

Introduction

When we have awareness and respect for the [menstrual cycle] we are invited to return to an ancient place of knowing, or an embodied experience of feminine spiritual power. She is naturally arising, deep and powerful. She is your own inner guidance, and she has been waiting for you to turn and greet her. She says, ‘Welcome back home to yourself’.

— Uma Dinsmore-Tuli, *Yoni Shakti*, 2014, page 278

The menstrual cycle, yoga and me

Hopeful beginnings

When I first learnt about the menstrual cycle as a nine-year-old girl, I was delighted to discover that my first period would mean that I would become a woman. “Great,” I thought, “people will start treating me like a grown-up and I will have more freedom”. I craved to be listened to and to be allowed to make my own decisions, instead of constantly being told what to think and feel and do.

My first bleed came and went just before I turned 13, but it was a total non-event: I was still treated like a child, not the respected woman I longed to be. Nothing changed. I was utterly disappointed.

This is not much fun

I disliked the discomfort of menstruating and I could find no solution to the period pain and heavy bleeding that plagued me for many years from that point onwards. As if that weren't enough to contend with, I always felt tossed around on an ever-changing ocean of physical, mental and emotional changes that seemed random and uncontrollable. Premenstrually I was stressed, irritable and difficult to be around. The whole damn thing was something I just had to endure. I never wanted to be premenstrual or to have my bleed. I resented it all and envied men for not having to suffer it.

These feelings towards my period continued for 30 years, by which time I'd suffered period pain each and every cycle, with cramping and dull aches in my belly and lower back. I felt like my insides were being sucked out by a vacuum cleaner for up to three days. I often felt dizzy and faint. On one occasion, rather than postpone a work visit to a construction site, I practically passed out on the London Underground. I felt too embarrassed to admit to my male colleague that I was menstruating and so excused it as not having eaten much that day. I always suffered from heavy bleeding and on occasion the blood soaked through my tampon or towel, my pants and my clothes. I've walked through a packed restaurant in a beautiful duck egg blue shift dress only to discover in the women's toilets that a large blood stain was showing through my dress.

Finding yoga

In my mid-twenties, in 1997, I felt drawn to going to a yoga class. This had nothing to do with my menstrual cycle and I knew nothing about yoga, but I landed firmly on my feet with a weekly class taught by Julie Friedeberger. It was a bit weird at first, but I relished the proper relaxation at the end of each session. It was the only time in my week when I actually stopped. I found that I slept more deeply and restfully, tension in my body eased away and my lower backache disappeared. I started to feel steadier within myself and less pulled around by life's events. It slowed down my whizzing mind and gave me tools to cope better with difficult thoughts and emotions.

In the summer of 2013, after a spell of mid-cycle bleeding, I needed a minor investigative operation (hysteroscopy). I wanted to be at optimum health and needed something to help me deal with the anxiety. I turned to yoga to help me prepare for the operation and to aid with the healing process afterwards. I did some research and selected some yoga postures that were said to be beneficial for a woman's reproductive system, which I practised daily alongside yoga nidra (deep relaxation) and meditation. The operation went well and there was no medical problem. The prognosis was that the mid-cycle bleeding was hormonal. I was advised to take painkillers for a week afterwards but needed only a couple of doses the following day. Yet again in my life, yoga had helped me through a difficult time.

Could yoga help my period pain?

The capacity of yoga to aid womb health made me curious as to whether yoga might ease my long-standing period pain. I did some research and was shocked to find little information available – most of the people who practise yoga in the UK are women, yet, in the yoga books I researched, period pain, menstruation and the menstrual cycle were generally given a cursory mention or not addressed at all. Using the findings of my research, combined with over 15 years' experience of practising yoga, I developed a yoga sequence specifically for my period. Being of a scientific education and curious by nature, I began experimenting on myself.

When I practised the sequence every day of my bleed, I had no pain. When I did not practise it, the pain returned with its usual intensity for up to three days. For the first time in my menstruating life I was pain-free. I was astounded. Nothing else had changed: the only difference was that I had stopped doing my normal yoga practice and started doing gentler postures and breathing.

