

Essay Bodhiyoga

The importance of a mindful pregnancy for the development of the foetus.

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Introduction

In this essay I describe the importance of a conscious pregnancy for the development of the foetus on the basis of books, articles and a documentary.

In our Western culture there is actually little awareness that real life starts in the womb and not just at the moment of birth. Until not even very long ago it was even thought that babies couldn't remember anything until their second year of life. But research shows that the opposite is true. The 9 months in the womb are perhaps the most important of a person's life.

Where is all starts

The development of the human being begins when the mother's egg cell and the sperm cell of the father merge and thus form a fertilized egg (zygote). The fertilized egg consists of half of the DNA of both parents.

New evidence shows that man is shaped by his environment and not only by his DNA. People are influenced by their environment from the moment they have an environment. That means from the moment the fertilized egg settles in the uterus. From that moment until our death we are beings who deal with, shape and are shaped by our environment. If the mother is malnourished during the pregnancy and therefore does not get enough nutrients to feed her unborn child, this increases the chance of health problems in the adult life of the unborn child. Examples are: high blood pressure, problems with the heart and blood vessels, diabetes etc. But also mental problems such as schizophrenia, depression and cognitive problems occur. Socio-economic factors, illness and medication and the age of the parents also play a role in the development of the unborn child. Smoking, drug use and the use of alcohol during pregnancy, in addition to the above mentioned risks, are also associated with later behavioural problems, addictive sensitivity, negative effect on cognitive functioning, etc.

These are all clear examples of how the environment in the womb affects the later life of an adult. The factor that we value the least, besides the natural physical factors mentioned, is the emotional state of the mother.

The mother as an environment

The first important person in our life is the mother. The mother gives life, gives birth to the child. If the mother feels good, the foetus feels that he is living in a good world. When the mother is stressed, the foetus feels that the world is stressful. Stress weakens the immune system and so does the emotional state of the mother and the foetus. The immune system and the emotional system influence each other.

If you do not sleep enough, if you work too hard, your stress level will rise and your immune system will weaken. If the immune system of a foetus goes down while it is in the womb, it has an effect on the foetus for the rest of its life.

Prenatal life is still unknown to us, but at the same time it is so important for who we are and become as people. You will see it unconsciously in many ways, expressed in films, fairy tales, novels, mythology, folklore, etc. Steiner taught us that every stage in a child's life belongs to a type of story to identify with. According to Dr. Ludwig Janus fairy tales were told in ancient times to help young people overcome their old fears and feelings of impotence that they felt in the womb, during birth and as babies.

Life in the womb is not as peaceful as some people try to make us believe. A foetus can not yet think in words but feels everything, every shiver of the mother. He is the recipient of all happiness and of all the fears of the mother. And it's those fears that cause problems.

We can see the genes that a foetus receives as a blueprint that can adapt to its environment. That is important to survive. It is not so much what genes you have been given but which genes are activated in the womb and are expressed. In the womb you have bad and good environmental factors that cause change. As a mother, it is important to ensure that you create enough good environmental factors. If there is a lot of stress in the womb, the stress reaction of the baby will be different. The reaction that often occurs in children is breaking attention when there is too much stress around them or comes to them. Breaking attention is the hallmark of ADD / ADHD that is increasingly common among children and adults and is nothing more than a defence mechanism. What, according to Dr. Gabor Maté is going on and we cannot recognize is that women become pregnant, are pregnant, give birth and raise their children in increasingly

stressful circumstances. This stress is passed on unconsciously to the foetus and manifests itself in behaviour that is not desirable in our society, such as ADHD, ADD, bipolar disorders, autism, etc. Next, the behaviour that results from this is controlled by the use of medication. However, the long-term effects are not yet well known.

Causes and consequences of stress in the mother

Our current society is in a hurry. We are always on the move, doing something and busy. We hardly know what 'just being away' is. Only being with yourself without distraction from TV, telephone, computer, newspaper, etc. has become strange to us and feels uncomfortable. We are over-stimulated and are barely a moment with ourselves. Going within ourselves has become something unnatural for many. Yoga and mediation are becoming increasingly popular and are now even offered by companies to their employees to try to keep the stress levels under control.

Families today often consist of two-income families. Pregnant women work until their maternity leave but often forget that the time for the leave is just as important for the well-being of her as the foetus.

Because our society has become increasingly individualistic, the community has become less dominant. And it is precisely a pregnant woman who needs a safety net for support and advice from parents, grandparents, wise women. If that is not the case, all the work, the questions, the doubts, feelings and body changes that take place during the pregnancy are brought down on the shoulders of the pregnant woman who then has to figure it out entirely or largely by herself. This can cause stress, anxiety, depression, etc. Stimuli from outside, such as the environment in which you are located or the information you get through media such as television, books, Internet, etc., affect your emotional state.

