

Special Delivery

By Samantha Dunn

More and more mothers-to-be are turning to Gurmukh Kaur Khalsa's gentle asana practice to prepare emotionally and physically for labor.

Ann Gentry walks through the newest branch of her Los Angeles-based restaurant Real Food Daily, as she's done for the six years since she founded the business. Except on this spring day the nine-months-pregnant Gentry has a little trouble maneuvering between the tables, her belly heavy, hips curved. The fact that she now appears like some pagan fertility goddess belies the years of pain and challenges she faced to get this way.

"I struggled to get pregnant," says the 43-year-old Gentry. "I had two pregnancies prior to this one. The first, six summers ago, was unintended and ended in miscarriage, but nonetheless, left me feeling that pregnancy was something I could do any time I desired." Then there was surgery for endometriosis, a painful inflammation of the uterus lining, followed by an ectopic pregnancy.

Yet amidst this she managed to birth two restaurants. From a macrobiotic catering venture she ran out of her own kitchen, she grew the business into Los Angeles's premier gourmet vegan eatery. But success came with a price tag, she says. "To do these restaurants took everything I had. I have always been a strong person, but after getting the business to the point where it could walk and talk on its own, I was whipped. I didn't have much left."

With the restaurants up and running and the past difficulties behind them, Gentry and her husband, Rob Jacobs, once again turned their attention to trying for a family. "Then, of course, it became a challenge," she says, remembering trips to fertility specialists.

Gentry also turned inward for answers; therapy helped to knock down mental roadblocks. A yoga practitioner for more than 20 years, she began Pilates work to rediscover "how to use my body intelligently. I felt in yoga I had fallen into the ego trap of showing off."

And then it happened: The proverbial rabbit died. "The success of this pregnancy came through deep emotional work I did to uncover all my anxieties and beliefs as to why I couldn't be a mother. Unconsciously I bought into fears my mother had, to things my family had taught me, to what society was saying: 'You're in your 40s, forget it, give it up.'"



Although in the first trimester Gentry didn't do any exercise—"I was walking on pins and needles," she recalls—by the fourth month she wanted to get into a routine. A Sikh friend suggested a prenatal yoga course taught by Kundalini Yoga instructor Gurmukh Kaur Khalsa, but others weren't so sure about it. "I heard from hard-core yogis who said, 'Oh, you won't like Gurmukh's class. It's not strenuous enough for you.' So I went to a couple of other prenatal classes, but they just did not do it for me. There was no community, no connection."

But when she kicked her shoes off and walked into Gurmukh's class, crowded with pregnant women laughing and sharing stories, that's exactly what Gentry found. Here was a room full of women who echoed what she had worked so hard to do: "Conscious parenting. It starts long before the baby is born," says Gentry.

Prenatal Mental Preparation

Women do exercise in Gurmukh's prenatal yoga classes, but if all you want to do is sweat, you'll miss the point entirely. "Women think, 'If I just get in shape, labor will be easier, or I'll feel more in control.' But those abs of steel are a false sense of security. It's not about getting in shape," says 57-year-old Khalsa, who has been a Kundalini Yoga teacher for almost 30 years and has a 16-year-old daughter. She points to her turbaned head. "It's about getting this in shape. Once a woman owns her life, she owns her birth."

That's ultimately the purpose of the Khalsa Way, the birthing preparation system for which prenatal yoga seekers come to Gurmukh's studio, Golden Bridge. Classes given by Gurmukh's childbirth preparation coteacher, Davi Kaur Khalsa, an R.N. and certified childbirth educator, teach couples about the physical realities of labor, what to expect, what biological functions occur, and what nutritional support the body needs. But more than just offering birth classes, the Khalsa Way extols emotional and spiritual work as being integral to childbirth, and beyond.

"Preparing for your birth is about preparing for your life as a mother," says Davi. Ideally, according to the Khalsa Way (which is based on the Kundalini Yoga teachings Yogi Bhanjan brought to the United States from India in 1969), the preparation should begin long before conception.

