MOVING WITH THE WOMB
Keys to a feminine yoga practice

BY ANA DAVIS
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At menarche a young woman enters her power
Throughout her menstruating years she practises her power
At menopause she becomes her power

~ Native American Saying
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What is Feminine Yoga?

A feminine approach to yoga honours our unique physical, mental and emotional needs as women. It acknowledges that women’s bodies are cyclical and that this needs to be reflected in a yoga practice that is fluid, changing and non-linear.

Unlike men we experience so many more hormonal fluctuations every month and throughout our life cycle. Even though the majority of yoga practitioners are women, this idea of Feminine Yoga is still new and there are many women who adopt an approach to their yoga practice that is very ‘yang’ and increases the stress placed on their feminine bodies.

A feminine yoga practice is about working with not against our bodies, as we discover that yoga can support us in achieving optimum health and vitality.

Moving with your womb: a feminine yoga practice for life

A more feminine approach to yoga can support a woman throughout her monthly cycles, enhancing her appreciation and enjoyment of the various shades of her menstrual month—spanning, what I describe as the four phases of our cycle.

Moving with your womb also helps you navigate the unique transitions of a feminine life—pre-conception, pregnancy, motherhood, and menopause. It’s a yoga practice for life; yoga can become your constant companion to lift your energy, health and spirits no matter where you are in your feminine life journey.

A moving with the womb approach gifts you with an understanding that every time you step onto your yoga mat your practice may be different and offers the tools to sensitively respond with a healing, nurturing yoga practice.

What does Feminine Yoga look and feel like?

When we’re in our flow, all we have to do is walk across a room to be mesmerising.
We feel confident in ourselves because we’re connected to the earth and in harmony with her rhythms, cycles, and moods.

~ Gabrielle Roth

Much of the yoga practised these days is angular, directional, and linear, reflecting the masculine principle. Women naturally love to move their bodies in fluid, sensuous ways, reflecting their physical curves and their cyclical nature. This means that a Feminine Yoga practice may look, and most definitely will feel, different from the traditional masculine approach.

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1 Gabrielle Roth, Sweat Your Prayers, p. 51
I like to incorporate a lot of spinal rolls, hip circles (what I call ‘womb circles’), swaying, and flowing. These are all accompanied with sighing, releasing, and sometimes sounded, exhalations. The feel and intention is softness, surrender; conscious, luscious, and joyful savouring of the physical sensations of moving and releasing the body, and of totally inhabiting your feminine body.

The spirit of a feminine practice is one of play and spontaneity. I like my body to guide me. Where am I feeling tight and restricted? Where can I let go and soften more? When do I need to rest sweetly and nourish my nervous system? Balancing this are questions like: When do I feel like moving and flowing in a dynamic, stimulating way? Where do I crave more internal stability and support? Where do I want to feel strong and powerful?

Physical strength that I cultivate in my practice also comes from a deep place of internal listening. I never want to impose upon my body, or my psyche, a structure or challenge from the outside. Everything is from the inside out.

Women’s ages and stages

THE MENSTRUAL CYCLE: GOING WITH THE FLOW

On average we experience 500 periods over our life. That’s a lot of cycles to ignore! That’s why it makes so much more sense to tune into your menstrual cycle and craft a yoga practice that honours and supports your fluctuating physical, mental and emotional symptoms.

The kind of yoga you need to practise when you menstruate is very different from when you ovulate. In fact, in my Moving with the Moon approach, I advocate that there are four energetic-phases in your monthly cycle, and each of these phases—that also correspond with a lunar phase— affects how much energy you have, how creative you are, and how emotional you are.

Here’s a summary.²

The Dark Moon (menstrual) phase

This phase correlates with your menses. When there is no moon, or a ‘dark moon’, your natural inclination is to stay indoors. In the same way, the energy of menstruation encourages you to retreat inwards.

As your uterus works hard to shed its menstrual blood, there is usually a natural dip in your energy. This is the most sensitive time in your cycle—your immune system is at its lowest point and you actually need more sleep at this time of the month! It represents the dormant, ‘winter’ phase of your cycle.

² Note that this is an overview of the four phases of the menstrual cycle and my moving with the moon approach to yoga for your menstrual cycle. If your interest is piqued, you can delve deep in my book Moving with the Moon: Yoga, Movement and Meditation for Every Phase of your Menstrual Cycle and Beyond. See: www.movingwiththemoon.com to order.
Miranda Gray, author of *The Optimized Woman*, calls the time that you menstruate the ‘reflective phase’.\(^3\) It’s when you can reflect on the events and feelings of the past month, and let go of anything that no longer serves you. It not only involves a physical cleansing of the body as the endometrial (uterine) lining is released, but also an emotional cleansing. To do this you need to take some time and space for yourself, as much as possible, and separate from your duties as mother, wife, girlfriend, worker; and nourish your energy with deep, inner reflective practices.

### A Dark Moon yoga practice

This is your time to ‘lush it up’ with gentle, Restorative Yoga that encompasses only those postures that are safe and appropriate for menstruation.\(^4\)

During this phase you are more receptive to deep states of relaxation and meditation than any other time, so this can be harnessed with a quiet, interior practice that will include time to breathe and just ‘be’. Create a sacred space for yourself—light some candles, play some soothing music, and turn off the mobile phone!

### The Waxing Moon (pre-ovulation) phase

Miranda Gray calls this the ‘dynamic phase’;\(^5\) it’s the phase that occurs from post-menstruation until just before you ovulate—what is typically called the follicular or proliferative phase in the medical model.

In the same way that your energy is building, your uterine lining is proliferating, and your hormone levels are escalating. This phase equates seasonally to spring, or to the waxing phase of the moon.

