

Antenatal Yoga

By S. Ramaswami

The approach to Yoga these days may be classified into three. Firstly, Yoga is treated as a vaidic philosophy based on the sutras of Patanjali. It deals with all aspects of Samadhi, its prerequisites, its ramification, culminating in the realization of distinctive natures of prakriti and indwelling consciousness, purusha. This leads to Kaivalya or Moksha, according to yoga philosophy.

YOGA AS AN ART

Yoga, secondly is treated as an art. Yoga is a complete physical culture (Sarvanga Sadhana). Many asanas, their variations along with coordinated breathing make it an art, and it is considered one of the 64 kalas or vidyas. This physical culture itself is fascinating to many.

Then again, thirdly, yoga is thought of as a therapy for many ailments, as curative and especially as preventive. Naturally the approach (chikitsa krama) will be distinctly different from that of a student of yoga who approaches it as an art, or a philosophy. Many texts talk about the benefits of certain asanas, pranayamas, Mudras, bandhas, etc. According to Ayurveda, those diseases that are chronic and that cannot be cured or completely eradicated by medicine alone can be and should be attempted to be cured with yogasanas and pranayamas.

Following this procedure, certain texts talk about yoga practice being different depending upon one's age. They would divide people according to their stage of life and suggest a different

approach. Those methods are called Srishti, Sthithi and Laya. Asanas to be done during the age of growth (Srishti), those that are to be done during middle age when there is neither growth nor decay and thirdly those that are to be done during the decaying period, called the Laya krama.

YOGA FOR WOMEN

It is established that women have been practising yoga in the olden days. In fact there are specific yogic practices for women. Sage Nathamuni considers the special conditions of women and has prescribed yoga treatment for them—during pregnancy for the proper development of the foetus (garbha vridhi) or specifically ante natal exercises; then asanas that specifically tone up the "delivery apparatus", and

help normal delivery and thirdly those that are useful in family planning (Mitha santhana) and for contraception (garbha nirodha). But then readers may wonder whether these have been medically tested. It has to be mentioned that one should have practised these asanas from early childhood—prior to puberty, or else many asanas are not possible to do at all at the time necessary—unlike taking a pill or undergoing instant surgery. All of them however, are logical and those interested could take them up from young age to see the efficacy of the system.

In this article, those yogic practices that are prescribed for a healthy development of the foetus are taken up. Sage Nathamuni gives his prescription in the following sloka.

Poorvathana Divipath
 Badhakona Padma
 Chatushtayam.
 Sirsha, Sarvanga,
 pavanayamaihi, garbho.
 vivardhate.

It means that foetal development is helped by

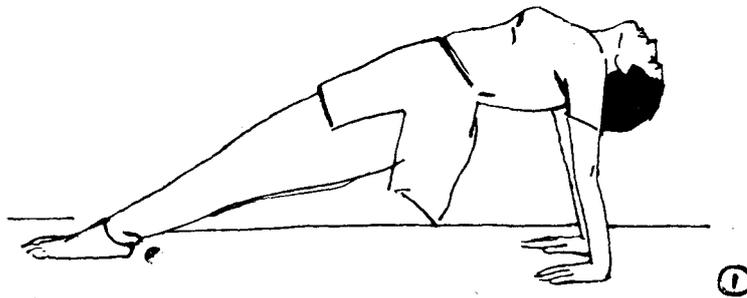
- a) purvathanasana of Anterior stretching posture,
- b) Dwipathapeetam or desk post,
- c) Badhakonasana

d) Padmasana or lotus pose Further Sarvangasana and Sirshasana (Head stand) are also suggested. This would be the daily routine which will facilitate proper foetal development. Briefly the asanas, are described.

1) Poorvatana or Anterior stretching posture. This has been explained earlier (Indian Review June 1978), as a counterpose for Paschimatanasana. Briefly it is to sit erect with feet together and stretched forward. This is called Dandasana or stick pose. Then inhale, raise both arms overhead, stretch and

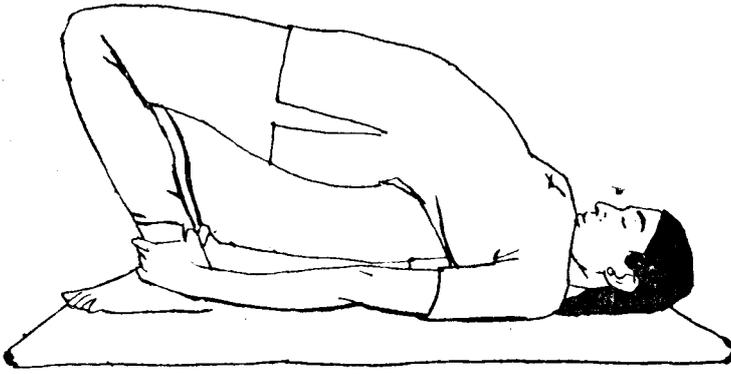
for about 3 to 6 breaths. It is a very good stretching movement involving the anterior portions of ankles, shin, knees, thighs and especially pelvis, abdomen, neck, shoulders and arms. The chest is opened up. It helps to tone up the breasts and improves vascularity and could help later in proper lactation. A milder variation of it is chatuspadapeetam (Indian Review June 1978) which could also be attempted.

