

## AFTERWORD

# genesis, gestation and birth of *Yoni Śakti*: learning to be fearless

*Do you want to accept the world as it is? Do you want to accept it and join it and become like that? Do you want to be that? Do you want to conform? Do you know what it means not to conform with something? That means going against the whole structure of society, against the morality, business, religion, the whole culture, which means you have to stand alone...*

*Don't just say, 'I am frightened'. The culture in which we are born makes us conform. Conformity brings fear... If you are frightened, then you are caught forever. But if you say, 'I am not going to be frightened', let's examine it, then let's find out how to live in this world without being frightened, without conforming... If you know how to live that way you will never be frightened.*

*Krishnamurti in dialogue with students at Brockwood Park School 1971  
(Krishnamurti 2011: 13)*

*Yoni Śakti* is the book that I wanted to read when I began menstruating nearly thirty years ago. The feminine and feminist approach to women's practice of yoga set out in the previous pages is what I wish I had known about when I first began attending yoga classes and teaching yoga classes to women. What I have shared in *Yoni Śakti* is slow-grown. The practices within this book are the spiritual baby of over forty years' gestation of yoga practice. The sequences and insights have been nurtured through nearly twenty years of teaching and facilitating groups of women of all ages in urban and rural locations from the west coast of Ireland to the heart of Moscow. In yoga teacher and yoga therapist training courses, on Śakti Rising and Womb Wisdom retreats, in yoga classes and at yoga camps, I have been privileged to serve many accomplished and beginning *yoginīs*, as students and clients, supporting them to use a full range of therapeutic yoga practices to enhance their experience of the female *siddhis* of menstruation, fertility, motherhood and menopause. *Yoni Śakti* has presented these explorations of womb yoga as accessible practices that are intended to inspire you to reveal, through your own encounter with yoga, a means of being in union that best speaks the present truth of your blood wisdom. It is my hope that

those who engage with these yoga practices will be encouraged to take a brave and fearless step closer to following the guidance of their own inner teacher.

It took much longer than I expected to write this book because the process of holding, developing and articulating all these powerful ideas was very slow. This slowness was good, because many of the topics presented in *Yoni Śakti* are not neutral: they awaken intense feelings and reactions, and it has been a necessary process to let all the often disturbing and frightening emotions around these topics come to the surface, be examined in detail, and then to set aside some of the troublesome confusions in the interests of clarifying what is most relevant to share. I have taken time to sift through the very angry and fearful reactions and opinions (my own and those of the women whom I serve) that first came to light when I began this journey. What remains, I hope, is a compendium of useful practices and inspiring philosophical reflections that will be of practical benefit to those who encounter them.

In the final stages of gestation, as I was up to my ears in reworking some of the historical arguments and editorial refinements suggested by Mark Singleton, a number of shocking revelations rocked the yoga world. All of these stories related to abuses of power and the sexual exploitation of women by teachers, trainers and other leaders in the wider fields of yoga, including yoga teacher training, yoga therapy and *bhakti* yoga (the increasingly popular yoga of devotional music and song). Whilst I was fiddling with commas and footnotes, attending to the minutiae, the bigger picture of many women's unhappy experiences in the world of yoga came more clearly into focus around me. It was very ugly.

Whilst I was endeavouring to bring harmony and precision into a book celebrating women's empowerment through yoga, all around me disharmony and confusion were revealing just how profoundly disempowered many women had been by the very structures and institutions that purport to promote yoga practice and teaching. I was trying very hard to keep my eyes down and focused on the small picky stuff so I endeavoured not to look too closely at what was being revealed. My priority was to get the book finished. But every day for two weeks I heard yet another sorry tale from a different teller:

Did I know that female volunteers in the service of an international chain of yoga retreats were being sexually abused by renunciates and senior staff? asked a trusted colleague shortly after she returned from a visit to one such retreat.