After the heaviness and often lower energy of your menstrual period, you emerge like a butterfly from its chrysalis, with renewed vigour. The more challenging hormonal symptoms that accompany the Waxing and Dark Moon phases of your cycle no longer encumber you. This is when you exhibit the most ‘yang’, or ‘masculine’ qualities of your cycle. You are driven and full of energy. Your focus is outward, and if you harness this energy, it’s when you are most productive and outcome-oriented.

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3 Miranda Gray in *The Optimized Woman: Using your menstrual cycle to achieve success and fulfillment*, writes: ‘The Reflective phase is probably the most profound catalytic tool we have for changing actions and goals and our relationship to ourselves, and also for deepening our level of connection, experience and understanding of the universe and our place in it. To actively use this tool we need to slow down. We need to accept that we can’t match the pace of the world for a few days and make room for the Reflective phase abilities’, p. 59

4 For detailed information on safe and appropriate postures and practices for menstruation (including illustrations and instructions and sequences) see my book *Moving with the Moon: Yoga, Movement and Meditation for Every Phase of your Menstrual Cycle and Beyond*. See: www.movingwiththemoon.com

5 Gray writes in *The Optimized Woman*: ‘The joy of the Dynamic phase is the feeling it brings of self-confidence, independence and the increased physical energy and mental clarity which empowers us to take action. This is the time to take steps and start those groundbreaking, life-changing exploits,’ p. 78
A Waxing Moon yoga practice

In the first few days after bleeding has completed, you’ll need to ease back into your regular yoga practice to allow time for your uterus to recover and your energy to rejuvenate.

After that, you can go for it! This is your time to shine in your yoga practice! Tackle those more challenging and dynamic postures during this phase of your cycle. However, don’t forget to also take time to ground and balance your energy so that you don’t overstimulate the nervous system and burn out.

The Full Moon (ovulation) phase

Around the time that you ovulate and are potentially fertile every month, you can usually notice a subtle shift into this phase, which is like the summer of your cycle.

When the moon is full, your natural inclination is to be outside and revel in its light and beauty. It is the same for the Full Moon phase. This is the time when your energy is extroverted, reflecting this full moon energy. Just like the Waxing Moon phase, you continue to feel energetic and outward focused. However, rather than the achievement-oriented, ego-driven energy that gets things done, you move into more of the nurturing, mother energy.

Miranda Gray calls this the ‘expressive phase’ because it’s when you become more relationship-focused and you naturally reconnect with those who are close to you—most particularly your lover. Now you sparkle in your femininity and you are generally at the peak of your sexual appetite and openness towards others, which reflects the womb’s biological imperative to receive and ‘hold’.

A Full Moon yoga practice

This is when you are at your most feminine and your yoga practice becomes playful and flirtatious with ‘womb dances’ and hip-opening fertility sequences.

You can also embody the loving, open, ‘feeling-energy’ of this phase with heart-opening yoga postures. However, be careful not to get carried away and overstretch during this time; you need to make sure you balance your practice with stabilising postures as the surge and then drop in oestrogen in the body at this time can cause instability in the sacrum and lower back.

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6 Gray describes the ‘Expressive Phase’ as a ‘feeling-oriented phase’ (The Optimised Woman, p. 94) and writes: ‘The Expressive phase abilities and skills develop around the time of ovulation and are usually experienced a few days before and a few days afterwards. Like the Reflective phase, the Expressive phase is the pivot time in our cycle, characterized by a weakening of the driving force of the ego,’ and ‘During the Expressive phase, work colleagues’ and customers’ needs and feelings have a higher priority than our own project. We are also more willing to ‘go with the flow’ and to allow things to develop in their own time.’ (p. 95)
The Waning Moon (premenstrual) phase

In your Waning Moon phase, your physical and emotional energy and fortitude begin to wane. Your focus moves inwards, which reflects the moon moving towards darkness and emptiness.

This phase spans the time after ovulation up until you start to bleed again. Autumnal energy symbolises this time in which our bodies are preparing to retreat. In modern society this is the much-maligned aspect of a woman’s cycle—it’s when women often experience premenstrual symptoms (PMS). Women commiserate with each other about the numerous annoying and sometimes distressing PMS symptoms, ranging from bloating, to headaches, to moodiness.

However, if you can learn to honour and embrace all of the changing faces of your cycle, even this more challenging phase, you may in fact find that your overall experience of this phase becomes much more positive.

Miranda Gray calls this the ‘creative phase’, which has helped me immeasurably in reframing my own experience of this time. I have learnt to value my heightened intuition and creative abilities that become obvious during this phase, and to cut myself some slack in terms of limiting my expectations for tackling left-brain, rational, detail-orientated tasks during this time.

A Waning Moon yoga practice

Very often your temper and your nerves are frayed during the premenstrual phase. This is the time to practice grounding, soothing sequences, enjoy long relaxation (Yoga Nidra) practices, and inversions, inversions, inversions! Inversions not only calm the nervous system, but also help balance the hormonal system, which can be more necessary at this time of the month than any other!

With the arrival of the dark moon (either real or metaphorical) and the shedding of the uterine lining, the cycle begins anew, symbolising your interconnection with the universal rhythms of death and re-birth.

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7 Gray writes of the ‘Creative Phase’: ‘it offers talents and opportunities that I don’t have at any other time, such as flashes of brilliant insight and awareness, and the opportunity to clear out my emotional baggage and find out what really matters to me’, The Optimized Woman, p. 39

8 My book, Moving with the Moon: Yoga, Movement and Meditation for Every Phase of Your Menstrual Cycle and Beyond features different moving with the moon, Yoga Nidra (deep relaxation) practices.
A go-to pose for healthy menstruation

**Baddha Konasana (Bound Angle Pose)**

This is one of the Classical Women’s Postures and helps to relieve congestion in the pelvic area—reducing menstrual pain, balancing irregular periods, and toning the abdominal and pelvic organs.

