

## **Birth as a journey: why an understanding of how to work with pregnancy and birth is useful in supporting work with all clients** By Suzanne Yates

“Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting. The soul that rises with us, our life’s star, Hath elsewhere its setting, And cometh from afar: Not in entire forgetfulness, and not in utter nakedness, but trailing clouds of glory do we come “ (Wordsworth, Ode, Intimation of Immortality)

Wordsworth echoes some of the ideas contained within the more esoteric aspects of Chinese philosophy and medicine: namely that our life has a purpose or a destiny. Whether or not we believe this, it is an interesting idea to consider that perhaps one of the purposes of shiatsu may be to help connect our clients with their inner purpose. I have become more and more aware of this aspect of working with shiatsu due to the emphasis in my practice on working with pregnancy: promoting pregnancy, supporting pregnancy and birth and the adaptation to motherhood. It is a key time in people’s lives: not just for the mother and father but for the baby. It is a time when questions such as the meaning and purpose of life, and the connection to family and ancestral patterns comes to the surface. Through the energetic changes occurring at this time, I have begun to have more of a focus in my shiatsu work with other clients on this type of theme. I also find that I often use aspects of my work with pregnancy with non pregnant clients, such as an understanding of the expression of the energetic of reproduction. I would therefore argue that an understanding of the changes of pregnancy and birth and how to work with them is of relevance for all our clients, not just simply those who are pregnant.

Of course, understanding the energetics of pregnancy helps immensely when working with clients wanting to conceive, especially with the current trends towards increasing difficulties with conceiving naturally. Building on that, understanding the processes of fertility helps support women at all phases of their lives: the switching on of the menstrual cycle during puberty and the switching off of the menstrual cycle during the menopause. Furthermore often issues which women experience during the menopause are directly related to pregnancy such as not having had children or the physical and emotional effects of traumatic births.

However, we have all experienced life in the womb and the birth experience and I would argue that these phases of our lives help us understand fundamental aspects of our basic life imprinting. Indeed, for many clients, the roots of current issues may lie with their experience of pregnancy and birth.

The ancient easterns recognised the importance of the womb experience through their concept of “womb education” (Tai Kyo). They outlined the importance of the mother eating good foods and having a balanced emotional and physical lifestyle in order to support the fetus’s physical and emotional development. A calm atmosphere was generally emphasized, although if a woman wanted a boy she was advised to attend archery contests during certain months.

They sought to understand the development of the fetus both physically and emotionally/spiritually. Vallée (p14/ 15 Pregnancy and gestation) says that fetal development begins with “ the most internal composition, the water, the ability to take a form, the five zang and the five constituent parts of the body and then moves from the depths outwards to the surface and the nine orifices (Guanzi Ch 39 and Lingshu Ch 10)...The sense organs...are able to perceive not only big and obvious things but also that which is not seen or heard directly. The production of a human being implies a destiny not just to comprehend the obvious, but to use the fullness of blood and qi and spirits and all the sensory faculties to go further than what is easily perceptible. The heart or mind can be used to think about what is really important in life and what is the subtle mystery of life”

Many texts refer to the idea of the soul of the fetus developing while in utero. In the first trimester the corporeal soul, the Po, guides the creation of form ( Valle 101 P and G). During the second

trimester the Shen (spirit of fire) is important, while during the third trimester The Hun (spirit of wood) starts to beat. The Hun is the “evolutionary spirit that is raised in virtue as we strive toward manifesting the highest which heaven has placed within. Upon death the Hun exits through the extremity of the liver meridian at GV20...(where) it reports to the spirits that preside over destiny on the degree to which each of us has cultivated virtue during our lifetime” (Jarret p236)

Yuen, an American acupuncturist interprets this as such:

“In a sense, experiences in life have been programmed and are needed so that one can transcend... that is the idea of Harmonisation. The idea is that, if I can't get over it in this lifetime, well I'm going to have to go through the same thing all over again. ...try to transcend it right now, in this life, rather than wait for another life...so that we can willfully die, with no regrets left!”