You might think you're just having a baby, but to the Khalsa Way you have the chance to do nothing short of save the world. Literally. "All we need are a few more saints. A Jesus. One Buddha will do!" says Gurmukh, smiling. "Take His Holiness the Dalai Lama, for instance. Look at what the contribution of just one little man can do."

Ideals aside, Gurmukh and Davi know most of us aren't so saintly, and they don't expect anybody to be. In fact, the majority of the women attending Gurmukh's prenatal yoga classes have never done yoga before. She tells them just to begin where they are. "Your babies will be grateful for anything you do for them through this. You can change the destiny of your child in the world just by the way you breathe, just by the way you move," she says. The Khalsa Way teaches that babies adopt the breathing patterns of their mothers while in the womb and continue it for life, so mothers who learn yogic breathing are, by extension, giving that gift to their children.

Yoga is the cornerstone of the Khalsa Way. "Basically, it takes you out of thinking into feeling, from the mental mind into the meditative mind," says Gurmukh. "You have to look at birth this way: For thousands of years nobody read books on birthing; they just watched their mothers, their sisters. They attended birthings. They didn't know when they were due—they just counted the moons. All they knew was how



they felt. Kundalini Yoga can take us out of our heads and back into our bodies to feel. It's a much different approach than intellectually approaching birth and having to transfer thought down to the pelvis."

They also believe that every month a woman is pregnant she actually relives, on an emotional level, her own unconscious emotional experience in her mother's womb. The grounding practice of yoga, they say, can provide a framework for dealing with the turbulent emotions of pregnancy.

The Pain & Glory of Labor

"Mothers first need to explore how their minds relate to challenge. Do they run away? Cry? Get angry? Because labor magnifies that," says Davi. And that's where meditation comes in. Meditation as taught by the Khalsa Way focuses the attention at the third eye point, which relates to the pituitary gland and has a direct connection to the function of the uterus. "You focus there and then allow the body to do what it knows how to do," says Davi. "In other words, you get out of your own way and let the body do what it has known how to do for thousands of years."

The ability to focus through the pain of labor is the goal of meditation—not to obliterate the pain, but to be fully aware during the birthing experience. "Either you're a prisoner of your mind and your fears, or you're the ruler of your mind. That is the glory and the victory of labor," says Gurmukh. Adds Davi, "You get into a place in your meditative mind where you can find the spaces between pain. Think of yourself out on a diving board. It's the space between the diving board and the water in the moment you jump."

But more than that, "Meditation opens up your connection with the soul that is coming through you," Gurmukh believes. "We don't have a window or a zipper to see our babies inside of us. Since we can't see them, yoga gives us the chance to connect with them on another level. As a result you and your baby do the work together. Your birth is a partnership."

Asanas to open the hips and strengthen the back are certainly a part of the Khalsa Way prenatal yoga system, but the real lesson of every class returns to the issue of mental strength. Holding a certain position might be uncomfortable, but by releasing the tension in your body and focusing toward the Infinite some inner strength is gained that is not otherwise measurable.

"Birth is physically challenging, of course," says Davi. "But you have to be like a marathon runner, calling on physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual strength. A lot of [pregnant] women come to yoga thinking, 'I'm going to swim and pump weights and walk, etc.' What they end up doing is constricting their bodies. But a relaxed body is a strong body." Relaxing into the pose thus becomes the perfect metaphor for childbirth.

The issue is not about being comfortable during labor. The Khalsa Way says that's impossible—labor wasn't meant to be comfortable. It's an issue of where you focus—learning to not be distracted by everything going on around you in order to focus on the inner process. "There is no magic position to get through labor. The magic is in the woman's mind and how she focuses," says Davi, who recommends walking in addition to yoga as the ideal exercise combination during pregnancy.