In this variation, a bolster is placed on its end in front of a wall. Come to sit up against the bolster and open your knees into the groin stretch—soles of the feet together; heels as close to the pelvis as you comfortably can. Support your knees with two yoga blocks or cushions. This allows you to totally relax and soften in the belly and pelvic area. Rest your palms on your lower belly (womb-space) and take some deep breaths down into the belly, feeling the abdomen expand behind your palms as you inhale and softly draw away from the palms as you exhale.

**THE PRE-CONCEPTION PHASE: PREPARING THE SPACE**

Infertility is on the rise. Regardless of whether a woman has difficulty falling pregnant there is now increased awareness about how practices like yoga can support you to be optimally healthy as a prospective mother.

Fertility-focused yoga offers many benefits: it increases energy and blood flow to the reproductive organs optimising their health and function; it supports hormonal balance; it reduces your stress levels (hormones), which can play a part in boosting fertility; and it helps you prepare physically, mentally and emotionally for pregnancy, birth and motherhood.

Fertility-focused yoga is all about softening and preparing your womb-space (literally your uterus, but also your sacred feminine energy centre) for pregnancy. We can do this not only with appropriate and beneficial yoga postures but also with potent meditation practices. See my ‘Womb-Heart Meditation’ on page 22 for a beautiful meditation script that can be helpful for fertility and preconception.

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9 Our Bliss Baby Yoga Yoga for Fertility Online Teacher Training Courses provide all-important information (and sample practices) on safe and beneficial fertility yoga postures and practices. See: www.anadavis.com
A go-to pose for fertility

The Pigeon Pose

This pose boosts the circulation to the pelvic area, nourishing your reproductive organs—uterus, fallopian tubes and ovaries.

Start from an all-fours position and slide your right knee forward to the front and right side of your mat. Bring your right foot slightly forward so it’s just in front of your frontal left thigh, extend your left leg directly behind you. For the safety and integrity of your knee and sacrum, I recommend you place a folded blanket or cushion underneath the front hip (see illustration) so that the hips are level.

Have your hands in front of you, a little wider than shoulder width and lift up on to your fingertips to open your chest, and most importantly stretch into the deep, pubic belly. Stay here and breathe down into your belly and pelvis for 5-10 breaths. Imagine your breath (prana) is nourishing your left ovary with white, healing light. When you are ready, come back to all-fours and do the pose with the other leg in front.

PREGNANCY: YOGA FOR TWO

There is probably no more critical time in a woman’s life than pregnancy, in terms of the need to adapt her yoga practice. If you’re not already working with a Feminine Yoga practice, now is the time! Once you conceive, you are doing yoga for two, and everything changes. Prenatal yoga is all about offering a woman the holistic tools to prepare herself physically, mentally and emotionally for the challenges of birth and motherhood to come. Plus, prenatal yoga offers a woman a wonderful way to connect with her baby during her pregnancy and to feel good in her pregnant-skin.
A go-to pose for pregnancy

Malasana (Squat Pose)

This pose is one of the Classical Women's Postures. It opens the hips in preparation for birth; increases circulation to the pelvic area (nourishing the reproductive organs); stretches and tones the pelvic floor; and releases tightness and compression in the lower back.

Come to standing with your feet a bit wider than hip width, toes turned out slightly. Slowly bend your legs and lower your buttocks towards the floor. If you find you can't keep your heels down, slide a folded blanket under the heels (see illustration) so that you can keep grounding-down through the heels. Press your palms together into prayer position, your elbows on the inside of your knees. Stay here for 3-5 slow, deep breaths, feeling your tailbone descending to the earth, while lifting your chest.

Note: there are some contraindications for this pose—check with your health care provider and a qualified prenatal yoga teacher before practising this posture when pregnant.

POST PARTUM: NURTURING THE NURTURER

The directive that you receive on an airplane—to put on your own oxygen mask first before helping others, including children—is a good metaphor for motherhood. It's so important that a mother, especially a new mother, fills up her own 'mothering tank' so that she can go on giving to her baby. This is where the gentle, nurturing aspects of a feminine approach to yoga can be so beneficial in rejuvenating a tired mamma.

Yoga can also support a woman emotionally, helping counteract emotional see-saws like 'the baby blues'. Plus, the right kind of safe, postnatal yoga tones and strengthens your post-baby body and helps counteract common postpartum aches and pains.

10 The Bliss Baby Yoga Online Prenatal & Postnatal Yoga Teacher Training Course will give you the full low-down on safe prenatal yoga practice. See: www.anadavis.com
A go-to pose for new mummas

Bridge Pose with Towel Roll

This pose is an example of a postnatal ‘stabilising posture’, helping to strengthen and tone the core muscles including the buttocks, pelvic floor, inner thigh muscles, and hamstrings. It is very therapeutic for the postpartum back, and the chest-opening (‘heart-opening’) effects of this pose offers a wonderful ‘breastfeeding counterpose’, relieving tightness in the upper back, neck and shoulders. The gentle backbending effects can boost a new mumma’s mood and energy levels.

Note: care needs to be taken, or you may even need to avoid this pose if you have any neck injuries.

Come to lie onto your back with your feet hip width apart and parallel, close, but not too close to the buttocks. Place a rolled up bath towel (secured with rubber bands) between the thighs, right up against the pubic bone. Press the palms into the floor next to the hips, drawing the shoulders back and down away from the ears. As you exhale, tilt the pelvis, so the top of the pelvis moves back, tailbone under and lower back presses into the floor, and the navel draws to the spine. Take a breath here and on your next exhale go on rolling the body all the way up into the Bridge Pose, so you’re resting on your shoulders, neck lengthening, chest opening towards the chin. Keep pressing the feet into the floor, lifting through the backs of the thighs, lifting the pubic bone and squeezing the towel roll. Stay here for 5-10 breaths depending on how early postpartum you are. When you are read to come out, roll down through your spine, vertabra by vertabra, tucking your tailbone until you rest your sacrum back down into your mat.

