



introduction

WELCOME HOME

I invite you now to set aside everything you think you may know about yoga, its history, and its practice, and its present forms and lineages. Consider instead the possibility that this powerful spiritual practice, this technology for transformation and evolution, this global, grassroots phenomenon that brings peace and well-being to millions, this collection of practices we call yoga, is a naturally arising way of being in connection with elemental rhythms, and that it was perhaps, once upon a time, first inspired by reverence for the intense emotional, psychic and physical experiences of women's life cycles.

And recognise now with certainty that it is largely through women that the practices and benefits of yoga are caressing the globe, spreading a healing wave of positive energy. And now, allow your awareness to be open to the experience of yogic wisdom not simply living within you, but being inspired by the natural rhythms of your own physicality as a woman. Consciousness of yoga is in your body now. Welcome back.

Welcome home to your yoni śakti.

Welcome back to blood wisdom.

Welcome to womb yoga consciousness.

Welcome to a yoga of awareness, delight, and reconciliation with deep knowing. This is a book for women of all ages, and for the men who love them. It presents effective yogic means to live in freedom: to welcome joy, vitality, comfort and courage into daily lives that may seem to have no space left for peace. The practical guidance, stories and philosophical reflections in this book encourage you to reawaken, through an experience of womb-conscious yoga, your own inner guidance that leads you to a state of freedom. *Yoni Śakti* tracks routes for you to reconnect tenderly and respectfully with deep sources of wisdom and intuitive understanding. The practices of yoga and *śākta tantra* which are shared in this book all reveal, through the experience of our hearts and bodies, our wombs and our blood, a profound resonance with the patterns of elemental rhythms: that is the experience that points us to the source of our true wisdom and the state of freedom.

The very term *yoni śakti* locates the place of power [*śakti*] in our own bodies, in our *yoni*, a term that means both cunt or vulva, and womb or source. *Yoni* also means home, or place of rest. It is in and through the *yoni* that we encounter our connection to deeper knowledge, or *blood wisdom*. The term *blood wisdom* conveys a sense of the profound experience of 'knowing already', of recognising, sometimes not always so clearly, that this deep wisdom is present as a sense of spirituality in our lifeblood. The understanding of blood wisdom is that in our very cells, in our wombs, this knowing has never really been absent, and all that has been denied is access to the



living consciousness of the true wealth that this wisdom brings, not just for women but for the whole planet. She is a deep and tender inner teacher. What she teaches is freedom.

Yoni Śakti is not just another book about adapting yoga for women's health. It is a contemporary *Tantra*: a handbook and compendium of practice and reflection, a treasure-house of resources, rituals and wild ideas, a powerful integration of philosophy and techniques for positive living. *Tantra* is often translated as a teaching that expands consciousness, but this understanding is also rooted in the literal meaning of the word *tantra* as a *loom*. So *Yoni Śakti* is a yogic weaving project: in and out through the warp of its structure are woven many different voices, experiences and strategies for living in freedom: there are fairy stories interwoven with instructions for nourishing, feminine practices of womb yoga, and there are radical and inspiring feminist perspectives on the origins and contemporary practice of yoga. *Yoni Śakti* is a rich fabric: it acknowledges the bloodroots of this powerful spiritual technology for awakening, and empowers you to reclaim your personal spiritual assurance in the urgent interests of the evolution of planetary consciousness and environmental healing.

So prepare to be refreshed, inspired and empowered. *Yoni Śakti* invites you to enter a newly embodied consciousness of the transformatory power of *tāntrik* yoga as a tool for global healing and freedom. The womb yoga that it describes moves beyond the biological and emotional aspects of yoga therapy for women's health to explore this deeper knowledge, a profound state of cosmic union, 'yoga', which enables us 'to restore a dignity and deeper meaning to a woman's cyclical nature' (Alexandra Pope 2001: 27). No longer do our yoga practices have to be 'adapted' or 'modified' to be appropriate for women, because they are, in the very essence of their genesis, the womb of yoga, and they lead us each back to our own blood wisdom: to the deep sense of knowing already exactly how to be free.

WHO NEEDS YONI ŚAKTI?

The philosophies and stories in *Yoni Śakti* explore the place of women in yoga past and present, and set out a theory of how women's lives now may be lived in freedom. The practices of womb yoga in *Yoni Śakti* are for any woman at any stage in her life who has an interest in yoga and consciousness, and a desire to support her own vitality, well-being, creativity, sexuality and spiritual consciousness. I have taught womb yoga practices to women of all ages in many different places, and have found that the techniques generally delight and astonish those who are new to yoga, those who are yoga teachers, as well as those who are thoroughly sceptical about yoga, and those who have been practising yoga all their lives. For many women the tender nurturing effect of this approach comes as a refreshing and rejuvenating relief in comparison to other more familiar (or imagined) ways of practising yoga.