“I’ll tell you a little story,” Gurmukh says with a smile. “Once we were sitting around swapping birth experiences, and somebody asked me about my home birth at the age of 41. It was beautiful. They asked me, ‘But did you make any noise while you were giving birth?’ and I said, ‘No, I was quiet.’ Well, my husband happened to be there, and he looked at me like I was nuts and said, ‘Gurmukh, you screamed your brains out.’ To this day I can’t even remember, I was so inside myself. Whatever was going on out there, including my own voice, was just not part of the reality of the moment.”

Gentry, meanwhile, says as the day of her labor nears, this is exactly what she’s concerned with. “I realize the next few weeks are about melting and softening, allowing the cervix to soften,” says Gentry. “Keeping it all together is easy for me. I’m a tough girl. I’m courageous. But now it’s the letting go that I have to do. I have some real anxiety about that. Can I do that? I realize what is going to get me there is being able to be by myself and really go inward, inward, inward.”

What to Expect

The prenatal classes at Golden Bridge might be the largest congregation of pregnant women in Los Angeles. Mats and pillows seem to line every inch of the big V-shaped studio, giving no hint of the hardwood floors underneath. Gurmukh sits on a stage covered with sheepskin, flowers, and candles, reading birth announcements and notes from “graduates” as if at a family gathering. Women of all shapes, sizes, and colors sit in Sukhasana (Easy Pose) and hold their hands in gyan mudra, thumb and index fingers touching, often leaning to whisper and laugh with a neighbor. Before any actual yoga is done, each will introduce herself to the group and give news of her pregnancy in a round-robin exchange. One woman shares with the group her sadness that after having planned for a home birth, she might have to have a C-section. She can’t get her baby to turn, and her midwife won’t deliver breech.

“Everybody talks about how they want to attain a home birth, but an aware birth is really the only goal,” Gurmukh tells her, but it is a lesson for the class. “Children are born at the exact time and location and to the parents to whom they are destined. We’re born into this life to grow spiritually, and we only grow by experiences. Some children may need to be airlifted.”

On this note the class begins. Each woman has her hands in anjali mudra (prayer position or namaste) as they chant the mantra Ong Na Mo Guru Dev Na Mo, meaning “I bow to the creative wisdom inside myself.” A series of stretching, breathing, and warm-up poses for the spine and the opening of the pelvic area follow. The class then moves into a deceptively simple exercise, holding their arms out and moving their hands around their wrists for three minutes. It becomes difficult very quickly. Just like a contraction, everybody gets through it. The class rests for a moment. Gurmukh asks everyone to pick a partner, holding each other wrist-to-wrist, supporting each other through a series of half-squats. Then, the music begins. “Okay everybody, time for the soul train,” Gurmukh says, clapping and jumping down from the stage. The women form two lines, coming in twos down the middle dancing and clapping, and mostly, laughing. The experience of all these large-bellied women dancing, the candlelight, and the aroma of incense feels slightly pagan, definitely primal. No one seems to notice that they have gently elevated their heart rates. Finally, each finds her place among the mats and returns to Easy Pose for a series of pranayama exercises and relaxation.

During the final meditation Gurmukh asks everyone to wrap their arms around their bellies. They chant sat nam, which means “truth is my identity,” 11 times. Then each lays upon her mat, relaxing and closing her eyes as the sound of Gurmukh striking the gong washes over them. At the end of class the women are quick to share their testimonials of the impact yoga has had on them. “I first came to class at three months, and it changed my life,” says Dana Williams, just weeks from delivering.”



“The people here have been a blessing. And my whole vision of who I am as a mother blossomed,” adds Dawn Law, who says she was the first among her friends to become pregnant and felt a little adrift. “The yoga has created some much-needed space in my body.”

Missing from class today is Gentry, for good reason: She “graduated” June 14. After 28 hours of labor, without the aid of anesthesia but with moaning and groaning, daughter Halle arrived. Says Gentry: “This is an experience that shaped our souls and will be with us forever.”

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