MENOPAUSE: EMBRACING THE CHANGE

Finally, we come to the big ‘M’, menopause. Although most of the action actually occurs in the lead-up to menopause, called perimenopause, which can go on for anywhere between 2-10 years, before our bodies stop ovulating. Rather than be in denial or bemoan this important life-transition, a Feminine Yoga approach helps you embrace your ‘second spring’ - that’s what the Chinese call it!

We learn that the tumult of hot-flushes, tiredness, mood swings, weight gain and menstrual cycle-changes all herald an opportunity for re-birth within our feminine life-cycle, if we only pause to listen to the messages our bodies are sending us, and reframe our attitude towards this sacred passage to wise womanhood.

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11 I have borrowed the idea of using a towel roll from the eminent Ana Forrest. See: www.forrestyoga.com
12 Important postpartum safety note: women need to wait at least 2 months before recommencing yoga after birth, and even then will need to do a graduated, postnatal practice. The Bliss Baby Yoga Online Postnatal Yoga Course offers detailed safety guidelines and the low-down on practising and teaching postnatal yoga (including Mums n Bubs yoga).
Yoga, a woman’s lifelong companion, is there to help you meet this new challenge, keeping your body strong, flexible and lithe; balancing your hormones (and your moods!), and boosting your energy levels.  

A go-to pose for menopause

The Supported Child Pose with Adrenal (Turtle) Breathing

This Restorative Pose is wonderfully rejuvenating - good for counteracting fatigue and exhaustion. It helps encourage the breath into the back of the body, as you receive a massage into the abdominal area of the belly into the bolster. It also relieves lower back pain and opens the hips. The Adrenal (Turtle) Breathing practice helps to nourish the adrenals, which supports your hormonal and nervous system, enhancing your energy levels.

Come to a kneeling position in front of the short end of your yoga bolster. Open your knees about mat-distance apart, keeping your big toes together, heels apart, and then slide the bolster up between your legs. Lay your torso along the bolster as you keep pressing the buttock bones back onto your heels. Rest one cheek on the bolster turning your head to the side. Let the forearms rest into the floor.

Allow your body to soften and relax for the first few breaths here. Perhaps even taking a few Falling-Out Breaths in which you allow the exhalations to fall out of an open, relaxed mouth.

When you are ready, begin to deepen your inhalations and feel the breath filling up into the lower back, kidney area—on either side of the spine, about 3 inches above the top of the sacrum. Imagine your back-body is a big turtle shell, and as you inhale and breathe into your lower back, your turtle shell is lifting up and away from the front of the body, towards the ceiling. As you exhale, your turtle shell gently softens back towards the floor and your front-body. After a few breaths, add the refinement of a very gentle pelvic floor lift on your inhalations as you imagine you are drawing energy up from you perineum into the kidney area, into your ‘turtle shell’. As you exhale, you can relax the pelvic floor muscles.

Feel this turtle breath circulating within and nourishing each of your kidneys and creating more space for your adrenals. Picture your adrenals as two spongy, pyramidal shaped organs that sit atop the kidneys, and as you inhale, the adrenals gently lift off the kidneys creating more space. After a few more of these turtle breaths, concentrate the awareness and the breath into the medulla (the very core or seed of the adrenals) and imagine you are charging each adrenal, right at its very core, with healing and energising energy, life-force or prana. Continue for 3–6 more breaths, and then come out of the posture in your own time.

For more on yoga for menopause see my book Moving with the Moon: Yoga, Movement and Meditation for Every Phase of your Menstrual Cycle and Beyond. See: www.movingwiththemoon.com

This breathing technique is inspired by Taoist Sexology practitioner Willow Brown’s ‘Turtle Breath’. See: www.yinwellness.com
Key principles of a Feminine Yoga practice

_The body has its own way of knowing, a knowing that has little_  
_to do with logic, and much to do with truth, little to do with control, and much to do with acceptance,_  
_little to do with division and analysis and much to do with union._  
_~ Marilyn Sewell_  

Throughout the feminine life phases and stages that we’ve just reviewed there are important yoga principles that underpin a feminine yoga practice.

Once you are able to appreciate and integrate these principles, along with a practical understanding of the changing requirements of your phase or life-stage, you will find that you can be more intuitive in your yoga practice. You will have the tools to sensitively listen and respond to your body-mind’s changing needs, allowing you to creatively craft your very own feminine yoga practice.

**AHIMSA**

_When we refuse to take the time to treat our bodies, emotions, and minds with reverence and love, they will often remind us—not so kindly—by failing to respond when we need them. Our ability to think clearly recedes. We may experience sadness and depression. After a time our lack of ease may allow disease to creep into our life. Then we are obliged to take care of ourselves… It is much more pleasant and fun to do it willingly, before any dis-ease invites itself to your life. Love for yourself is love for all._  
_~ Nischala Joy Devi_  

_Ahimsa_ is a foundational moral precept that appears in the ancient yogic text, _The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali_.

Ahimsa is derived from two words—‘a’, meaning ‘not’, and ‘himsa’, meaning ‘harm’. It therefore means ‘non-harming’, or ‘non-violence’. From an early age we are inculcated with the idea that hurting others is not socially or morally sanctioned; however we don’t necessarily learn about the importance of also being gentle with ourselves.

For women this is perhaps even more true because we are the nurturers of society and are often too busy taking care of others to consider that we also need to take care of ourselves! Sometimes we only realise the importance of self-care when we become sick or injured and receive a ‘wake-up’ call from our body’s intelligence.

