



BODY
BY KOJI AND JOANNA YAMAMOTO

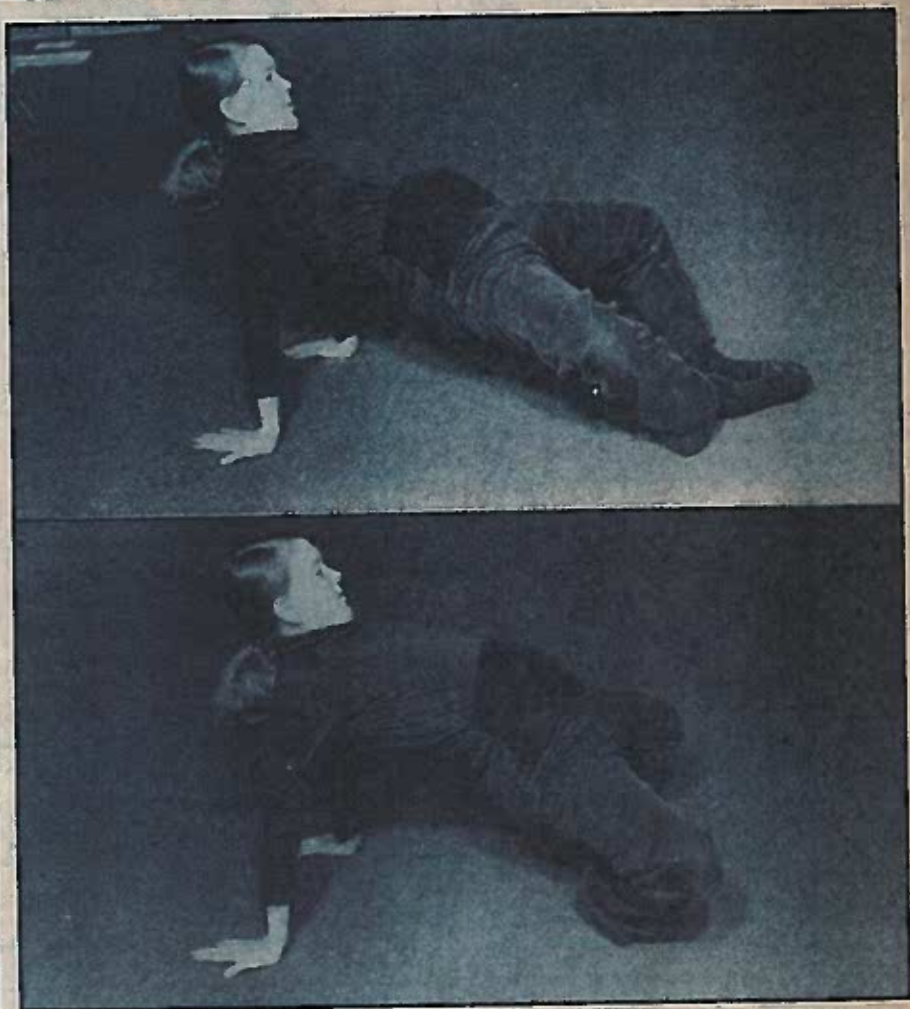
EXERCISES FOR EASY CHILDBIRTH

Giving Birth Should Be as Natural as the Rising Moon

When I was pregnant and living in Japan, a friend from the States sent me a few books on childbirth. They described birth procedures in American hospitals which they characterized as among the most inhospitable in the world. Birth was viewed as surgery for a sick person; episiotomies and drugs were routinely administered; women were compelled to lie flat with their legs strapped up in a struggle against the power of gravity; patient's arms were hooked into intravenous feed devices and their heartbeats monitored by machines.

When I read those descriptions, I was glad to be in Japan. I had been seeing a dear, old midwife whose daughter, grandmother, and great-grandmother were all midwives. The birth of our son was not all perfection, but it was peaceful, homey, and warm. It took place in the midwife's clinic-home within a private, sunny, *tatami* (straw mat) floor room, on a *futon* (cotton mattress). Afterwards, the baby and I stayed in the same room for a week, sleeping, and getting better acquainted with each other.