Emotional states are not just abstract psychological experiences. They have their physiological correlates in the body. When your body is under stress, high levels of cortisol are created, the stress hormone increases your blood sugar level so you can fight or have more energy to escape. Adrenaline is pumped through your system, making your heartbeat faster and your muscles tighten up to be stronger. As a result, you get more energy so you can better escape or struggle. But what if you have a baby in your belly as a woman? What if you are chronically scared? Those same stress hormones and other substances go through the placenta to the foetus that also feels the

stress of the mother. Those stress hormones have a major influence on the brain development of the foetus.

Prof. dr. Moriah Thomason states that in infants, who are exposed to chronic stress in the womb, reduced brain volume is seen and also reduced density of brain matter. If reduced density of brain matter occurs, this suggests that fewer control units are available. We also see a decrease in the volume of the hippocampus and an increase in the amygdala volume. The hippocampus is crucial for memory. The amygdala is very important for emotional processing that responds to emotional information. These two are considered extremely important during the development of the foetus in the womb. The reason is that they are developed at a very early stage during pregnancy. Disruption in those areas is also associated with a higher risk of emotional psychopathology or neuro-psychiatric illness.

How could mindfulness help the mother reduce stress?

Even though pregnancy is a natural process, it may give the mother challenging elements that could cause her to respond with stress. Pregnancy is a time of physical and emotional change with an element of uncertainty about the outcome of the birth process for everyone involved. The amount of stress the woman will experience during her pregnancy is dependant on her physical and mental health; nevertheless, every pregnancy is more or less stressful.

Mindfulness could help to mother to create a better environment for the baby to grow in. The mother is the environment and when the mother feels at ease the baby will feel at ease too. Even though it's near to impossible to not experience any level of stress during pregnancy, practicing mindfulness could help the mother to not act out of anxiety but out of trust.

The effects of mindfulness is still an on-going study, findings so far suggest that mindfulness-based interventions aiming at pregnant woman and their partners do increase the capability of coping with the stress involved in the transition to parenthood. To have inner resources and emotional tools taken from mindfulness to navigate the physiological changes of pregnancy and birth and the developmental change in the life course may have benefit for both expectant parents.

To help expectant parents, Nancy Bardacke, developed the Mindfulness Based Childbirth and Parenting program as a formal adaptation of the Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction Program. As in the MBSR program, the MBCP program provides systematic instruction in mindfulness meditation as a self-regulation approach to physical and emotional health and well-being. The MBCP program is created to help participants to discover previously unrecognized inner resources of strength and resilience. It helps the parents to practise being in the present moment, which is the key to managing one's fears according to Bardacke. "Staying in the present moment without worrying about the past or the future." She also says that women and their partners can learn that the painful contractions of labour come and go, moment by moment, and that between the contractions are moments of calm and ease.

By learning all this participants may develop greater confidence and their fears begin to dissolve which will bring them a deeper sense of well being during this normative life transition. They will realise that giving birth is hard but it's something they can manage if they stay in the moment.

Which mindfulness practices could help the mother?

When starting practicing mindfulness, professional guidance is very important to practice safely until familiar with the practices. There are many mindfulness practices that could be beneficial during pregnancy and birth. Amongst others:

Present moment awareness through mind-body perspective. By closing the eyes and following the voice and invitations of a mindfulness teacher, women and their partners are encouraged to consider how fearful appraisals of pain by the mind may trigger the stress reaction in the body. If this happens during childbirth it can negatively affect the labour process through psychophysiological pathways of the neuroendocrine system. On the contrary, when becoming aware of the negative effects of worrying thoughts and learning how to come back to the present moment and being with it, it can help the body to relax and have a positive effect during pregnancy and labour.

The ***Body Scan*** is an important practice in mindfulness, sometimes called a journey through the body, paying attention to all the different parts of the body one by one. The mind and body have influence on one another. Thoughts can give sensations in the

body and felt sensations in the body can bring up thoughts. Practising the Body Scan can help the mother with the unpleasant or painful sensations that may arise. Practice will help to develop the skill of uncoupling the sensory component of pain from its emotional and cognitive components right in the present moment.

The **Breath as an Anchor** practice will help the mother to focus on her breath. The breath is always available, no matter where you are. By becoming mindful of the breath flowing in and out, the mother will be able to drop down out of the head, where she can easily get carried away with worries. The Breath as an Anchor practice will teach the mother to return to her breath when sensations or thoughts become overwhelming. By doing this it can actually help change the experience.

The **Mindful Movement/Yoga practice** is a meditative discipline. Noticing and moving into sensations during the Mindful Movement/Yoga practice, particularly focusing of sensations of stretching and contracting and noticing what times of ease and rest do between the poses, is a wonderful mindfulness preparation for mothers for noticing the sensations of contractions and the moments of ease between contractions during the labour process.