Womb yoga is both accessible and esoteric: the techniques themselves are easy to follow, and positively supportive of women's health at every cycle of life. And though the instructions are clear enough for even a beginner to understand, the experiences that often result can open doors to profound levels of connection and

peaceful awareness that are usually imagined to be accessible only after many years of advanced and sustained *tapas*, or yogic discipline. So the practices are open to all, but evoke different and individual responses in each practitioner, depending on their capacity and need. Once, after sharing the ‘five dimensions of being’ practice (pp.183–7) with a group of thirty experienced yoga teachers at a yoga festival, a *yoginī* in her seventies who had been teaching *hatha* yoga for forty years approached me at the end of the session with tears of joy in her eyes to express her thanks for ‘the most beautiful yoga practice I have ever done. My heart is melted.’ In brief, the practices are enjoyable and powerful.

Yoni Śakti was born out of my own desire to understand more about the feminist potential of yoga as a radical force for deep change and freedom in women’s lives. It is both a project of reclamation and a means to reconnection. Telling the histories of the women whose lives have been lived in freedom through the practice of yoga in the past reclaims their experiences for us all to learn from. This is the ‘reclamation project’: it is like picking over the leftovers and cooking up something tasty and sustaining. But reading other’s stories will only bring us so far towards a state of freedom. Our lived experience of reconnection comes through our own practice. The ‘reconnection project’ of *Yoni Śakti* is in the practices it shares. All the instructions for the practices described in part three evolved at the request of women attending yoga retreats, my own students, clients, trainee teachers and colleagues who expressed a need for a comprehensive reference work that would present with detail and context all the practices they had encountered.

This book may be of especial practical use to yoga teachers, trainee teachers and yoga teacher trainers and yoga therapists. Because of the focus on women’s health and women’s experiences, *Yoni Śakti* may also be of interest to health care professionals and educators in the field of women’s health, for example gynaecologists, psychotherapists, women’s health physiotherapists, counsellors, midwives, child-birth educators, doulas and integrative health care providers such as acupuncturists, reflexologists, dance-movement and massage therapists.

WHAT IS WOMB YOGA AND DO I NEED A WOMB TO PRACTISE IT?

Womb yoga is part of *yoni śakti*. It is a means to realise freedom, a technology of transformation. To experience *yoni śakti* is to be empowered, and to practise womb yoga is a way to encounter this power.

It is not necessary to have a womb to practise womb yoga. The meaning and resonance of womb yoga is not tied or limited to the physical organ of the womb. Nor is it intended solely for women whose wombs experience menstrual cycles. It is a practice for all women of all ages, including women who no longer have a womb. In all phases of women’s lives, it is the presence of the womb space energies, the energies of *yonisthāna cakra* (pp.141–2), which has a capacity to provide deep intuitive wisdom, and to reconnect us with the earthed and watery energies of creativity, fluidity, nurture and fertility that are characteristic of this energy centre. The *cakra* is not an anatomical feature. Historically, *cakras* have never been directly linked



to particular aspects of biology: they are part of the energy body. For the purposes of mental focus during practice, however, it may be helpful to associate *yonisthāna cakra* with the physical organ of the womb, but even so, the qualities of experience it generates continue to be powerfully present in the absence of the womb herself.

As the locus of many women's significant life experiences, the womb and her energies can have a powerful presence in the female psyche. But whilst an awareness of womb life is, in the context of *yonī śakti*, the source of unfolding of cyclic wisdom and power, it is limiting to believe that women are simply 'womb carriers'. A central tenet of the women's liberation movement in the 1960s and '70s was to defy the oppression that occurred if a woman's biology was the only thing that determined her destiny. It is important for our sense of wholeness to see that our womb life is part of a whole world of experience that extends beyond our relationship with our womb, but it is not anti-feminist to admit that much of a woman's energy can be devoted to evolving her own understanding of womb life. Whether it be the practical challenges of menstruation, the emotional upheavals of menstrual cycles, concerns about conception or contraception, or anxieties about womb health in later life, including the presence of growths and fibroids, the effects of gravity and hormonal shifts, or issues about the value and function of her womb after menopause and beyond, the life of her womb often powerfully engages a woman's attention. That is why I have named this woman-centred yoga practice after the womb herself.

