They’re not just cute little dogs and cats. You’re taking on a destiny that you don’t know. And it’s a lot of work. The rewards are beyond the beyond, but you’ve got them from the time they’re in your womb, on and on and on. It’s big, and I always say it’s the funniest occupation because the most important occupation on planet earth is to be a parent, yet it’s the one for which we are often least qualified. No degree, no certificate, no license, no stamp of approval. Through anyone, anywhere, anyhow, a soul comes in.

These children who are coming through now are brighter, more intelligent, more lighted up, more creative, more fearless than we ever imagined human beings could be, and the world needs children who are light and healthy and vibrant and with a great intelligence. And I’m not talking about an IQ; I’m talking about an intelligence where they stay connected to the illuminations of their soul, so they know what they have come to do in this lifetime.