There are midwives still practicing in Japan, but since the Second World War and American Occupation, the percentage of hospital births has increased until they now outnumber home births. Since hospital births have not become significant until now, it seems the change to hospital deliveries has mainly been for the convenience of the doctor. The experience of a Japanese friend, who was pregnant at the same time as I, confirmed this comparison. She was told by her doctor, a woman (indeed!), that if she began to go into labor during the night she could come to the hospital where they would give her a drug to stop the contractions until morning. That way the



To strengthen lower back: Supporting body on hands and feet (soles of feet together) legs stretched open, hips up, chin tucked in—inhale. Exhale using "chin-power" to push the hips as far forward as possible, keeping thighs open, knees down.


doctor would not lose sleep. Hospital practices go against rather than with nature. If a woman keeps a moderate, balanced lifestyle during pregnancy and is able to relax among supportive people in a comfortable room, there is not excessive pain and no need for an episiotomy. If the mother's body is flexible and strong, she can deliver her baby herself, squatting down, with or without an attendant. Doctors may have forgotten why they became doctors, and women misunderstand why they are having babies: to serve the family. The woman enables the child to be born and brings a soul into the

family. Pregnancy is one of woman's most important occupations, and if she is to make a strong, healthy descendant, she must take care of herself. From embryo to infant, the baby increases 30 billion times within the mother. Pregnancy is the period when the basic constitution is created. The health of the baby, mentally, physically, emotionally, and spiritually, derives from the health of the pregnancy, which should be actively full, free of shock, and as natural to a human being as possible. Pregnancy is for the mother as well as the baby. It is the chance of a woman's lifetime to



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change her whole self, so that, in a sense, she can be born again along with her baby. Her mind and body can be cleansed, emptied, and made peaceful.

Age should not be a factor in how difficult or easy it is to give birth. As long as a woman is ovulating she can have a baby. But if her lifestyle is improper and lazy and her body hard, birth can be difficult. When our son was born, I was thirty-three. There was pain, but it was not unbearable. Most women have pain, some do not, but the pain is intermittent and it ends, so it can be absorbed. The pregnant woman should keep active and empty right up until the birth. During labor I did Yoga postures, did not eat, and went for a long walk with my husband. When a contraction came, I stopped walking and held onto my husband, a fence, a bridge, or a phone booth. We even went shopping and although I'm not stoic, I'm sure no one knew I was about to have a baby. Pain is a message calling for adjustment. The woman in labor should move until she finds how to release the tension causing pain. She should stay alert to the experience, take care of everything that is happening, and not lie down. Finally, much nicer than the termination of a backache or having a tooth pulled, she will have a baby.

PLEASE EAT WELL DURING PREGNANCY

Food is fundamental to making the mother's body soft for delivery and the baby's constitution healthy and strong. In traditional Japan the food for pregnant women was barley and miso soup with fresh seasonable vegetables. Please try to eat simply and don't overeat. You are not eating for two—you and the baby are one—and should not gain a lot of weight; fifteen pounds is enough. If you are overweight, please reduce. Excess, in the form of fat, mucus, or constipation, is dangerous. It makes breathing laborious, the abdominal organs hard, and pushes against the baby. Also, excess fat and mucus accumulate inside the vagina, making the birth passage small and unsmooth. Consumption of animal food and dairy products also makes the blood impure and the muscles hard so that it is painful to



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open the pelvis. Spicy food, alcohol, caffeine, and drugs shorten the breath and excite the nervous system. During pregnancy, whole grains and vegetables simply prepared are best for making a soft and peaceful mother and child.

In the early months, the mother might desire foods that she had as a child, for example, popcorn or ice cream. This is both a physiological and sentimental kind of longing. These cravings are all right but please determine how much is sentiment and how much is need. Also, remember that certain desires are coming from the baby, who is the product of both the father and mother as well as both sets of ancestors. Later, when the child wants artificial sweets, you can dissuade him or her with better food or play. While still in the womb, please tell your child that Mama prefers that he or she not have sugar, junk food, or too much salt.

PLEASE TALK TO YOUR BABY

Begin your infant's education as soon as you know you are pregnant. The science of *Tai Kyo* (Body Education), traditional in the Far East, is a kind of complete prenatal care in which the pregnant woman teaches her baby with her own body. This education, which includes communication, entails being aware of what you are doing and the consequences of your decisions. Educate your child through yourself to be a balanced human being, vital and full of energy. Frequently explain your movement and thinking to your baby; introduce your family and friends to him or her; share your daily life just as you are sharing oxygen, blood, food, and drink.