There are poetic, philosophical and political reasons for choosing to call this approach *womb* yoga. At a poetic level, the word *womb* has potently symbolic resonance as a place of nurture, safety and creativity. It is the place within the body where new life is nourished and protected. The womb is also a place within our embodied (or imagined) understanding of menstrual cycles that connects a woman's body to powerful cosmic rhythms and forces of elemental power. In the same way as the phases of the moon above exert gravitational forces strong enough to create tides in the great oceans, so too do the tides and flows of the body respond to the rhythmic cycles of the 'moon within'. With this understanding of the womb as an interface between individual and cosmic patterns, like the phases of the moon, then any yoga that seeks to support a growing awareness of our place in the order of the universe needs to attend to the rhythmic dances of the womb cycles. In the context of yoga and *tantra*, the word womb is pregnant with the metaphorical and spiritual meanings of the *hiranya garbha* – the golden cosmic egg or cosmic mother's womb, a metaphor for the endlessly fertile and creative cosmic mind that contains the whole universe. This Golden Womb is a manifestation of *śakti*, the feminine energy of creation in *tantra* and in yoga.

So for all these reasons, and at all these levels, *womb* yoga intends to heighten awareness and respect for this experience of the abundant creativity and fertility of *Śakti*, manifesting as the great Golden Womb, within whose nurturing boundaries all our needs are met, just like the child within the mother's womb. And for women, this has a double resonance, because even as we are all held within the Golden Cosmic Womb, so is the individual womb held within the woman herself.

OLD ROOTS

Ultimately, though, this approach to yoga is not really anything new. It is simply one amongst many means to reconnect to our innate wisdom, the knowledge that we hold within us and need only to attend to in order to realise that it has always been there. I have called this kind of knowing *blood wisdom* because of its resonance with the blood tides that flow at menstruation and in childbirth, and because it evokes a powerful primal and ancient sense of already having this wisdom embodied within us.

The spiritual and philosophical framework of *Yoni Śakti* is, appropriately enough for a work that is encouraging us to reconnect with our own ancient ways of knowing, many thousands of years old. The philosophy and practice of *śākta tantra* provides a detailed understanding of the living presence of the power of *Śakti*, the feminine energy of the creative life force, pulsing within each one of us. The full aim and intention of *śākta tantra* is the awakening of awareness to recognise and honour this living presence of the goddess as an everyday reality. Once this awareness is awakened, and with continued practice, the shift in consciousness which it makes possible is so powerful that it can literally change one's whole view of life, and can certainly support a newly confident and assured capacity to value the voice of the inner teacher and the blood wisdom within.

The practices of womb yoga are informed by this awareness, and to do these practices is to enter into consciousness that honours the power of *śakti* within us. In particular, womb yoga is nourished by the experiences of *śakti* consciousness expressed in the Sanskrit poem *Saundarya-Laharī*, which is discussed in chapters five and seven.

WOMB ECOLOGY AND THE SPIRITUAL DIMENSIONS OF FEMININITY

The experience of freedom through *yoni śakti* is rooted in an acknowledgement that those specifically female experiences that centre on or around the womb, such as menstruation, orgasm, childbirth and menopause, can be encountered consciously as potential doorways to spiritual power and heightened intuitive awareness.

This book provides both the philosophical context (in parts one and two) and specific practical yoga guidance (in part three) to enhance the spiritual experience of the great female *siddhis* (yogic powers) of menstruation, feminine sexuality, fertility, birth, postnatal recovery and menopause. The yoga practice is inclusive, holistic and comprehensive. It includes *āsana* (postures), *prāṇāyāma* (breathwork), *mudrā* (gesture), *bandha* (energy locks and seals), *yantra* (visual embodiment of energetic fields), *mantra* (sound), *pratyāhāra* (sense withdrawal), *dhāraṇā* (concentration), *dhyāna* (meditation) and *samādhi* (ecstatic trance). Womb yoga brings together all these forms of yoga in a creative and delicious synthesis of sound, breath, flowing movement and stillness that respects *śakti* (energy) as she flows within each of us, every day, whatever we are doing and wherever we find ourselves. It also includes simple rituals to reawaken consciousness to the deeper significance of life stages and female *siddhis*.

When we practise yoga that fully expresses our consciousness as women, and gives



us freedom to feel the powerful forces of our feminine energy, or *yoni śakti*, then the whole world changes for the good. From the personal experience of physical and emotional benefits which lead to enhanced energy and creative thinking, comes an immensely positive influence on all areas of human life, from work to family, from intimate relationships to frameworks of national organisations and government. The healing effect of womb yoga leads from a personal rediscovery of a woman's blood wisdom to an evolved consciousness of union, to a healing global yoga experience that transforms the consciousness of all humans on the planet. It is the thread of reconnection that leads to freedom.