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15 Found on: http://www.livinglifefully.com/body.htm  
17 There are many translations of _The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali_ that delineates the ‘8 Limbs of Yoga’. One of my favourites is the interpretation by Nischala Joy Devi, _The Secret Power of Yoga_, because it looks at the sutras with fresh eyes, from a feminine perspective, and serves as a great reference to support a feminine, moving with the moon approach to our yoga practice.
This concept of self-compassion is the overarching principle of feminine yoga, no matter where you are in your monthly cycle or life-stage.

Ideally, once you have truly embodied this idea of self-care and self-love you can proactively implement it in your life so that it becomes a daily habit and not just something you do to try to fix yourself when something goes wrong.

As Liz Koch, somatic educator and author, suggests:

> What we need is more capacity to build our ability to endure pleasure. What is it to feel good? What is it to allow the system to become more intelligent, more resilient? Most of us don’t have that. We have the idea that we only do something to get us out of pain. We don’t do it because it brings us pleasure; because it brings us a sense of calm, a sense of nourishment. We don’t know how to nourish ourselves, through movement as well as through food. So you’re learning to take care of yourself, to continue this exploration of nourishment.\(^\textsuperscript{18}\)

Yogic tools that help you embody *ahimsa* include relaxation and meditation practices, as well as Restorative Yoga.\(^\textsuperscript{19}\) These tools teach women to be gentle with themselves.

The very concept of *moving with the womb* is *ahimsa* in action, because it involves skilfully tuning in to the changing daily needs of your body so that you only practise to an intensity that is appropriate for what is going on for you at that particular point in your monthly cycle or life stage, on all levels—physically, mentally and emotionally. Cultivating your own *moving with the womb* home practice, rather than attending one-size-fits-all group classes is so beneficial. An evolving personalised practice helps you avoid the pitfalls of a gung-ho group class energy, which can tempt you to override your individual needs.

Another way to embody *ahimsa* is to examine how you treat yourself, and others, *off* the yoga mat. *Ahimsa* comprises one of the ten ethical guidelines (five *yamas* and five *niyamas*) for living that are described in the ancient Yoga Sutras attributed to the sage Patanjali. These guidelines were created to inspire people to lead an authentic yogic life that extended way beyond the practice of just the *asanas* (postures). If you are to truly practise *ahimsa*, you need to ask yourself these big questions: Can I deepen my mindfulness around my intentions, thoughts and actions towards others—are they kind, are my words necessary? Can I learn to forgive myself implicitly when I invariably ‘fall down’ and act unkindly or inappropriately towards myself or others?

Ultimately, your yoga *off the mat* practice in which you set the intention to live as mindfully and gently as possible is very similar to your *on the mat* practice. It is a *practice*. And that’s the key thing to remember when you fail. Which you will! Just get back on your mat (either your real yoga mat or your metaphorical one) and begin again. The relentless challenges of motherhood have taught me that one on a very profound level! Forgiveness, letting go of judgement (of self and of others), and an active gratitude-practice, are all ways you can bring more of the nectar of *ahimsa* into your daily life.

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\(^{18}\) This quote is from my transcript from an audio lecture Liz Koch delivered as part of an online course I attended. See Koch’s website for more information on her courses and publications: http://www.coreawareness.com

\(^{19}\) I share a number of beautiful feminine meditation and relaxation practices, and Restorative Yoga postures and sequences in my book *Moving with the Moon: Yoga, Movement and Meditation for Every Phase of Your Menstrual Cycle and Beyond*. See: www.movingwiththemoon.com
WOMB CENTRING

When the womb is ungrounded, we can be scattered, inefficient, moody, and exhausted. It can seem like we never have enough time to get what we want done, and the things we want always seem just out of reach. We can be reactive, unable to step back from people, events and relationship experiences to allow appropriate action. We feel like life is too fast, that it is passing by too quickly, and we cannot quite catch up to it.

~ Padma and Aniya Aon Prakasha

In our hectic lives we are prone to ‘living in our heads’, as we worry, stress and fuss our way through our days, weeks, months and even years.

People may not take the opportunity to ground their awareness in their body, particularly their lower-body. As a yoga teacher I see this so often reflected in how people breathe. A ‘heady’ person will very often have a shallow, upper-chest way of breathing that can exacerbate the stress response. In their yoga practice, these people have great difficulty sensing into their body and tuning into it to make subtle adjustments or softenings where needed. They will intellectualise everything, rather than feel. In essence, this is an example of an over-masculinisation that buries women’s innate femininity.

The quality of energy flow in the female pelvis, including the flow of each ovary, the uterus, and the vagina, impacts on a woman’s overall vibrancy. Like nutrients drawn from the soil that are essential for a plant’s growth, the flow of pelvic energy through a woman’s root determines the vitality of her womanhood.

~ Tami Lynn Kent

It’s vital for women’s health and wellbeing that we form a healthy relationship with our lower two energy centres—the root, or ‘muladhara’ chakra, located at the perineum and vagina, as well as their ‘womb-space’, or ‘svadisthana’ chakra, located within the pelvis, specifically, the uterus.

Back in the 1970s, Aviva Steiner, a physical education teacher developed a series of womb-stimulating and nourishing movements to control women’s cycles. She claimed that if women don’t move the energy within their pelvic region they are at risk of creating menstrual and menopausal imbalances and lowering their fertility.

Well known obstetrician and author Dr Christiane Northrup agrees that the free flow of pelvic energy is vital to a woman’s health and says: ‘Fibroids, endometriosis, diseases of the ovaries, and other pelvic disorders are manifestations of blocked energy in the pelvis.’