A fine time to bind the relationship with the baby is while going for a walk every day. Please go out in whatever weather, you and your baby inside you, and walk just for the sake of walking. Always wear comfortable low-heeled shoes so as not to distort the pelvis, and don't have anywhere to go or anything to do other than being together. Just enjoy that time, pointing out the trees, houses, shops, grass, birds, plants, and people as you go along. If you walk to just walk, you will walk differently than if you walk to go to the store. It will relax your mind and enable your pelvis to move freely and your baby to recognize the world when he or she enters it.



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PLEASE PRACTICE LONG, DEEP BREATHING

The oxygen of the mother feeds and cleans the baby; she should get plenty of it. By singing, chanting, and doing sitting meditation with the right posture, the breath can be lengthened and made fuller. Full breathing increases the expansive ability of the ribcage, which directly relates to the opening and closing ability of the pelvis.

In whatever you do, use the whole body to do it, with the breath and power coming from your center, where the baby is. There is really no physical movement or activity that a healthy, pregnant woman cannot do, save lifting heavy objects or jumping off high walls, as long as the breathing is correct. But if you find your breath getting short and shallow, stop what you're doing, correct your breath, and try again. Some books warn not to twist the body, nor bend sideways, nor even lift the arms overhead. Such admonitions treat the pregnant woman as if she were sick or incapacitated. She is not. As the pregnancy progresses, mothers actually have more energy than most people and can use their bodies freely, although differently, as long as the breath stays deep and full with long exhalations.

Some schools teach breathing techniques for the time of birth. Our feeling is that every woman intuitively knows how to breathe when having a baby just as she does when having an orgasm. She breathes as her body needs to breathe. If she tenses up, she'll breathe incorrectly. Rather than practicing how to breathe for the stages of labor, please work on being relaxed, peaceful, and flexible, taking simple, normal quantities of food and not smoking anything.

PLEASE KEEP YOUR MIND CALM

Most pregnant women either shine and glow or look miserable. Please be the former so that the father of your baby, your family, and friends will be glad to be with you and give you the support and love you and your baby need. Try to find a woman who can offer you experienced advice, not directions as to how many grams of protein or calcium to take, but advice that seems to be seated in sensitivity to



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what is natural and allows you to be the best woman you can be. Attract warmth from others by giving it, and keep your own body covered, especially the legs, feet, and abdomen in winter and the thighs and abdomen in summer. Wear cotton clothing, especially cotton underwear, in order to promote warmth. Synthetic fibers are cooling and tend to inhibit circulation and proper elimination. There are so many unnatural things in the environment, that you must look for what is true, and be clever enough to keep those things and people around you. They will give you peace.


PLEASE EXERCISE

When the muscles are soft, the breathing will be deep and pelvis and vagina can open easily. Exercise to make your wrists, ankles, neck, and pelvis flexible and legs and lower back strong. Keep your chin pulled straight in, and see how chin power strengthens the abdomen. Always keep your spine straight, standing and moving with the big toes pushed into the earth; feel the power in your legs and pelvis. If your pelvis is tight, twisted, or out of line with the legs; or the baby is breach or off center; or if you have morning sickness, your pelvis needs balancing. Please do corrective exercise.

PLEASE DEVELOP A GRATEFUL MIND

By stopping to look at your life, you will appreciate that you can walk, work, think, have friends, family, food, clothing, home, and a baby. Please say thank you to your ancestors, your family, and the baby for choosing you as his or her mother. Also, be willing to apologize to your unborn child for each day that isn't the best day possible and promise him or her you will do better. Please understand that pregnancy is a privilege and that the baby is helping you perform the great work of making you a happy and healthy human being.

Koji and Joanna Yamamoto trained at the dojo of Masahiro Oki and in this country, Europe, and Japan. They teach Zen Yoga, corrective exercise, and preparation for natural birth. For information on their classes and residential seminars write: Zen Yoga Arts, 88 Seaverns Ave., Jamaica Plain, MA 02130, (617) 522-5561.



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