The practice of womb yoga guides us to rediscover a respectful connection with the inner wisdom of our womb cycles. It is an inner ecology of the womb, explored more fully in chapter twenty-seven. When this blood wisdom informs our life and work then we can honour the cyclical nature not only of a woman's life, but also of all life on earth. From the wisdom born of womb ecology follows a naturally arising global green consciousness rooted in a sustainable and respectful honouring of the natural cycles and energies of the earth, the womb that nurtures all life in our world. So it is through blood wisdom, this spiritual awareness that is literally encoded in the cycles of the female body, that we can access the deep healing that our planet, our earthly womb, urgently calls for now. We are in deep need of such yoga.

YOGINĪS AS AGENTS FOR GLOBAL JUSTICE

The free flowing *śakti* and woman-positive attitudes of *yoginīs* are potent antidotes to the poisonous misogyny of patriarchy. Eco-feminist understandings of ecological disaster and global inequality offer holistic perspectives that are entirely congruent with the teachings of yoga and *śākta tantra*. We can see from this viewpoint that the exploitation of women is part and parcel of unsustainable abuse of the earth's resources. Thousands of years of denigration, oppression and confinement of women's power has created a range of exploitative methods of control and disempowerment that are global, varied and effective. A key casualty of the patriarchal project has been female spiritual power and women's spiritual freedom; for the continued economic and political inequalities of power manifest also as an almost total eradication of any respectful honouring of women's access to our own spiritual authority.

Sadly, the yoga world is not exempt from oppressive misogyny. Many approaches to yoga teaching do not respectfully honour women's spiritual autonomy. In fact, the global yoga community is rife with inequalities of power that compromise women's freedom. This, I believe, is a deep structural problem. For many of the institutions that preserve and promote yoga teachings are modelled on patriarchal lines. They are hierarchical, commercial and often very secretive and controlling of power. These schools and centres are rarely good examples of how yoga can function as a positive force for social justice. Within such structures, women are often manipulated, disempowered and abused by those who wield authority. The nature of these structures encourages the abuse of power, and it is often women, especially (but not exclusively) younger women, who suffer this abuse most consistently and acutely

in the form of sexual harassment by manipulative and exploitative male teachers. How can *yoginīs* fulfil our potential as agents for social justice when we, and the teachings we may share, ‘belong’ (or are seen to belong) to such organisations?

The good news is that these stories of manipulative abuse are now coming out into the open. Even better, as more *yoginīs* become aware of the anti-feminist and ultimately anti-spiritual activities of those in power within these organisations, then we can choose to leave these structures. We can choose not to give them further financial support. They will crumble, and the essential nature of yoga practice will be free to flourish, one woman at a time. This is a powerful route to profound change.

Because yoga lays such emphasis upon personal experience, it values shifts in individual consciousness as the starting points for global and cosmic change. This means that individual women’s yoga practice can be an immensely effective way to rekindle global interest in the wisdom of a feminine experience of spirituality. Individual encounters with this wisdom through the practice of yoga point a way for everyone to live in freedom. Womb yoga and womb ecology are very effective tools for raising consciousness of the value of intuitive female wisdom and the earth-honouring spirituality which follows as a result. They offer positive practical responses both to the current ecological crisis and to the continuing disrespect and exploitation of women worldwide. Projects that are manifesting this work all over the world today are discussed in chapter twenty-seven. The lived, embodied experience of practices that awaken our trust in the inner guide and reawaken our sense of connectedness with the universe which we inhabit is pure yoga, and it has the potential to heal the world, one womb at a time, one menstrual cycle at a time, one birth at a time, one menopause at a time, one woman at a time. Each act of healing increases the collective *yoni śakti*, until we are all free.



HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Yoni Śakti offers an integrated and holistic picture of the philosophy and practice of womb yoga and *śakta tantra* as a spiritual path that empowers women to live in freedom. Some of the practices are developments and combinations of yoga techniques that you may not have encountered before, and some are more familiar, and widely taught.

Yoni Śakti presents history and philosophy alongside practice and case studies, and is punctuated with fairy stories that communicate at another level of understanding. By intertwining a number of different ‘voices’, the book leads towards a synthesis of the many different ways of knowing; the intention of calling on all these different types of knowledge is to invite a complete encounter with many aspects of *yoni śakti*. The freedom which it describes affects all dimensions of our being: the intellect and the emotions, as much as the spiritual imagination and the body.