2) Dwipadapeetam or Desk Pose. Lie down on your back on a soft carpet. Support the



interlock fingers. Next step is to exhale and keep the palms on the ground about one foot behind the back. Then keeping the back straight, press the palms, exhale and raise the trunk, dropping the head back, the chest and pelvis pushed up. This is Purvatanasana (Sketch 1). Inhale return to starting position. Do about 6 times, or stay in the posture

neck and head with a small soft pillow. Exhale bending the legs at the knees, drawing and placing the feet close to the buttocks. Do a few modulated breaths with chin lock or Jalandhara-bandha. If possible hold the ankles with the hands, if not keep the palms pressed on the floor. Inhale press the back of the head, neck and also the feet, raising



(2)

the trunk slowly as high as you can, arching and stretching the spine. Stay for a few seconds, pushing the hip (and stretching the low back in the process). Exhale, slowly lowering the body. Repeat 3 to 6 times. This is Dwipada Peetam or desk pose. (Sketch 2) The trunk raising may be done on exhalation, if one is tending to be obese during pregn-

ancy. It is comparatively easy but a very effective asana. It is especially useful in relieving low back pain so common among pregnant women.

THE STICK POSE

3) Badhakonasanam: This asana should be practised by women daily. From Dandasana, exhale, bend and push

one knee outward so that the thigh is at about 90°. Keep the heel pressing against the perineum. On the next exhalation, bend the other knee also, so that both the feet are together and the heels pressing against the perineum. Keep the palms on the toes. Stay for a few minutes, doing normal inhalation and exhalation. This is Badhakonasanam. (sketch 3)

It could be observed that unless one has been practising this asana from childhood, the hips would have become too rigid to do this asana properly. This is the one asana which stretches the pelvic muscles, and the perineum well so that the normal development of the foetus is facilitated by the elastic pelvic muscles. Further it also helps in toning up the muscles so that they help to bear down at the time of delivery. It is one of the few asanas recommended for practice even during menstruation.

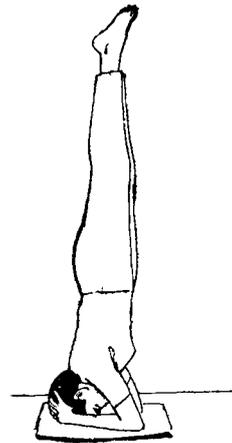


(3)

4) Padmasanam: The fourth posture that Nathamuni suggests is lotus pose or Padmasana. It is one of the well-known asanas and holds the pride of place among sitting postures. Sit in Dandasana, exhale deeply bend right leg, draw the right foot close to the body with hands and place it on top of the left thigh, in line with the groin. On the next exhala-



one feels extremely secure on the firm base, the lower back enjoys a freedom and comfort unknown even in a most cosy couch or sofa. The body is erect. Naturally the mind will be relaxed and alert, unperturbed by postural distractions. This is recommended for both Pranayama (Sketch 4) and some relaxation procedure like Shanmkhi Mudra (Sketch 5).



tion, in a similar fashion, bend the left knee and place the left foot on top of the right thigh. Now you have a very firm base to sit and lower back is relieved of the strain of the outward curve normally found in squatting. Now keep the palms on the knees, lock the chin and do normal breathing, with the mind following the breath. This is Padmasana. In this,

TWO OTHER ASANAS

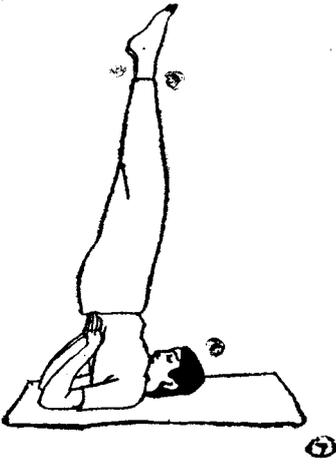
Apart from these four, Nathamuni recommends two other inverted postures, sirsasana (Sketch 6) and Sarvangasana. (Sketch 7) The technique of doing Sarvangasana and Sirasana has been explained in earlier Indian Review issues in

detail (April 1978 and December 1977)

According to yogic theory, diseases are caused by displacement of vital internal organs and muscles and the yogic practice is resorted to for normalisation. This is sought to be accomplished by Sirshasana and Sarvangasana. There are many benefits attributed to the practice of these asanas. It has a tonic effect on the ovaries and pelvis by removal of congestion. Sirsasana has a sedative effect. Pregnant women tend to get circulatory problem in their lower extremities during pregnancy. It helps to restore circulation Sarvangasana has the advantage of working on the thyroid and helps to tone it up. A sluggish thyroid affects the foetus.



Even here, Nathamuni cautions that the inverted



postures should be performed only upto the sixth month of pregnancy.

PRANAYAMA

Apart from the asanas, pranayama to be done is Nadi Sodhana. (Sketch 4)

The kumbhaka or retention of breath should be very limited, The food should be Satvic and nourishing.

Shan massa kaala paryantam
Sirshasaivanga sadhanam

Sudhirga Rechaka Pura-
kaischa

Mitha kumbhaka yoshi
thaihi.

Praanayamaihi Sradhubak
shaihi

Samyak Garbho virvar
dhate.

It would be clear that one cannot start to learn yoga after pregnancy. One should have been practising regularly and the above are selected by Nathamuni as

antenatal yoga exercises. One should avoid all forward bending movements. And while practising pranayama, it should not be preceded by kapaala Bhaati or Bhastrika. Then Moola and Uddiyana Bandhas also should be avoided. The selection of yogic vyayama for a pregnant woman is quite effective.

SAVASANA

As for relaxation Savaasana and Shanmukhi Mudra (Sketch 5) can be practised after Pranayama. Apart from the asanas explained, there are certain others which if practiced from the early ante natal period will facilitate normal delivery and these will be taken up in the next issue.



