

Labor of Love: My Second Pregnancy seen through the Mamaste prenatal teacher training program

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By Colleen Millen

It's 9 p.m. The belly dance has begun.

I look down and watch as this tiny Aquarian rolls and stretches its limbs inside me. I'm amused and content.

With this pregnancy, I'm also more empowered. Part of the reason is due to the prenatal yoga teacher training I've completed, Mamaste Yoga. Founded by Karen Prior, it is part of the Samatva yoga teacher training, a 200-hour program registered with the Yoga Alliance. Mamaste Yoga, which can be taken as a stand-alone course, offers many routes to certification. Since I live where the program is based, in the north Dallas, Texas, area, I chose to do the home-study with workshop. (The other options are a full home-study and home-study with private session.)



Mamaste Yoga was born from Karen's experience owning Yoga for Women in the early 1990s in Houston. She was teaching mainly ashtanga yoga, and when some of her students became pregnant, she realized she needed to create different classes for them. Guided by her yoga teacher Robert Boustany and *Preparing for Birth with Yoga*, by Janet Balaskas, she started offering "very gentle" prenatal yoga.

"I was scared that pregnant women were fragile," Karen said.

The program shifted, though, when one student's father, who was an OB-GYN, hired Karen to teach prenatal yoga to clients at his practice. The doctor or other members of the staff would sit in on the classes.

"They really taught me how much I could do," Karen said, "[and] that pregnant women weren't fragile and that they could do a lot more. And he turned me on to the ACOG (American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists) guidelines on exercise in pregnancy, which had just come out. Exercise had been quite controversial before then."

While her experience in Houston gave birth to Mamaste Yoga, her subsequent living in New York allowed the program to grow stronger. There Karen began taking prenatal yoga classes from Jyothi Larson at the Integral Yoga Institute during her own pregnancy.

"[Integral Yoga] really believes you are preparing for a marathon—that you have this 6-month period to train for labor," Karen said. (As with Mamaste Yoga, Integral's prenatal classes cater to women in their second and third trimesters.)

Fortunately for me, Karen's journey took her from New York to Dallas, where I found her on the Internet after becoming pregnant with my second child. I inquired about classes in the area and was told I'd need to wait until my second trimester. The philosophy of Mamaste Yoga is that the first 12 weeks of pregnancy need to be restful. Often the mother feels fatigue and nausea (among other changes) as her body is adjusting to sustaining life. Also, in the first trimester, the child develops a strong implantation within the womb and all its organs are formed. As a consequence, the first trimester presents the most risk factors.

Karen advised me to meditate, which, I found, by my third week of pregnancy was all I could do anyway. I was experiencing all-day nausea and vomiting and at the same time taking care of my 3-year-old and settling into our new home. My days mostly consisted of drinking mango juice and eating peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and ginger chews. I wore sea bands to activate the nausea acupressure points. Yoga asana? Let's just say when my son slept, so did I.

Somehow, through my discomfort, I read two books required by Mamaste Yoga—The Pregnancy Book by William Sears and Yoga Mom, Buddha Baby by Jyothi Larson (I would read Janet Balaskas' book later)—and completed open-book tests.

The first trimester and nausea went by quickly, though, and I was happy to start taking prenatal classes with Karen. In retrospect, being pregnant and taking classes with Karen was such a gift. It not only provided me with tools I could take into my own labor and delivery process, it helped me appreciate Mamaste Yoga's philosophy even more.

One aspect that separates Mamaste Yoga from others is that it is based on a routine system that interweaves 36 postures. Any asana falling "into a grey area" is thrown out," Karen said, "because I don't believe in spending time on something that's iffy if there's so much more that is absolutely beneficial and safe."

Although I've enjoyed all Karen's classes, my favorite is Routine 14, which was just added to the program. The class starts with centering and a warm-up, then flows from a "circle of joy"—seated arm movements paired with breath—to a modified cat and dog and downward facing dog sequence. Next comes a series of lunges and standing postures. Goddess and modified king dancer follow and then onto hip openers—malasana (garland pose), baddha konasna (bound angle pose), upavistha konasna (seated angle)—where Kegels (pelvic-floor muscle exercises) are emphasized. The session offers a choice of many finishing postures, but simhasana (lion pose) and gomukhasana (cow-face pose) are most delicious for me.

