



Yoga for Women's Monthly Cycles

By Linda Shevloff

In her text *Yoga: A Gem for Women*, first published in 1983, Geeta Iyengar addressed the milestones in a women's life from the onset of menses during puberty through pregnancy and motherhood, then menopause and onward. Geeta and her father B.K.S. Iyengar were the first yoga masters of the twentieth century to strongly address the need for women to nurture and honour their bodies by adjusting the way they practice yoga during the different cycles in life.

At about the time Geeta's book was published, many women in the West, in varying degrees, had recently gone through the women's liberation movement, where women had asserted their rights to be treated as equal to men. There was some confusion though about what being equals meant, but certainly many women did not want to be seen as being a weaker sex. Women wanted to show that they could do anything a man could do. Sometimes an obvious fact was ignored: Being equal did not mean being the same, for men and women do have different bodies with different physiological functions.

When I first went to study yoga at the Ramamani Iyengar Memorial Yoga Institute in India in 1987, I can remember Geeta and her father being furious with the western women in attendance who were trying to do the demanding poses in the Yoga Intensive Course while they were menstruating. Although we were given clear directions to go to the side of the room and do a special series of poses there, women frequently tried to avoid letting anyone know they were having a period so that they could experience everything in the Intensive. Somehow, the Iyengars could tell when this was going on. We were lectured on our pride and ignorance and on how little we understood about ourselves.

Over the years since then Geeta has become an expert in women's needs and has really re-educated Western women about how to practice and maintain good health. She has taught extensively on this subject around the world. It is now understood and accepted by Iyengar yoga students that we must acknowledge our current state of being when we practice and then practice accordingly. For a woman, this means doing a menstrual series when required, doing special poses for pregnancy, using yoga to alleviate uncomfortable symptoms during menopause, and so on. Mr. Iyengar has developed ways for people in almost every state of being to do yoga. If one is ill or injured then the practice must be altered to bring one back into health and balance. Yoga is about this balance.

In a more recent communiqué to teachers about menstruation, Geeta advised once again that during menstruation, from the first day to the last day, a woman should only do asanas that keep her healthy and which do not create an obstruction to the menstrual flow. She should select poses that do not cause her to run out of energy or create hormonal



imbalance. For some women, standing poses, particularly supported ones, are helpful, but for others they are to be avoided. Some supine poses with the support of blankets and bolsters can relax the muscles and the nerves, reduce cramps and lessen mental irritation. Forward bends, especially if done with support, can check over-bleeding and soothe the abdomen. Seated poses can calm the brain.

There are quite a number of poses that are beneficial during menstruation, especially if done with correct support. Certain poses are definitely to be avoided. Full inversions, arm balancings, most backbends, and any poses that involve abdominal contractions are included here. In regard to inversions, Geeta explains that the menstrual flow will stop or be arrested if one does inversions. This is not good for health as it may lead to fibroids, cysts, endometriosis and cancer. According to Ayurvedic medicine, any waste products of the body that are meant to be excreted, will invite disease if they are retained.

For optimum health, a woman should practice yoga regularly and adjust her practice as the cycles of her life require. In *Yoga: A Gem for Women*, Geeta explains that “the practice of yoga brings not only physical health but also mental health. It teaches how to conquer obstacles so that one can live peacefully and in perfect happiness to achieve the goal of life – Self-realisation.

Take time to learn poses from the menstrual series. Remember to tell your teacher before your yoga class begins that you are on your monthly period so that poses can be adjusted for your needs. Use poses from the menstrual series in your home practice so that they will be most beneficial for you. Yoga can offer us a lot of help in life, but it only works if we take responsibility for ourselves and use what we have been given.