

Tai chi in pregnancy and childbirth

Eileen Ford-Price

(First published in 'Cloud Hands' the newsletter of Wu's Tai Chi Chuan Academy, Toronto.)

It first dawned on me that I might be pregnant when my husband commented that pickled gherkins were an unusual choice for breakfast. When my pregnancy was confirmed I was overjoyed and, like every expectant mother, started thinking straight away about the best ways of looking after myself and the growing baby during the next nine months. It is now acknowledged that labour is generally easier for those who exercise regularly and that being in a state of relaxation can help a woman cope with the pain of labour. One of the basic principles of tai chi is relaxation; as I wanted to have my baby with the minimum of pain relieving drugs or medical intervention, it was important to continue to stay fit and relaxed.

For the last 4 years I had been practising tai chi at London's Wu's Tai Chi Academy run by Sifu Gary Wragg and had been impressed from the very beginning by the health benefits of Wu style tai chi. I was unable to locate any written documentation about tai chi during pregnancy so the following nine months became a personal exploration. Whilst I was a little disappointed at having to give up some of the martial training temporarily I enjoyed learning from personal experience what was more beneficial for different circumstances.

In many ways, pregnancy is a pathological state, a deviation from the body's normal functioning. It brings with it a large number of uncomfortable side effects such as morning sickness, heartburn, backache, joint instability, breathlessness, circulatory problems, to list but a few. The hormone relaxin, which is secreted during pregnancy to soften the body's ligaments in preparation for childbirth, can cause joint instability and lower back pain, which is in turn exacerbated by the forward pull of the growing bump. As pregnancy progresses, the internal organs are squashed and displaced, giving rise to heartburn and breathlessness. The action of the smooth muscle of the intestines slows down, often causing constipation. Additionally, the process of childbirth itself weakens the pelvic floor muscles, which, if not toned up, can lead to stress incontinence. With all of this in mind, I used tai chi as a tool to minimise the discomforts and maximise good health. I also used acupuncture and consulted a medical herbalist.

I experienced a little nausea early on in my pregnancy, which was on the whole relieved by acupuncture. However, my main complaint in the early months was total exhaustion, so my training sessions were kept short. I was able to do very little sabre training as this proved too strenuous.

As time moved on breathlessness became a problem. This was greatly helped by specific Wu style exercises that worked on the stretching of the back and relaxation of the chest. Because I was accustomed to relaxed breathing due to my training I did not have to learn any breathing techniques for labour (which usually get forgotten in the event at any rate!)

An important aspect of Wu style tai chi is the distribution of body weight - the weight is always 100% on one leg or the other. My own labour was very long and slow so the extra stamina built up through single-weightedness was invaluable. Single-weightedness not only strengthens the legs in preparation for carrying all that extra body weight in the later months but also promotes good circulation.

In addition, the muscles are constantly stretching and contracting, in particular the calf muscles; these muscles are the main 'pumps' that circulate the blood and lymph from the lower limbs back to the heart. It is possible that tai chi can help women avoid many of the circulatory problems experienced in pregnancy, such as varicose veins or deep vein thrombosis. I did experience some leg cramps, common in pregnancy - these were helped by form practice, or by some simple tai chi walking.

A further benefit of the constant stretching and contracting of the muscles is that the body becomes flexible in preparation for assuming different positions during actual childbirth.

Tai chi helps to promote good posture and is particularly good for back pain. This is because the pelvis is tucked under and the normal curve in the lower back (which can become exaggerated in pregnancy causing discomfort and pain) is straightened out. In my labour the baby's spine was turned to my back causing severe backache. I believe that maintaining good posture helped me to deal with this. It is interesting to note that during my pregnancy I experienced no back pain at all. However, after the baby was born and my training became confined to brief spells between feeds and nappy changes, I did start to have some back pain as well as discomfort in the wrists and elbows.

Indeed the body's joints are generally strengthened by correct practice of tai chi. Practising the horse stance in particular helps to maintain the pelvic floor muscles during pregnancy and to build them up again after childbirth.

Another feature of tai chi is learning to turn and relax the hips. Being able to do this is invaluable (in my experience!) in dealing with constipation. I used Wu style warm-up exercises to good effect whenever this became a problem.

In late pregnancy the main problem I had was heartburn, which was sometimes helped by meditation and sitting exercises. However, the one thing that helped it most had nothing whatsoever to do with tai chi; I noticed that it was always brought on by wheat products, which I stopped eating completely. My heartburn disappeared and I continued eating curries, pickles etc! Otherwise I remained completely healthy throughout my pregnancy and in June gave birth to a beautiful baby boy who has been doing his best to wreck the health of his mother and father ever since!

One word of caution: I had been practising tai chi for four years before I became pregnant. It is advisable to check with your GP before starting any exercise programme while pregnant and remember that there are certain guidelines you need to follow. The body's systems are working much harder, so it is more important to take plenty of rest between bouts of exercise. There is much more danger of over-heating, so it is essential to drink plenty of fluid, especially in hot weather. Stop exercising immediately if you begin to feel nauseous.

In summary, I had a pregnancy that was fairly problem free. I felt extremely well and healthy. I'm sure that this, and being able to cope with a long backache-labour, was due in large part to my practice of Wu style tai chi.

Eileen Ford-Price

Classes in Wu Style tai chi are available at Wu's Tai Chi Chuan Academy, Osnaburgh Street, London, telephone 0207, 916, 6064. Beginners' classes are run on Monday, Tuesday and Thursday evenings.

For classes in Oxfordshire, contact Burford Community College, telephone 01993 822314. Beginners' classes are run on Tuesday evenings 7-8.30pm