The first part, 'Foundations', includes the historical, philosophical and practical roots of *yonī śakti* and womb yoga. Chapter one opens with an overview of women doing yoga now, and tells the stories of how western women came to be initiated into lineages and schools of *haṭha* yoga from which they had once been excluded, and what benefits and limitations surround the experiences of women practising yoga in the contemporary yoga world. Chapter two covers the early historical development of yoga, including the presence of women teachers as *tāntrik gurus* and devotional mystics in the time before and during the growth of *haṭha* yoga. This is followed by a radical proposal to consider the female *siddhis* as an intuited and inspirational motivation for the genesis of *haṭha* yoga.

Chapters four to seven combine philosophy and yoga practice. They set out the most unusual and specifically womb-focusing yoga techniques, which are described in detail. These practices are gathered into three groups: 'Awakening to the feminine energy of the life force' (chapter four); 'Greeting the womb with love' (chapter five); and 'Honouring the feminine energy of the life force' (chapter six). These 'womb greetings' and 'honourings' combine movement, breath, sound and stillness with meditative gestures and attitudes, and they are the foundations of womb yoga. They promote a form of awareness that most directly enables you to connect with the presence of the womb or womb energies as an inner guide. These practices are especially useful to do at the start of any yoga session, since they use all means at your disposal to direct the focus of your mental attention to the womb: engaging the physical body, the state of mind and heart, the rhythm of breath, the direction of gaze and the voice. After the instructions for the 'greetings' and 'honourings' (chapters three to six), chapter seven ('Embodied spirit') shares two sequences that give an embodied experience of the philosophical structure of the whole *Yonī Śakti* project. The intention with these sequences is to use the totality of the yoga experience as a way to encounter, at deep levels, the elemental connections and metaphysical understandings of *śākta tantra* as manifesting in your own blood wisdom.

The second part, 'Life Cycles and the Wisdom Goddesses', presents a sustained examination of *yonī śakti* as she unfolds in a woman's life, and the practical use of womb yoga at every stage of a woman's life cycles, beginning in chapter eight with an investigation of how all these cycles overlap and interconnect. Each chapter in this part of the book, from chapter eight through to chapter seventeen, links female life stages and experiences to particular aspects of the Goddess in the forms of the ten great wisdom goddesses.

The third part, 'Further practices of Womb Yoga', includes a complete set of *yoga nidrā* practices specially developed to link to each stage of a woman's life (chapter eighteen). Chapters nineteen to twenty-six are practical instructions for yoga breaths, awareness, locks and energy seals,

individual postures and flowing series of linked movements. Each of these chapters groups together a family of practices and the last chapter in this part presents suggested sequences for programmes and classes.

The final part, 'Expansions', offers explorations of womb ecology and the wider application of *yonī śakti* consciousness as an element of global and grassroots transition (chapter twenty-seven), and as the energising force that is generated and sustained by groups of women meeting together in *śakti* circles (chapter twenty-eight). These chapters are followed by a gathering of inspirational resources that support the manifesting consciousness of your own blood wisdom to live everyday life in a state of freedom.

If you prefer, you may use the book as a reference, to learn more about the particular practices or philosophical ideas which most appeal to you. Part two will be the most valuable resource if you wish to direct your attention to a particular time of life, or to discover those yoga practices which may be most appropriate during that time, since it is in these chapters that the cycles of women's lives are set out with most attention, from menarche to post-menopause, along with recommended practices for many experiences. These chapters offer a clear-sighted glimpse of the cycles of a woman's life from the perspective of a *yoginī*. It is not within the scope of this book to provide complete detailed anatomical or medical information, nor to outline in all their complexity the political and cultural influences that shape women's experience, and for this reason each of the chapters concludes with a set of recommended readings and pointers for further research.

Detailed instructions for all the practices not already described in chapters three to seven are set out in part two. The instructions pay particular attention to the internal awareness with each technique, in order to enable you to more fully understand how these, and countless other yoga practices not included within the scope of this book, may be used to create your own womb-conscious yoga practice.

The index of therapeutic applications at the end of the book (pp.640–4) also makes it possible for you to identify which practices may be of most benefit as you encounter health challenges or life experiences that lead you to feel in need of yogic support. The second index, which lists individual practices, can guide you to the instructions for a particular technique (pp.645–7).

The colour *yantras* (geometric embodiments) of the wisdom goddesses (*Mahāvidyās*) in the appendix are for visual meditation (*trātak*); details of how to use them are on p.660.

However you decide to make use of this book, it is my hope that the material I present will be of service to each *yoginī* and *yogi* who encounters it. I trust that the experience of deep connection with the blood wisdom which this book endeavours to awaken will enable you to nurture with confident assurance the unique flowering of your own *yonī śakti*, the seed of which lies now within your consciousness.

