

THE  TIMES

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Saturday September 27 2008 • "The essence of pleasure is spontaneity" Germaine Greer, b1939

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INSIDE



There's no place like Om

From Downward Dogs to Upward Butts, part two of comedian Ronni Ancona's post-baby regimen

I have always wanted to be a proper yoga bunny. Not just doing the exercises in a pair of flared pastel sweat pants on a little blue roll-up mat, but living the whole lifestyle. You know, some calm creature totally at ease in her own body and mind; sitting, lotus position, with a neat dark ponytail, in a minimalist room. No, not minimalist. Empty, save for the billowing of white muslin curtains and the flickerings of a dozen harmoniously scented candles.

Instead of the chaos that inhabits my head, my thought processes would be as smooth and co-ordinated as the taupe cashmere and crisp white linen that would neatly fill my cupboards. Everything would be achievable — and achieved. And, within the aura of my Zen world, I'd be able to do extraordinarily flexible things with my limbs and have the urge to drink only green tea (yeah, right).

Fantasy apart, I am aware that yoga in itself, and by itself, is "a good thing". And I have been told that it would be incredibly beneficial for me more times than I have ever thought of impersonating Amy Winehouse (ie, a lot).

My experiences of yoga, however, haven't always been positive. In fact, I have often found them rather intimidating. Even when I tried a "beginners' class", it seemed to be full of women who, clearly not beginners, were sneering at each other's Downward Dogs and eyeing up each other's Upward Butts.

The only time I have done yoga consistently and happily was when I was pregnant and took some highly enjoyable and helpful classes given by Tara Lee, the guru of pregnancy yoga. Some yoga teachers are good at making pregnant women feel inadequate if they end up needing a Caesarean or even simply having an epidural. They seem to believe that we should be able to use only breath control to "conquer the mountain of pain" during contractions. Tara is a little more realistic.

And so am I. Surely it seems churlish to re-

JAMES CLARKE



Sitting pretty, Tara Lee, left, and Ronni

ject pain relief. I mean, think of all those poor little scientists who have toiled away in dark, dank basements for years developing increasingly effective methods of analgesia. (Incidentally, some yoga teachers like to refer to contractions as "surges" as the word has fewer negative connotations. In fact, it sounds downright pleasant. Oh, if only I had just suffered seven hours of "surges" during labour.)

Pregnancy yoga can sometimes feel ineffectual. However, Tara (who calls a contraction a contraction) always gave all of us beached whales a damn good workout without putting anyone at risk. As she rightly points out, pregnancy yoga isn't just a gimmick, it's about fitness and strength. And if ever there was a time to be fit and strong, says Tara, it is when approaching

childbirth. There's no point in being at the peak of fitness if you're just going to sit on the sofa and watch.

Tara even looks like a yoga teacher should (like a beautiful, hippy Pocahontas), which is good: you need something to aspire to when you look like a hump-backed bridge on legs. More importantly, she has a great sense of humour, which is not always apparent in the muslin-curtains world of serious yoga.

So, I turned to Tara again after the birth of my daughter to inject some flexibility into my horribly stiff limbs and get some tone and strength back into the squidgy rice pudding that is impersonating my body.

Tara teaches me some poses that are an amalgamation of the different types of yoga,

including hatha, ashtanga and Iyengar. Just pronouncing the names makes the muscles around my mouth firmer. I'm on my way. The poses combine moves that promote strength with more restorative, gentler stretches. Tara graciously doesn't sneer when my Cobra looks more like Sad Worm, Dead in the Grass, or when my Warrior III looks more like, well, Sad Worm, Dead in the Grass. And she doesn't laugh when a series of moves, in my case, resulted not so much in a Sun Salutation but more of a Moaning Insult (note to self: get some better-fitting tracksuit bottoms).

At least there were no men around to gape at my slowly emerging rear. That's one of the cunning things about the names of the yoga exercises. For some reason they are so unerringly feminine that it seems to put men off and sends them scuttling to the less florid, less spiritual world of Pilates.

And all the different types of yoga can confuse anyone; it's like getting to grips with politics in the Baltic states. Or knowing the "spiciness" of curries. But I'm happy to say, I've now learnt that hatha is really more of an umbrella term for all yoga types. Sivananda is a gentler form of yoga (the korma, if you will), Iyengar is about alignment and precision, ashtanga is fast, dynamic and for sadomasochists (or vindaloo lovers) and bikram ("hot") yoga is like taking a shower with your clothes on. Got that? Just call me Yogi Ronni.

Best and most entertaining of all are Tara's excellent "mother and baby classes", in which the mothers use their newborns as weights. Well, why not? They'll be using us as weights for the next 18 years.

For information and details of classes, visit www.taraleeyoga.com. A Pregnancy Health Yoga with Tara Lee DVD (£19.90) is available from Blossom (020-7589 7500; www.blossommotherandchild.com)

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