

Breathing for Two: Luce Irigaray and the practice of pregnancy yoga

The mother gives her breath and lets the other go; she gives the other life and autonomy. From the beginning, she passes on physical and metaphysical existence to the other.

(Luce Irigaray Between East & West)

French Feminist philosopher, Luce Irigaray, explains that during pregnancy women have the unique opportunity to breathe for another. When pregnant, we give and sustain life within ourselves. Pregnancy is the only time in which we may cultivate our breath for another and our breath gives the gift of life to our unborn child. A pregnancy and birth inspired by conscious breathing holds the promise of an articulation of our subjectivity as woman. The cultivation of our breathing during pregnancy and the use of breath during birth provides us with the possibility of being born to our own life in the act of giving birth to another. Conscious pregnancy and birth enables us to discover our autonomy as women in the face of the pathologising of our pregnant body. Birthing consciously brings us to the threshold of our being and plunges us into the depths of the unknown, with only our breath and being to guide us. The practice of pregnancy yoga is a powerful tool for women to connect with pregnancy and birth as a transformative experience. To use Luce Irigaray's words, the cultivation of breathing during pregnancy and birth might be a 'personal renaissance' of sorts. Irigaray writes, *To breathe by myself allows me to move away from a socio cultural placenta. Thus I can begin to be born, to no longer live from the breath of anyone ... To be born to my life ... to not need to break in order to discover or rediscover what is, what is beautiful, what is true (Irigaray, 2002: 5).*

My belief that the practice of pregnancy yoga can be a transformative one (with the right teacher) is based not only on

the work of Luce Irigaray, but upon my own experience of the practice of yoga during pregnancy and stories from women who practiced pregnancy yoga in my classes. My suggestion that pregnancy yoga could be a transformative practice might be met with a great deal of healthy scepticism. Women's bodies are commonly medicated, measured, anesthetized, cut and deemed incompetent during pregnancy and birth. Pregnancy and birth have become pathologies in modern society, a sickness which requires the constant attention of an obstetrician who uses his/her tools of monitoring and measuring and weighing to deem how well a pregnant woman and her unborn child is 'progressing'. In such a culture of objectification and sublimation of the mother's role and wisdom regarding her body and the development and health of her unborn child it seems unlikely that women may have the sort of experience I am referring to. The possibility that we might connect deeply with ourselves and undergone a radical, spiritual transformation is not generally associated with prenatal yoga! However it became evident to me through my own pregnancy and birth and through sharing the journey of pregnancy with my students that it is indeed possible... Personally, during the birth of my son, Jamie, my mind and body extended beyond the boundaries I generally exist within. My breath guided my baby out, and while I was too tired to feel it at the time, the final breath which brought my son into the world was one which was the culmination of a somewhat difficult to understand process in which I became 'ME'. Something had shifted, my breath had guided me to a place in which I realised my true nature, different, strong, life giving. My partner commented on how our closeness as a couple changed at that point. No longer could we believe in the illusion of togetherness, completing accepting this transformation and valuing my becoming as a woman, and now a mother, we negotiated a new way to experience a togetherness informed by our difference. Essentially I realised, if we can give birth in a conscious way, where we make the

decisions for our own bodies we can discover ourselves as women, powerful and strong. When I gave birth in the quiet space of aloneness, with just my partner present, a dark room and a midwife I became myself. This experience, I soon after realised is rare. In days past women gave birth with other women - midwives and doulas - who guided them through this intense and transitional rite of passage to motherhood. Now pregnancy is a fearful experience for many women. The possibility of discovering their inner strength and power is difficult in the context in which they birth. However pregnancy yoga, informed by a philosophy of active birth can begin to provide an alternate perspective on pregnancy and birth. Rather than pregnancy and birth being a sickness, through the practice of pre natal yoga with a suitably qualified instructor women can truly discover themselves from a place of awareness rather than fear. This in turn, allows women to face the joys and difficulties of motherhood, with equanimity **and fearlessness.**

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