20 Padma and Aniya Aon Prakasha, Womb Wisdom: Awakening the Creative and Forgotten Powers of the Feminine, Location 893 (Kindle Version)
21 Tami Lynn Kent, Wild Feminine, p. 14. Also from Kent: ‘When a woman knows how to access her root place, she finds the energy for building her creative dreams, nurturing her creations, and changing the core patterns that diminish her radiance,’ p. XXIII
22 Adelheid Ohlig in her book, Luna Yoga: Vital Fertility and Sexuality, writes of her teacher and mentor, Aviva Steiner: ‘Aviva discovered that a woman’s energy source is in her pelvis, in her sexual organs. If a woman’s energy is allowed to flow freely into the rest of her body, the woman will live a healthy, long life and have tremendous energy and vitality. If the energy is locked in the pelvis, reproductive problems and a variety of diseases from PMS to cancer are promoted,’ p. 35.
23 Christiane Northrup M.D., Women’s Bodies, Women’s Wisdom, p. 87
Defining the womb-space and the root

The womb is a woman’s creative centre. It’s literally the space in which she creates new life when she nurtures a baby for nine months. However, even if a woman never carries a child in her womb, it is still the energetic centre for creative energy in her life. The womb-space can correlate with the dantien or hara from Eastern traditions such as Taoism, Chi Kung and martial arts. The dantien or hara is said to be located about four finger widths below the navel and is considered to be the ‘power centre’ in which humans store their vital chi or energy—for both women and men.24

Another way to locate your womb-space is to place your thumbs at the navel and extend your index fingers down to form a diamond shape (see illustration).

Deep into your body behind your index fingers is the rough location of your womb. In reality, you don’t need to be too specific about the physical location; what you’re aiming to do is to build your feeling, awareness and ultimately energy in the general lower belly and pelvic region.

It’s very easy to start to build a tangible connection with your root-centre. Just squeeze your pelvic floor or vagina in the same way you do when you are doing ‘kegels’ (pelvic floor exercises). If you’re not familiar with exercising the pelvic floor, think of the muscles you use to stop the flow of urine when you are on the toilet, or, imagine you are squeezing a pencil in your vagina. To get concrete feedback, you can try putting your index or middle finger in your vagina and then squeezing your finger.

Squeezing and toning this vaginal and perineal area will help foster a healthy connection with the root of your body as well as achieving many benefits such as healing or preventing prolapse and incontinence, and boosting your enjoyment of sex. At the same time, it’s also important to learn how to relax your pelvic floor and vaginal muscles, particularly when you are menstruating or giving birth.

If these muscles are permanently switched on, tension can accrue. It’s all about creating elasticity of these muscles. From an energetic perspective, it’s about generating energy-flow around the perineum and up into the pelvis. The first step to doing this is fostering a subtle awareness and sensitivity of this part of your body.

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24 Rachael Jayne Groover in Powerful and Feminine: How to Increase your Magnetic Presence & Attract the Attention You Want suggests that the dantien (also called the ‘lower dantien’) or hara correlates with the feminine womb-space (p. 63). Christiane Northrup M.D. says that the hara, this low-belly body center (which also includes the ovaries) is associated with power, passion and creativity – Women’s Bodies, Women’s Wisdom, p. 163. Christopher J. Makhert, author of Dantien: Your Secret Energy Centre (York Beach ME, Samuel Weiser Inc., 1998) defines the ‘Dan-Tien Personality’ as somebody who is ‘collected, responsible, helpful’ and with a ‘modest attitude’. He goes on to say, ‘They are self confident but do not seek the limelight, and they are not interested in impressing or dominating others. Yet they radiate quiet power and attract admirers and follow’. These could be described as the more feminine characteristics!
**Shakti Prana**

In Feminine Yoga, we talk about encouraging the flow of ‘shakti prana’ within the pelvic bowl. **Prana** is the energy or life-force that moves around the body and **shakti prana** is the sacred, feminine energy that is present in these lowest two chakras, the root and womb-space. Maya Tiwari (Mother Maya), an Ayurvedic women’s health expert, explains: 'shakti prana is the body’s inherent reproductive life force; when in a state of balance, it protects the health of the reproductive organs, genitals, womb, belly and breast.'

On a purely physical level it also makes sense to promote blood flow to the pelvic region. The health of the pelvic organs (ovaries, uterus, fallopian tubes) is greatly improved when they receive unimpeded blood flow. Tight pelvic muscles can restrict the natural, healthy circulation within the pelvis. The Classical Women’s Postures work to promote pelvic circulation—both physical and energetic—by opening the hips, stretching the pelvic floor and bringing space and softness to the belly.

**Ways of connecting with your womb-space and the root-chakra**

**Yoga postures**

As mentioned, the Classical Women’s Postures promote energy and blood flow to the pelvic area. The pelvic tilting movements involved in the cat-cow pose, supine pelvic tilts, and mermaid pelvic tilts also move and generate energy in this area.

**Breath**

In yoga we say that the breath represents, and is a way to move and activate **prana** (the essential life force or energy) throughout the body. There are a number of breathing techniques, the simplest being the Soft Belly Breath, that you can use to breathe more deeply into your deep, lower belly and pelvic floor area, therefore activating and nourishing your shakti prana.

**Meditation and visualisation**

One of the important and characterising features of a moving with the womb and moving with the moon approach are beautiful, feminine meditations to help you inhabit your womb-space. Read on for a Womb-Heart Meditation.

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25 Maya Tiwari, *Women’s Power to Heal through Inner Medicine*, p. 155  
26 Some examples of Classical Women’s Postures are Baddha Konasana on page 10, Malasana on page 12, and Pigeon Pose on page 11. For more information see my book *Moving with the Moon: Yoga, Movement, and meditation for Every Phase of the Menstrual Cycle and Beyond*. See: [www.movingwiththemoon.com](http://www.movingwiththemoon.com)  
27 I share some wonderful feminine yoga breathing techniques in my book *Moving with the Moon: Yoga, Movement, and meditation for Every Phase of the Menstrual Cycle and Beyond*. See: [www.movingwiththemoon.com](http://www.movingwiththemoon.com)  
28 My book *Moving with the Moon: Yoga, Movement, and meditation for Every Phase of the Menstrual Cycle and Beyond* is filled with luscious feminine meditations for the various phases of your menstrual cycle, as well as healing meditations for menstrual imbalances. See: [www.movingwiththemoon.com](http://www.movingwiththemoon.com)
**Touch**

I often rub my hands over my belly in an instinctive, nurturing gesture. This instantly helps me drop my awareness down and out of my busy-mind. It reminds me to relax and soften my belly, which helps with alleviating stress and tension, and nourishes my abdominal and pelvic organs.