Had I not heard that devoted young *bhakti yoginīs* had been, just like rock and roll groupies, serving the sexual 'needs' of popular devotional singers touring European yoga centres? asked a concerned musician who had worked on the tour.

I tried not to be distracted by these stories, and I attended to my commas. But then I began to receive emails from disillusioned ex-staff of a globally admired yoga therapy institution, describing how trainee yoga therapists and long-term yoga teachers had been manipulated and controlled by the senior male teacher who had been appointed as their spiritual guide and professional advisor.

The stories kept coming.

I became aware that, despite the resignations of experienced staff and teachers in protest at high-level misconduct, the senior international women tutors of one yoga training organisation had failed to support the claims of sexual abuse raised



by young women against their key male mentor. Five years later the stories had come to light again, along with other, more serious accusations that are were being investigated by Interpol.

Dismayed sister *yoginīs* shared with me how trainee teachers and women staff in one yoga *aśram* were too scared to even enter the rooms of certain swamis because they feared that they would be molested, just as many other younger *yoginīs* had been previously.

One colleague pointed out that even though ten years earlier a *guru* at a huge yoga training and retreat centre had been unceremoniously ousted from his position of power following numerous reports of sexual misconduct with students and staff, this same charismatic yoga pioneer was now back on the workshop circuit, gaining praise and popularity.

Hadn't I heard? enquired a further colleague, that yet another famed yoga *guru* had effectively 'reinvented' himself and had returned to teaching only seven months after some scandalous financial and sexual improprieties had come to light.

Was I not aware? asked my yoga sisters in the subcontinent, of the fact that, even whilst he was under investigation for multiple cases of mental, emotional and sexual abuses, another esteemed yoga tutor was continuing to teach sessions in India.

At first, the more stories I heard, the more I didn't want to listen. I sent out auto-reply emails. I got back to the minutiae of writing. I told people to piss off and leave me alone. I was finishing *Yoni Śakti*. I was working on a celebration of yoga to heal and empower women, I was looking to the future, when women everywhere would be able to find their own power and health through yoga, and it would support them to live in freedom and grace. My mission was to be super positive about yoga as a way for women to connect with their own *yonī śakti*, with their deep source power, with the well-spring of their intuitive knowledge and wisdom.

So just at the point when *Yoni Śakti* was reaching completion, when this huge compendium of positive yogic support for the empowerment of women was almost ready to see the light of day, when after its inordinately long gestation, it was finally ready to be birthed, I was faced with an important choice: whether to include any coverage of these scandals or not.

It simply did not feel right to send *Yoni Śakti* out into the world without any acknowledgment of these stories of the exploitation and abuse of women in the yoga world. But neither did it feel right to re-write the entire book, shifting the focus and tone to a more negative but perhaps more realistic appraisal of the place of many women in yoga now. It was hard to know quite what to do; it was like being about to go into labour and hearing some massive civil disturbance going on outside in the street, so loud and so disturbing that it stalls the process of labour. How to respond?

Initially I simply wrote a new preface on sexual exploitation on planet yoga, expressing my deep disgust at the misogynist abuses that had been revealed to be so widespread. I stuck the preface up front, and hoped that would fix the balance. But even that was not the right strategy. Whilst it was important to acknowledge those very bad stories, it was not a good way to start a book whose purpose was to celebrate women's power in yoga. So in the end, I ditched the outraged author's preface and chose to open with the celebratory invocation to *yonī śakti* that appears on pp.17–21.

So what then is to be done with all those shocking stories? What becomes of all the tales of exploitation and sexual abuse? I have chosen to gather them here at the end, where they put a salutary sting in the tail of an entity that is largely positive and encouraging. For, in the context of a whole book of celebration, it is clear, that on balance, yoga can be very good for women, even if many of the organisations which purport to promote it are rooted in hierarchical and commercial power structures that can foster exploitation and abuse. And we have the capacity to change the power balance here. For at a very practical level, it is a simple matter to make a decision never to support any yoga institution or organisation that condones, accepts or ignores the abuse of the women within it.