(Yuen)

Modern science also recognises the importance of life in the womb on the future life of the unborn child. The baby is bathed in the mother's hormones and so is directly affected by changes in the mother's moods (which are linked with changes in hormonal levels, especially stress (adrenalin) and relaxation(endorphins and oxytocin).

Exactly how stress affects the unborn child and the implications for the future adult are unclear; however, early studies indicate the potential negative implications of long term stress on both short and long term maternal and fetal health. If the mother is chronically stressed the fetus will absorb excess cortisol and other fight or flight hormones. These will affect the fetus in the same way as the mother and shunt blood flow from the viscera and organs and suppress forebrain function van den Bergh BR et al 2005, Gitau R et al 2005, Teixeira J et al 1999, O'Connor TG et al 2003, Lesage et al 2004, , Sandman CA, Wadhwa PD et al 1994)

Nathanielsz goes as far as to say “the quality of life in the womb, our temporary home before we were born, programmes our susceptibility to coronary artery disease, stroke, diabetes, obesity and a multitude of other conditions in later life” (*Nathanielsz 1999*). And “that programming of a lifetime health by the conditions in the womb is equally, if not more important than our genes in determining how we perform mentally and physically during our life”. He draws upon research by Bateson (*2004*). A range of adult related chronic disorders including osteoporosis, mood disorders and psychoses have been intimately related to pre and perinatal developmental influences (*Gluckman 2004*)

Recent research on nutrition suggests that good nutrition in pregnancy will affect the long term health of the unborn child. (Stein Z et al 1995) Research is being done into the area of nutrition and its implications by an EU-funded project EARNEST (Early Nutrition Programming — Long-term follow-up of efficacy and safety trials and integrated epidemiological, genetic, animal, consumer and economic research'. (Press Release 07).

Other work on how the womb experience affects the developing baby includes the fascinating work with babies carried out by Karlton Terry, Ray Castellino and William Emerson which considers the many long term emotional and psychological implications of this time. This work is difficult to prove scientifically but it certainly makes sense if one relates to the fetus being aware and developing senses.

The long term relevance of the womb experience, and indeed the time before conception, underlines the importance of working with pregnant women so that they can be enabled to look after themselves and connect with their baby in order to best support their physical and emotional development at this crucial time. However, when working with any client, we can hold an

awareness of their time in the womb, so that they may be enabled, as appropriate, to connect with their destiny and purpose for being here. Further the experience of the time in the womb can be revealing of a deeper understanding of who they are and how they live in the world. For example, was the womb space happy, safe and comfortable or stressful? This may affect how the client responds to the experiences in life of being contained, supported and nurtured as well as how they relate to their mothers.

The experience of birth is also considered by many, particularly Karlton et al as also being an important developmental time. Karlton refers to how many of the neurons in the brain start making their connections in the time just before and around the birth. Much of their work is based on this awareness. Modern science/obstetrics does not so much consider birth from the baby's point of view but there are increasing studies on the impacts of the different types of birth experience (ref Gentle Birth)

The ancient Chinese however, considered the experience of birth to be much more important for the baby than the mother. Indeed, they did not so much consider supporting the mother but rather the baby during the birth process. The phenomenon of using shiatsu to aid relief from pain and enhance the experience for the mother is an extremely recent concept of the past 30 or 40 years. They considered it far more important to protect the Jing of the baby. For this reason, birth would be in a darkened room and strong voices and shocks and contact with metal would be avoided where possible.

" Waking up from a dream, the child is capable of rotating their body, opening up the envelope and finding their path. They follow the amniotic fluid and descend " ( Xu Chun Fu, from Ming period quoted in Essaylet and translated by Suzanne Yates). This has echoes of the Wordsworth quote. If the baby was not breathing well at birth, then it was considered that they hadn't woken up from their dream. The first cry and the first gestures of the baby were taken seriously. The music master who had accompanied the mother in the last few months would determine the note of the cry. The cook would work out which of the five tastes would correspond to the baby. The time of the moment of birth and the placement of the stars would help identify the Nature of the child (Xing) and their line of destiny (Ming). Of course, in ancient China, the society was much more rigid and there would be specific ways outlined in which the child was expected to fulfil their pre-ordained destiny. However, this awareness can be applied in modern societies to enable people to identify their pathways in order to support their own personal journey.