Getting familiar with the **8 Attitudinals** can help the mother when practicing mindfulness and in daily life. When nurtured the 8 Attitudinals can grow and will help the mother to pass through the pregnancy days with more ease and a calmer mind.

Non-judging – softening the tendency to judge, not trying to label sensations, thoughts or feelings as good or bad.

Patience – allows a deep understanding of the nature of change and allows to be with change with greater inside and compassion.

Beginners Mind – willing to see everything as if seeing it for the first time. It helps to stay in the present moment with your experience now rather than looking at it through the fog of preconceptions.

Trust – helps develop faith in the validity of your own sensations, feelings, thoughts and intuition.

Non-Striving – willingness to allow the present to be the way it is, not trying to fix anything but rather to uncover an awareness of the actuality of the experience and a willingness to let it be the way it is.

Acceptance – by intentionally cultivating acceptance, you are creating preconditions for healing.

Letting go – simply letting things be as they are without becoming entangled in the content.

Self-compassion/kindness – creating a loving space for yourself and others to learn, grow and heal.

By practicing **being in Silence** the mother gets the chance to listen more carefully to her body and could have an enhanced awareness of body sensations and thinking patterns.

The **3 Step Breathing Space** practice can help the mother to come into awareness when things get overwhelming. It's a short practice. It could be seen as taking a short pause. The aim is to have an initial broad awareness of your experience, followed by reducing or narrowing of the focus onto your breath, followed by an expansion of focus once more. It has been called a pocket practice because you can do it anytime anywhere wherever you need it.

R.A.I.N. is another pocket practice. It is an informal practice to decrease stress and anxiety in daily life. It's an effective method of working with mindful self-enquiry.

R= Recognize when a difficult emotion is present; we don't need to like it or accept it, it's here anyway.

A= Acknowledge or allow, we simply look in its direction and say perhaps, "aha, I see you"

I= Invest or investigate we become more curious about what this moment actually feels like in our bodies. It's important not to slip into the story about why this is happening.

N= Non-identify. Often the manifestation of the emotion is not the problem; we can get ourselves into difficulty when we give the emotion meaning. For example, "I'm anxious" turns into "I'm an anxious person". If we use the metaphor of R.A.I.N. and let 'weather patterns' rolling in, staying a while, and then rolling out perhaps we can take it less personally. We can have a new relationship with the emotion.

The **Being with the Pleasant and Unpleasant** practice. Monitoring pleasant and unpleasant sensations, thoughts and emotions can help the mother realise that even when experiencing the unpleasant there is always something pleasant to find in your moment experience. This will help to make the unpleasant sensations, thoughts or emotions more manageable.

An important part of participating in a mindfulness course, even more so for expecting couples, is **sharing** with others. To be able to share and listen to others may help mothers and fathers to feel seen and heard and realise they are not alone in the process of becoming parents. Bonding with others gives a sense of support. Something that is very important during pregnancy and beyond.

Conclusion

Dr. Gabor Maté emphasizes that when we see a dysfunction in people, we really appreciate and understand the importance of the prenatal environment in the development of the child and will realize that we usually see the blueprint of one or more early experiences as a foetus. . These can be conscious and unconscious memories. And although people say that they do not remember anything from their early childhood, it is a researched fact that everyone remembers something. At most it has slipped from a conscious to an unconscious memory.

According to Gabor, the only way to deal with these events is to divert attention from what was going on so that the situation can not be recalled. According to Gabor, we have to distinguish between conscious and unconscious memories.

At many moments in our lives, the blueprint of past experiences thus plays a role that causes confusion or problems. That this blueprint begins in the womb of it should be more conscious.

According to Prof. Loren Weiner must start world ecology with uterine ecology. We can not expect peace and not make good people in the world if we do not raise peaceful, good children. That must start with conception, not just at birth. The more people realize this, the more attention will be paid to how we treat the unborn child. And this means that more attention must be paid to the mother. After all, the mother is the environment in which the foetus lives for 9 months. How else can we make this world into a world in which not so many disturbing, difficult thoughts and feelings are sent to the foetus through the placenta? It is our responsibility as a society to be aware of this and to create a better environment. An environment in which the mother can grow her foetus in her womb in a conscious and safe way and she can prepare for childbirth and motherhood without the unnecessary stress.

Practicing mindfulness allows the development of skills that are important for pregnant women, new mothers and their partners. It encourages them practicing awareness and acceptance of one's thoughts, emotions and body sensations. It can help building stress tolerance, reducing reactivity and avoidance of uncomfortable experiences. This all will help woman and their partners to feel empowered and results in an overall healthier and more positive experience for the woman, partner and child, during pregnancy, labour and beyond.

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