In the final edit, I inserted an invitation to this commitment as the first statement of the womb yoga manifesto. Practising what I was preaching, I withdrew my participation as a student from the organisation that had recently been forced to reveal the immorality of its leading male tutor. I simply chose not to pay the next invoice because I sensed that to feed money into any of these organisations is to perpetuate abuses of power and the mistreatment of women in yoga. It is my hope that if other women yoga students and teachers recognise the role that *yoginīs* have to play as agents of social justice, that they too may choose to redirect their money towards individuals and training outfits that do not harbour old fears and new scandals. Without the continued financial support of women, these organisations will not last very long, and then maybe those who exploit and abuse will have nowhere left to hide.

To attend in detail to the significance of all these stories would take a whole new book of its own. But even just to hear the stories of the women who have encountered abuse in yoga organisations is an important part of healing the hurt caused by those abuses. As I began to lecture and talk about *yonī śakti*, at yoga festivals and gatherings, I was privileged to hear testimonies from many women of their truly shocking experiences at the hands of so-called yoga *gurus* and senior teachers (both male and female) in almost every yoga school of which I have ever heard. But even in the face of abuses and exploitations, these courageous *yoginīs* were empowered by the tangible benefits of their own practice of yoga. They have continued to practise yoga, and it has continued to nourish and support them. What these brave *yoginīs* have done is to encounter fear and to overcome it with the love and positive energy that their yoga practice brings them. It is good that yoga practice builds our courage, because courage is what is needed now.

Courage is needed, because deep in the heart of many of the world's yoga organisations, and in all of the organisations and institutions that are home to these stories of exploitation, the organising principle is basically fear. It is fear that enables these abuses to occur. People, especially women, and especially vulnerable young women, are frightened that if they follow their own intuitive wisdom it might lead them to a place of exclusion or ridicule: if we resist the unwelcome advances of those in power, it may cause us to be excommunicated or ousted from the apparently supportive structures that can be centred around powerful teachers. Dissenters will not be allowed to continue to 'belong'. We may fear isolation and disapproval. The older women who may be in a position to protect the younger ones fear that



if they do not continue to support and condone the misogynist and exploitative misbehaviours of those in power, then they may in turn lose their own power within the organisation. Almost everyone is afraid to criticise, for fear they will be cast out. Beyond the current scandals, this fear is almost omnipresent. It is stronger in some places than others, but there is barely any corner of any traditionally structured yoga school or institution that it doesn't reach in some way. If it does not manifest as outright sexual abuse, it is often clearly detectable in other abuses of power within protectionist hierarchies of yoga teaching, for example the exclusion of practitioners and the expulsion of able teachers in the interests of maintaining the status quo.

During the weeks that I was fielding testimonies from colleagues about the deep fear of expulsion that permits the exploitation of women in so many yoga institutions around the world, I recollected the faint echo of an expulsion anxiety that I myself had experienced more than a dozen years previously. I recognised the fear which prevented so many people from speaking out about abuses of power within the yoga hierarchies: it was the same fear that had led my younger self to try desperately to please the power-holders of a yoga tradition so that I could remain safe within it. My struggle to maintain my place on a teacher-training course brought me very close to the suffocating stench of this fear: 'Listen!' hissed the top swami of the establishment as I endeavoured to remonstrate that my expulsion from the course was unfair, and that there should be some procedure for redress, 'Shut up and listen! This is important. When you are a trainer, when you are running your own courses, believe me, you will want to be able to treat your students in the exact same way that we have treated you. You will want to be able to expel students and not to give them any good reason. You will need to be able to do this. This is just how it is: this is how to treat students. This is how we have always trained teachers.' When I suggested perhaps that it was time to consider other ways, the response was emphatic: 'I'm too old to change now – we can't change this. And you can't either.'