**Movement**

Circling and swaying your hips is an instinctively feminine way to nurture and strengthen your *shakti prana*. You can incorporate these movements within your Feminine Yoga practice, or you can simply put on some inspiring music and enjoy some juicy, sexy free-dance movements.

**Pelvic floor activation**

As previously detailed, engaging the pelvic floor, known in yoga as ‘Muladhara Bandha’, is a simple way to not only bring awareness into your root, but also to tone the all-important pelvic floor muscles. In addition, pelvic floor work helps you to subtly tone the deep, abdominal muscles (transversus abdominus).

**Fostering your creativity**

As I have mentioned, your womb-space is your creative, power centre. Finding ways to express your creativity can nourish the energy there. Take up or reconnect with a creative pursuit that fills you up—whether it be writing, painting, dancing, gardening, craft or music, to name just a few!

There is so much joy to be found in indulging in something creative, just for the sake of it; to express yourself—your deepest soul energies—not because there is any specific purpose, for instance to make money, but just for the love of it.

Beginning or renewing your commitment to your creativity can bring profound benefits to the health and vitality of your reproductive organs as well as your nervous system as you learn to relax more and ‘find your flow’.

**Ana’s story: reconnecting with the womb-space**

*At the age of 42, I experienced a health crisis which shook my assumptions and by association, my life, to the very core. I suffered total burnout due to an overload of stress and ultimately an excess of the ‘masculine’ in my life. I had been single parenting for almost a decade as well as running my busy yoga teacher training business in which I was responsible for a number of administration and teaching staff.*
Even in my relationship with my partner at the time, I felt that I was the main one who was responsible for holding things together. I was accountable, too accountable. If you’re familiar with the work of Alison A. Armstrong, you’ll know that she suggests that accountability is a defining masculine characteristic. Men, with their predominance of testosterone thrive on being accountable, on being responsible - on the ‘single focus’ of getting the job done, on being ‘outcome focused’.

Women don’t have the same levels of testosterone (just one small peak around ovulation) to sustain this ‘hunter instinct’ and they burn out if they feel compelled to be accountable for too long.

My healing-crisis revealed to me a clear irony: I always thought with all the work in women’s health and yoga that I’d been doing that I was very connected with my womb-space—no problems there! However, as I sat with my friend and spiritual healer; Anna Watts and meditated on my chakras, I realised that when she prompted me to feel into and visualise my sacral chakra, my womb-centre, my ‘female creative space’, I saw only a barren, dark, inhospitable place—a dark cave. This was no surprise when you consider one of my most distressing burnout symptoms was constant heart arrhythmia (ectopic heartbeat) and breathlessness which left me feeling like my energy was all up in my chest (the home of the masculine).

In time, as I began to heal, I furnished this space, in my mind’s eye, so that I feminised it. I added a day-bed with colourful cushions, rich velvet drapes, a warm fire in the centre. My womb-space gradually became somewhere I felt more comfortable to spend some time ‘hanging out’.

At my third session with Anna I finally experienced my womb-space as filled with light and clear energy, breezes and pastel-coloured drapes, and I could feel myself dropping down into this space. My weeks of meditations, visualisations, womb-dances and breath-work dedicated to embodying this space had paid off and my energy had finally dropped, or ‘earthed’ down to where it should be. Wow! What a relief!

I was then able to access a new way to soften into my natural femininity that had been there all the time, but had been suppressed and ignored. It’s not just about ‘thinking’ your way to connect with your womb-space, you have to feel, and to do that, use whatever tool works for you whether it be breath, meditation, yoga asanas, chanting, dance—or a combination of all!

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29 Alison A. Armstrong author of The Queen’s Code and personal growth facilitator is renowned for her work around understanding the differences between men and women in relationships.

30 Find out about Anna Watts’s work here: www.spiritwayhealing.com.au
The womb-heart connection

Not only is it important for women to connect with their womb-space, but it’s also beneficial to form a positive connection with another key feminine-centre, the heart-space, or in yogic terms, the ‘heart chakra’.

The heart-centre is the energetic home for love, unconditional love and by softening into this space in conjunction with, and in alignment with the womb-space, you can support yourself in healing your connection to the feminine.

Here’s a beautiful ‘womb-heart meditation’ that will support this softening into the feminine and feeling the connection (feedback-loop) between the womb-space and heart-space, which is integral in supporting your fertility.

Womb-heart meditation

Begin by placing both palms on your lower belly, your womb-centre and take some lovely deep, soft belly breaths. Allow your deep, lower belly to open to the breath; to receive the breath; to receive this moment.

Now, place your left hand on your heart-centre (in the centre of the chest) and keep your right hand on your lower belly, your womb-space, or ‘womb-heart’.

Your womb-space, behind your right palm, is your centre for nurturing new life. Deep within your uterus is where the seed of love grows into a fully formed baby or idea.

Your womb-space is sometimes called your ‘womb-heart’ because it is so closely connected to the energy of your heart-centre, and it has its own energetic, beating heart.

Your heart-centre, behind your left palm, is your epicentre for love—deep, abiding, unconditional love. It has the capacity to keep opening and opening like a lotus flower unfurling its petals in the sun—feeding yourself and others with love.

There is a free flow of energy between these two energy centres.