While the yoga played a part in this pain relief for me, it was also the act of giving myself the rest and slowness that I needed during bleed time and taking the time to care for myself, even if it was for just 20 minutes a day. I was properly listening to my body and respecting it, which, I realised, I had never really done before. It opened my eyes to how damaging it was to push on regardless of the fact that I was bleeding – not only in yoga, but in everything else in my life. It was a revelation. It was also the beginning of a gentle but powerful revolution.

Instead of resisting and resenting the need to be in a low-energy state, I gradually came to relish the gentle approach and the opportunity to be still and introspective. Previously,

slowing down had felt weak and lazy, and something I couldn't possibly do, but now it feels revitalising and ultimately empowering. I have come to love my bleed time, which I never even dreamt was possible.

It is not always easy to manage to slow down, let alone stop, or to allow myself to rest and recharge. When I don't do so, I still experience some pain, but it only lasts for a couple of hours on the morning of Day 4 (yes, it really is that exact in its timing!) – a gentle reminder from my body to take more care of myself.

This sequence and tips for yoga and life are offered to you to try in **Chapter 7: Yoga and the bleed phase** (see pages 80–117). My intention is that it will give you a yoga practice that encourages you to slow down, rest and take care of yourself, so that this phase becomes an opportunity for you to recharge and restore.

Relearning about biology

I became curious about the biology behind how the menstrual cycle actually works and refreshed my knowledge. The last time I'd really thought about this was 25 years previously for O-level and A-level Biology, in classes that were a mixture of young men and women, full of teenage awkwardness and embarrassment. It was hardly the ideal learning environment for something that has affected me and my relationships throughout my whole adult life. I realised that I had been given very clinical and scientific information, but that some women, perhaps, had not even had that – or if so, like me, had been given the information many moons ago and it had long been forgotten. Yet knowledge is power, so it is absolutely crucial that women (and men) understand the mechanism of the menstrual cycle and this is explained in **Chapter 2: How the menstrual cycle works** (see pages 24–34).

There's more to this than just biology

I found out how women change mentally and emotionally throughout their cycles when I attended a workshop by Sofya, a yoga teacher and therapist (Sofya Yoga Therapies, 2013). I could instantly relate to much of what Sofya was saying about these changes, and it was fascinating. It explained so many things about me that had felt out of control or had had a strong, usually detrimental, effect on me and consequently on my relationships. I discovered that there are four phases and each has its own strengths and benefits.

Sofya also taught us about charting the menstrual cycle. This enabled me to spend focused time – just a few minutes each day – being fully aware of how I was doing, physically, mentally and emotionally. As I went through the first month it was a revelation to me to see and acknowledge how I changed. I tried various methods of charting and developed my own techniques. After a few months, I had enough information to look for patterns across several cycles and to become even more aware of how I am at different phases of my cycle. It was amazing to see that on some days I felt a particular way – and I experienced the same feeling on the same day of every cycle. It enabled me to understand myself more fully, develop patience and kindness towards myself for how I am and to learn ways to take proper care of myself. More about this invaluable way of discovering the different aspects of yourself as you change through your cycle is given in **Chapter 4: Menstrual cycle awareness** (see pages 47–52).

The knowledge of my biology combined with the findings of my charting was radical for me. The physical, mental and emotional changes that had previously seemed random turned out not to be at all. They follow a distinct pattern and are the natural rhythm of being a woman. I have learnt that the phases of the cycle I had found so difficult for so long, are not me heading for madness or depression, but are introspective times that can be used for insight and healing. I have discovered the different ways my mind works during the different phases of my cycle and stopped being hard on myself when it's a bit slow or not quite so logical. I have identified that other benefits appear when it's like that – my intuition is stronger and I'm more creative. I've encapsulated this knowledge in **Chapter 3: How the menstrual cycle affects women** (see pages 35–45).

Why hadn't anyone mentioned all of this before?