I was so stunned that at first I didn't even recognise the deep fear which motivated this proclamation. But once I identified it, then all desires to remain part of any organisation that perpetuated that kind of fear and resistance to change totally vanished. My radical feminist, agent of social justice, union-representative fire rose up inside me and I looked that swami straight in the eye. I could smell her fear. I spoke to it: 'So you abuse me, as a way to ensure that I might in turn perpetuate these same kind of abuses of power upon my future students? And you believe there is no way to change any of this? And you want me to behave just like you?' There was of course no answer. 'Well, you're wrong. That's not what I want to do.' I left. Once I felt free of the fear of not belonging, I never felt frightened like that again.

It was in that moment of freedom from fear that I first conceived of the seed that became *Yoni Śakti*. I knew yoga to be a force for change. I know that using yoga institutions to resist change, or to maintain existing power abuses, was just plain wrong. The seed that was planted in my heart at that moment was very tiny but very potent: its essence was the desire to liberate the transformative potential of yoga from any limitation that might dwarf or stunt its potentially world-changing capacity to grow and thrive. It took a very long time for that tiny fragile seed to grow into this book. But the desire to nurture the freedom for every woman to practise the form of

yoga that most nourishes and honours her at every stage of her life was a powerful motivation, which sustained the gestation and birth process of *Yoni Śakti*. For I believed then, and I know now, that the ultimate aim of any truly good teacher is to enable her students to be better, and more powerful than her. I believed then, and I know now, that yoga is an optimal means for women to encounter their own power. I fervently and honestly desire for all women to have access to those practices and techniques of yoga that most empower and strengthen their ability to honour their own inner teachers, and thus to live in freedom and love throughout the whole of their lives. That is why I persevered through the protracted gestation, long labour and birth of this book.

As a direct result of my desire to be free from the fear that permeates almost every yoga institution I have ever heard of, I have consciously chosen in my work to remain independent from any alignment or affiliation. Even within the apparently open and kind worlds of pregnancy and postnatal yoga, I have encountered a kind of deeply fearful protectionism that manifests as a resistance to allow students from ‘other’ traditions and schools to learn from each other. I have steadfastly kept the doors of all my own trainings, classes and those of the students who have trained with me, absolutely wide open to *yoginīs* from all traditions. The doors can be open because we have no fear – there is no power structure or hierarchy to maintain, and so there are no abuses of power or fearful, protectionist agendas at work. This is a profound freedom to breathe the fresh air of confidence and power.

Exploitative hierarchies harbour the fear of what happens when people can hear the clear guidance of their own inner teacher, and need no-one to tell them what to do. When we stand unafraid, outside these limiting, old structures, then we are truly free to embrace our diversity of yogic experience. We can be clear and strong, empowered by our own yoga practice to listen to the voice of our inner teachers, and to follow the deep intuitive wisdom that can immediately detect the slightest whiff of something that is inappropriate or harmful for us.

The revelations that so disturbed the completion of this book show us how fear can limit and control us, and lead us into situations where we may be harmed and abused. Once I had found a way to place these important stories in relation to the celebratory and positive tone of the rest of *Yoni Śakti*, then the labour that had been stalled by fear, started up again and the book could be born. My own fearful response to that massive disturbance out in the wider yoga world was quieted: I knew that the positive tales and helpful techniques shared in *Yoni Śakti* were safe to be born: they didn't need to be hedged about with expressions of disgust and horror. The gestation and birth process of this book, long and demanding as it has been, has taught me that we have no need to be afraid of challenging the yogic status quo. Now is the right time, the needed time, to be sharing positive news of women's power and yoga.

So long in gestation, so delayed in labour, and so difficult to birth, *Yoni Śakti* is out alive, and its birth cry is a cry for freedom: the freedom to honour your own inner teacher, the freedom to encounter your power, and the freedom to enjoy an open-hearted and fearless practice of yoga that has full commitment to the evolution of women's spiritual empowerment.