Nischala Joy Devi says that the beating heart and the womb heart each hold the sacred essence of consciousness.31

31 Devi in *The Secret Power of Yoga*, p. 60. I owe the idea of the ‘womb-heart’ to Devi who writes: ‘Women are graced with what is often referred to as the ‘womb heart’. It relates to the ‘beating heart’ through intuition and feelings. This legacy of love is so powerful that it is able to sustain a new life. The beating heart and the womb heart each hold the sacred essence of consciousness.’
Traumas that affect your heart can affect the uterus and the free flow of blood and energy between these two physical and energetic points in our body.

So as you rest now, deeply into yourself, feel the sensations, the subtle permutations of energy beneath your left and right palms.

Feel the flow of energy between these points—up and down your soft solar plexus.

Know that this simple practice helps you come home to yourself and allows you to embrace the divine in everyday life.

Namaste

APANA

Work with apana, and apana will work with you.

~ Robert Svoboda 32

The third principle of a Feminine Yoga practice is apana. According to ancient yogic subtle physiology and Ayurveda, the sister-science to yoga, there are five vayus or ‘energies’ that govern different bodily functions and aspects of your being and they all need to be in balance for your optimal health and vitality.

Prana vayu, residing in the chest and head, is the energy that governs your inspiration and taking things. It also nourishes the brain and the eyes. The force behind prana vayu is upward and propulsive and is generally considered more ‘masculine’ in its essence. Apana vayu is the opposite, more ‘feminine’ quality of energy flow that is represented by a downward movement, residing in the pelvis, and nourishing the pelvic organs.

Healthy apana (the downward movement of energy) is essential in supporting elimination of your bodily wastes to avoid imbalances like constipation or diarrhoea. Additionally, apana vayu is responsible for eliminating mental and emotional toxins from your bodies, which can support your whole, mind-body health. Specifically, for women, the processes of menstruation and birth are also governed by the energy of apana and it is therefore an important principle when working with a more feminine-based yoga practice.

32 Dr Svoboda, Ayurveda for Women: A Guide to Vitality and Health, p. 79
33 Ibid: p. 60. Dr Svoboda provides an overview of these Five vayus which are also aspects of the Ayurvedic dosha (or constitution) of Vata: Prana (extends from the diaphragm to the throat), Udana (extends from the throat to the top of the head), Samana (extends from diaphragm to the navel), Vyana (permeates the entire body from its seat in the heart), Apana (extends from the navel to the anus)
Because *apana* is a grounding energy it can help to balance your vata levels. *Vata* is one of the three main Ayurvedic constitutions (of which everyone has a predominance of one or several) that is related to the air-element. When you have an excess of this vata energy in your body, you can feel anxious, ‘spacy’ and ungrounded. It is therefore useful to focus on cultivating *apana vayu* at times of high vata such as during perimenopause as well as your premenstrual (*Waning Moon*) and menstruation-phases (*Dark Moon*) of your monthly cycle.

Yogic tools for harnessing the power of *apana*—which will deepen the therapeutic value of a feminine-focused yoga practice—include breathing techniques such as the Apana Breath as well as various meditation and visualisation practices.  

Grounding, floor-based postures such as the Classical Women’s Postures and sequences like the classical joint-freeing and digestive toning sequence, known as Pawanmuktasana, also encourage the energy of *apana*. Some standing poses, like the Standing Goddess (see illustration), are also wonderful for sending the breath (and therefore energy) down through the legs into the earth, channelling *apana*.

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34 See my book *Moving with the Moon: Yoga, Movement, and Meditation for Every Phase of the Menstrual Cycle and Beyond* for details on the Apana Breath and other Apana-engendering meditation practices. See: [www.movingwiththemoon.com](http://www.movingwiththemoon.com)

35 I detail a Women’s Pawanmuktasana Sequence in my book *Moving with the Moon: Yoga, Movement, and Meditation for Every Phase of the Menstrual Cycle and Beyond*. This sequence is also available as an online video class on my website—See: [www.movingwiththemoon.com](http://www.movingwiththemoon.com)
CONCLUSION

I hope this little journey through the feminine life phases and stages and how yoga can support us as women has opened your eyes to a whole new, nourishing way to practise yoga.

I urge you to play and experiment with these ideas on your yoga mat—make them your own—and in so doing, you will reap the rewards of a richer life lived in closer connection to your essential femininity.

Special offer: ‘Moving with the Moon’ e-book $19.00 Aud (reg. $29)

If you’d like to delve more deeply and find more supportive practices, I encourage you to read my book, Moving with the Moon – Yoga, Movement and Meditation for Every Phase of Your Menstrual Cycle and Beyond.

This comprehensive ‘health bible’ for women and will help you fall in love with your monthly and life cycles. It showcases a huge repertoire of yoga postures, sequences and tips on therapeutic modifications and prop use, all overlaid with a passionately nurturing and self-sustaining approach to yoga and self-care. It also includes comprehensive chapters on yoga for menstrual disorders as well as ‘The wise womb: embracing menopause’.

We’d like to offer you a special opportunity to purchase the ebook, which is over 600 pages, for just $19 by using the promo code MWM19. You’ll also have the option to save even more if you add on Ana’s Moving with the Moon Audio Tracks and Online Classes at bundle prices at the checkout when you purchase the Moving with the Moon E-book.

Wholesale orders

Moving with the Moon can also be used as a resource for yoga teachers and teacher training courses. Why not add it to your syllabus? Wholesale orders can be arranged at wholesale@blissbabyyoga.com

What they’re are saying about ‘Moving with the Moon’ by Ana Davis:

“‘My Bible! I love this book. It’s where I get a lot of my inspiration for my yoga classes. Every time I read it I’m reminded to drop into my feminine nature which is exactly what I love to teach. Moving with the Moon you have brought so much love to my life and my teachings by creating this magical masterpiece.’”

Thanks @Bodybreathsoul