The joy of discovery and deep relief that I was a (relatively!) normal woman was swiftly followed by rage: in three decades of troublesome cycles, no one had mentioned any of this to me. With reflection and hindsight, I saw painfully clearly that during every premenstrual phase, for all those years, I really had felt that I was going crazy. My mother suffered with mental health problems, so for me it had been a genuine and logical fear that I was becoming like her, which terrified me. I had endured severe period pain, utterly unaware that there were simple yoga practices, awareness techniques and self-care that I could utilise that would not only alleviate it but actually eliminate it. If only I'd known all about this sooner I could have avoided years of physical, mental and emotional suffering and anguish. The anger and impatience I usually experienced premenstrually had been a source of stress in my relationships. Life would have been smoother, not only for me but also for those around me, if I had been given this knowledge earlier.

We're not told the truth

I also discovered that the menstrual cycle actually has benefits which I can draw on to be at my optimum physical, mental and emotional wellbeing – where was that talked about? It wasn't in women's magazines, on TV or in the newspapers. Society paints a picture of bleed time as something dreadful – “the curse” – or something to ignore while we carry on as normal. The menstrual cycle has not been treated with the truth and respect that it deserves, as I outline in **Chapter 1: Attitudes towards the menstrual cycle** (see pages 19–23). I was in a rage for months. Some of that rage is still within me now and has fuelled my sharing of this information with the intent that other women will not suffer like I did. There is another way.

Could yoga help my premenstrual syndrome?

My curiosity now led me to wonder whether yoga could help me with the extreme see-sawing emotions and yo-yoing energy of my premenstrual phase. So, again, I did some research and applied my own knowledge of yoga to develop a sequence specifically aimed at the difficulties of this phase. After practising for several cycles, my previously hellish premenstrual syndrome practically disappeared. My cycle charting showed that this phase now lasted about five days instead of ten, making it so much easier for me to manage and live with.

Challenging emotions still came up – mostly anger – and if I gave myself quiet time and meditated to feel underneath, there was deep hurt. Previously I'd tried to hold all of that in, as I had feared that it would overwhelm me or I would explode or I was heading for a mental institution. A large part of the stress and tiredness of this phase had resulted from me trying to fight it: not wanting to be low in energy, not wanting ever-changing moods, not wanting raging anger. Why couldn't I be more constant, more like a man?

However, the yoga sequence enabled me to allow all of those difficult emotions to arise in a way that affected no one else. I discovered the most effective approach was simply to be with it. Originally, I'd tried to let it all go but then I quickly realised that that approach did not work. By creating space to really feel my emotions and to let my emotions be, old hurt slowly but surely let go of me. Over time I found a way to roll with the peaks and troughs of energy and mood, which took the damaging edge off them. My stress levels reduced dramatically.

Underneath all of the premenstrual turmoil, I found something I never knew I had: creativity. I discovered I could channel my anger, frustration and bursts of energy into something constructive or creative – be that cleaning the house or writing this book. Some of that frustration still arises if I do not give myself time and space to create. Becoming aware of all this and surrounding it in as much compassion as I can muster has revolutionised my approach to the premenstrual phase, shifting it from one of dread to one of being able to cope, and sometimes even to welcome.

The yoga sequence and tips for yoga and life are given for you to try in **Chapter 10: Yoga and the premenstrual phase** (see pages 166–203). My intention is that it will help you explore yoga that supports you through the challenges that come up, equipping you with tools to ride out this often-difficult time.

It's not all about the bleed – it's a cycle

I had benefitted enormously from the yoga sequences for bleed time and the premenstrual phase. It was also clear that managing my menstrual problems of pain, heavy flow and premenstrual syndrome did not only lie in specific yoga practices for these phases, but also for the other phases. The yoga I did and how I approached my life in the pre-ovulation and ovulation phases also had an impact on the premenstrual and bleed phases. Yet I had been blindly doing the same yoga practice every day of the rest of my menstrual cycle, not even acknowledging my natural changes, let alone honouring and respecting them. No wonder that on certain days my yoga practice felt like such hard work: I had been going against the natural flow of my being. I discovered yoga practices that enhance menstrual health and wellbeing need to be practised throughout the whole cycle.