The baby was considered to be vulnerable in the early days because the Shen is open. In order to protect the Shen, the baby was placed in immediate and direct contact with the mother's abdomen.

In using an awareness of the importance of the journey of birth we can relate to birth as our first journey in the world: it imprints our basic way of transitioning. How we move from the womb space to outside provides a model of how we move into new situations. It is also a potentially stressful experience: indeed many argue that it is our first experience of stress and thus shapes how we respond to stressful situations in life.

It is all very well to understand this and have experienced this process but how do we work with it with shiatsu in a safe way? I have found that simply being aware of the links and holding that awareness within my work with a client can open up the space in order for them to connect with it. I also find that people only connect if they are ready to, or if it is relevant for them. I find the most powerful tool is using visualisations and the breath: not guiding someone too specifically but guiding them through a journey in which they may or may not connect with their womb or birth experience. This type of work is, for me, a fundamental part of working with shiatsu. I often find that both clients and students on workshops often connect fairly easily with these experiences if they are of relevance at that particular time in their lives. For pregnant clients, visualising their baby in the

womb can help them connect more deeply and they can also connect with their babies journey while they are birthing.

The other main tool I use in my work in order to tap into the energy of pregnancy and birth, are the extraordinary vessels. Circulating the Jing, they tap into core energy and often when the vessels are worked upon, clients often spontaneously and with no prompting, go back to their experience of time in the womb or their birth experience. I use these vessels extensively now in all my work with clients: both pregnant and non and including work during pregnancy and the birth process itself.

How I work with the extraordinary vessels is through work directly on their pathways as well as work with the opening and associated points. I find that this work is usually slower and energetically much deeper than work with the 12 meridians and requires that the practitioner is still and focused and working from a semi meditative state. I work holding points for longer and tapping energetically back into that womb/birth experience if it is relevant while working on them. I work with all of the 8 extras , although the most relevant for pregnant women are the Conception, Governing, Penetrating and Girdle ( Ren, Du, Chong and Wei Mai). It is usually relevant to include work with some of the 12 meridians in order to fully support and connect with the energy and certainly it is important to understand the connections between the 8 extras and the 12 meridians.

Pregnancy and birth is such a powerful time in all our lives. I feel eternally grateful to my own children who led me to specialise in this field. Of course I have especially learnt extensively lot from my students and clients and I feel humbled to be constantly in touch with the very meaning of life itself.

## Suzanne Yates

**body-worker and birth educator,**

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Suzanne has been developing a holistic approach to maternity since 1989. Motivated by her first pregnancy, she began to deepen her professional shiatsu and massage work to specialise in maternity care. She established 'Well Mother' in 1990, teaching shiatsu, massage and exercise to women and their partners in Bristol, UK, to help them connect with the wisdom of their body.

Since 1988 Suzanne has taught courses for midwives, shiatsu and massage therapists, internationally, regularly visiting N America, Australasia and Europe. She has written 3 books: "Shiatsu for Midwives" published by Elsevier in 2003 which has proved popular amongst therapists. "Beautiful Birth" is for parents (Carroll and Brown 2008) and "Pregnancy and childbirth; an holistic approach to massage and bodywork" her book aimed at bodywork therapists will be published in 2010 by Elsevier.

She continues to work with mothers as well as professionals and this guides her to deepen her knowledge and expand her skill base. She works with women trying to conceive as well as women going through the menopause. Her passion lies with integrating eastern and western approaches to offer a complete health care system for women at all stages of their lives.

She is visiting Australia and New Zealand to teach again in September 2010.

Future articles do you want me to include these? I could write one for next mag but you could delete.:

Specific training in pregnancy work.

How to work alongside medical personnel and the implications of birth interventions.....That would be next article...

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