Within the asana sequences, specific breathing techniques that can be used in labor and delivery are practiced. The technique I've used most often is "easy breath," in which the exhale is done with an open mouth—the thought being that when one relaxes the jaw, the pelvic floor relaxes. When I asked Karen to explain this anatomical connection further, she sent me a long e-mail explaining her research. Karen offered an interesting quote from yoga teacher Liz Koch, who is an expert on the psoas muscle and a former alternative health practitioner. (See "Core Awareness" by Liz Koch, YOGAChicago November–December 2004.)

"The idea of the jaw and pelvis being related is embryology, first of all," Karen quoted Koch as saying. "When the cell begins to divide it becomes the spinal streak...at the top of the streak the head eventually forms and the tail is the tail bone part of the pelvic basin."

But that hasn't been the only anatomy I've learned. Module 2 and especially Module 3 delve into pregnancy anatomy. I completed both during my second trimester. Module 2 consisted of listening to an audio tape and a phone conversation with Karen regarding terms related to pregnancy and labor, including the physiological and anatomical changes. Module 2 also lists Mamaste Yoga's contraindications to practice, modifications and ACOG guidelines.

Module 3 was offered in the form of a workshop in Dallas; it reviewed all the Mamaste pranayama and asana routines and business ethics. After the workshop, attendees were assigned posture sheets. Although a lengthy process, I found writing the postures out to be very helpful for learning the necessary modifications in Mamaste Yoga.

"The Mamaste program is based on research, planning and safety, so the teachers are able to answer questions from their students," Karen said. "[The teachers] know the anatomy for every decision that's been made in the program and how to back it up."

Not all Karen's students are able to take the Module 3 workshop, which is why this portion of the teacher training differs if one takes the full home-study or home-study with private session. Some of Karen's students live a state away, while some live continents away—in Japan and Australia. Kate Tremblay, co-owner of Heartwood Yoga and Body-Centered Therapies in Birmingham, Alabama, is working on Module 3 and finds the program affordable and "immensely informative."

"Karen's program far exceeds any other training I have participated in," Kate said, "in terms of her level of organization, the quality of her materials, her availability for e-mail or phone consultations and her own continually expanding expertise in pre- and post-natal yoga."

I was so happy to have Module 3 done at the time I started substitute teaching prenatal yoga classes around Dallas. I was surprised how many questions I was fielding from the students. "Why am I having this pain?" (This student had round ligament pain. The round ligament attaches the uterus to the pelvic bone and it stretches from two inches—its normal length—to about 12 inches by nine months. Hence, especially in second trimester, the reason for the pain.) "Should I be doing abdominal crunches?" (Mamaste Yoga encourages toning of the transverse abdominals, which are needed to push in delivery, with gentle breath work, in which on exhale a student "hugs" the baby.) "Why do we lie on the left side in savasana?" (Lying on the left side offers the best blood flow for mother and baby.) Through the information I gleaned in training, I could answer many questions and foster a safer environment for my students.

Module 4 included a video review, making my own video and reviewing it and an open-book final exam. The most challenging proved to be the video of my class. I organized a special workshop with four pregnant students. Upon testing the sound before the event, however, I found my video machine was registering a huge amount of background noise. I had to place the machine two feet away from me to be heard.

It was difficult to be "plugged into" the students with a machine glaring at me, but the class went well. Watching me afterward was strange, as I hadn't seen myself on video since my first extensive training with Ana Forrest in 2000. It's not the easiest process to see yourself on tape, but I found it very useful.

After reviewing students' videotapes, Karen says the aspect of Mamaste Yoga that most of her trainees need to work on is how to teach breath.

"Breathing is so important," she said, "[it] becomes second nature, so that when [pregnant women] are under the stress of labor they can use the breath to relax and empower themselves....When women tell me about their birth stories," she continued, "they say that the yoga breathing was what helped them through it."

After hearing that my videotape was acceptable (deep sigh), I began the final exam. Happily, I actually retained much information from the program. I e-mailed the test late one night and received my license to teach the next day during a Yoga for Labor workshop Karen was teaching.

This training has been a labor of love. Mamaste Yoga has empowered me as a yoga teacher and student. I know all that I've learned will contribute positively to my birthing experience as well. However labor and delivery present themselves, it doesn't matter, because, as Karen tells her students during savasana: "tell your babies you're eagerly awaiting their arrival and you'll accept them however and whenever they arrive."

The way this Aquarian is moving, I expect the date will be quite soon.



Forrest Yoga and Mamaste Yoga teacher Colleen Millen, a former Chicagoan, lives in Murphy, Texas, a suburb of Dallas, with her husband, Steve, son Jacob, and her new baby daughter Samantha, born January 26. Colleen can be reached at info@bluebuddhayoga.com. To read more about Mamaste Yoga, visit www.mamasteyoga.com.