So, I researched further to find out more about the recommended practices for menstrual health. I looked at some of the postures recommended in some of the yoga books and laughed – after 20 years of yoga, I couldn't do them, so what hope did the average woman have? I chose postures that I could actually do and started to incorporate these with my own expertise of yoga to work out what would benefit the other phases. I developed a yoga sequence to complement the wave of increasing energy levels in the

pre-ovulation phase, which you will find in **Chapter 8: Yoga and the pre-ovulation phase** (see pages 118–139).

I realised that the shift between the gentle, slow Bleed Sequence and the active, flowing Pre-ovulation Sequence was too big a step for my body to make. I designed the End of Bleed Sequence to provide an intermediate step to reawaken the body after the rest of bleed time, which is given in **Chapter 7: Yoga and the bleed phase** (see pages 102–117).

I created another sequence to match the physically strongest ovulation phase of my cycle but, through menstrual cycle awareness, I noticed that sometimes after ovulation my energy and emotions crashed for two to three days and I wasn't able to do such a strong practice. So, I adopted a different sequence on those days. I have only experienced ovulation pain twice since beginning this exploration. When it came, I reached for the only yoga book I could find with any reference to ovulation pain: *Yoni Shakti* by Uma Dinsmore-Tuli (2014). I found recommended postures and combined them into a sequence that eradicated the pain for me. This sequence is given in **Chapter 9: Yoga and the ovulation phase** (see pages 140–165) for you to try if you experience ovulation pain. You will also find a stronger sequence here to enjoy when you are feeling strong and vital.

Finding balance and harmony

This combination of the appropriate yoga for the appropriate phase together with menstrual cycle awareness, explained in **Chapter 5: Yoga and the whole menstrual cycle** (see pages 53–60), has had other benefits too. It's affected the regularity of my cycle. Previously, my cycle varied in length from 27 to 45 days. I would worry I was pregnant as soon as it went over about 33 days, which was often. Now it is almost always 28 or 29 days long and I feel more in balance. The length of my bleed time has also reduced: previously it was seven or even eight days; now it is usually five, which is easier to manage.

Looking back on my menstrual journey of discovery, I realised that it was not only the yoga sequences, menstrual cycle awareness and taking better care of myself that had been beneficial. Alongside these I'd regularly been practising yoga nidra and meditation, which were also incredibly helpful. Yoga nidra gave me deep, proper relaxation and had a gentle healing effect whereby, over time, difficulties and tensions would lessen and release – with no effort required, except to lie under a blanket. Meditation gave me dedicated time and space to tune into my body, mind and emotions each day of my cycle, and to really listen to what I needed. This holistic approach is given for you to follow in **Chapter 6: How to practice the yoga** (see pages 61–79).

The change in approach to yoga and my cycle has had other advantages. I now see that I am well balanced when I look at my cycle as a whole – low-energy days are balanced by high-energy days; sharp logical thinking days are balanced by slow creative days; days of emotional upset are balanced by contented days. There is constancy in my cyclical nature, paradoxical though that may appear. Connecting my yoga and my life into my cycle helps me to be centred and grounded.

Inspired by all of these benefits, I honed the sequences over a period of four years – adding and removing practices, re-arranging the order, doing a practice in a different way or at a different pace – until they fully met the needs of each phase for me. It was also

crucial that each sequence only took about 20 minutes to do. Who has the time to do more than that?

I continue to explore and experiment with yoga to find what best supports me through the ebbs and flows of my cycle and life. What I offer in this book are all the things I have discovered that have genuinely helped me. You and your cycle are unique, so I encourage you to try whatever resonates with you with a compassionate curiosity. I invite you to explore your own menstrual cycle and practise yoga that is in sync with it so that you can live in harmony with your natural rhythm.