Baby Bliss

Meditating and nursing an infant have striking—and surprising—similarities.

By KATHERINE PEW

I sit quietly, eyes closed, cocooned in sweetness, merged in a love that softens me to the bones. The clutter of daily minutiae is swept from my mind like a magician whipping the tablecloth from under the plates and glasses without disturbing a thing. When I am breast-feeding our daughter, the experience is exactly what I always imagined meditation would be, or ought to be. Nursing Greta brings a bliss akin to the spiritual masters' description of *samadhi:* union with the divine through meditation.

I have come to realize that meditation and breast-feeding have striking similarities. In the beginning especially, meditation can be physically painful, mentally trying, and deeply frustrating. Breast-feeding a newborn can also be exhausting, demanding, and depleting. The first time around, with our son Everett, it was difficult getting him to latch on. My skin was so raw and sore, it felt like I had a piranha suckling at my breast. Mercifully, that phase passed quickly. But, unlike meditation (a practice you can skip if you don't feel up to it), once you commit to nursing an infant, you have to follow through. This can be helpful if—like me—you lack discipline in establishing a daily practice. Procrastination is not an option when you have a wailing, hungry baby and you are her only source of nourishment. Rescheduling is out of the question. But after a few weeks of breast-feeding, I relaxed into it completely and it became delightful.

Before I had children, I tried intermittently to meditate: to carve out the time to sit down, close my eyes, turn inward, and stop my mind from rambling. It was always a struggle—something I resisted. Occasionally, I mustered the discipline. But I never managed to stick with it. In contrast, breast-feeding has been an effortless joy, a state in which my mind takes on a magical buoyancy and a serenity I was never able to sustain in meditation. I had glimpses of tranquility while meditating, but I never got past my physical discomfort and my busy mind. I never got over feeling like it was work. Nursing is my way into *yogash chitta vritti nirodah* ("yoga is the cessation of the whirlings of the mind"), the second and most essential of Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra*. Breast-feeding banishes the *chitta-vrittis*. When I see Greta's ecstatic smile, I can't help but think that this must be the expression of samadhi.

"A baby and his caregiver have no past to explain, no future to plan," writes Daniel Stern, MD in *Diary of a Baby: What Your Child Sees, Feels, and Experiences*. "Their only 'topic' is the single moment happening now: two human beings mutually engaged. These interactions' only goal is to sustain that experience. They are not preliminary to something else; they are that something.... A baby is not only exclusively interested in, he is limited to the social events in the 'here and now,' between us."

Babies naturally exist in the ideal state all would-be meditators aspire to—they have the ability to "be here now," a state which Ram Dass and other yoga masters encourage spiritual seekers to strive for. Babies not only possess the ability to be totally present in the here and now; it is actually the only state they are capable of existing in.

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Three years ago, when I had my first baby, I was able to sit still and nurse him for long periods of time, my mind peaceful, with no desire to do anything else. I gave myself permission to do just that. Now, with Greta's tiny, warm body

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curled against mine, it is happening all over again. Breast-feeding is the antidote to all things hectic. The moment I begin, I feel the tension draining from my body. My neck and shoulders relax, my jaw goes slack, and my brow softens. I let go of everything I was holding onto, without even realizing it. Sometimes, when I wake in the night and my mind takes up its fitful wandering and worrying, I find myself longing for Greta to wake up, so I can empty my mind as I fill her belly, the transfer of warm milk restoring harmony and soothing us both back to stillness. It is a tremendous relief to take a sabbatical from multi-tasking. Sitting in a glider by my window in Brooklyn, I look out at the late afternoon sun. It polishes the brick building across the street a godly hue of burnished red. When I am nursing, life slows down and I watch the passage of time, minute by minute. I feel Greta's tiny feet pressing against my thigh, like a kitten stretching its paws. With her delicate fingers grasping mine, my mind has no desire to skip ahead. I watch a bird on a branch, turning its head from side to side and blinking its tiny black eyes. I examine the buds of some sort of fruit on the tree, which I never noticed before. I watch the people on their way home from work. I see mothers pushing strollers, stopping to wait for their older children to catch up. My eyes linger on my next-door neighbor, her back hunched, strolling her little dog around the block.

{ BREAST-FEEDING }

A NEWBORN BABY'S IDEAL FOOD comes directly from her mother's breast. Science has shown that breast-feeding protects against such potentially grave diseases as gastroenteritis, respiratory illness, urinary tract infections, and necrotizing enterocolitis. Ayurveda teaches that mothers continue to transfer *ojas* to their children through their milk. Mothers in India used to breast-feed sweetness into their children for up to five years. Although the modern world has stolen such opportunities from most Indian urbanites, village and tribal women who do not live under time pressures continue to offer their own juices to their children long after they could get by on cooked food alone. Even today, in India's cities you can still see migrant construction workers along the road-side, hammer in one hand crushing rocks to pebbles, the other hand support-ing a child avidly suckling at the breast. —*Robert E. Svoboda, BAMS*

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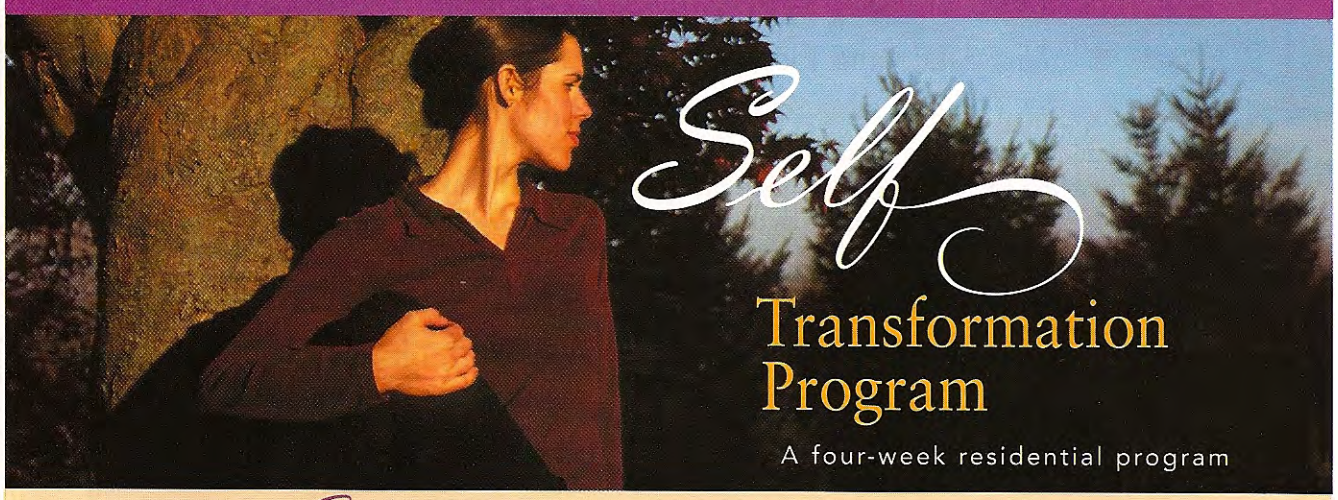

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These small, everyday happenings are elevated, bathed in the magnificent glow that emanates from my connection to the blissful little being at my breast.

When Greta opens her eyes and looks at me, my heart is stretched like Hanuman leaping across the sea. Nursing encompasses every yogic teaching I know. An infant is the embodiment of *saucha*—a pure being, untainted by corruption. Her purity is irresistible, infectious. When I am nursing, *santosha* (contentment) runs through my veins. The knowledge that I am the life-force for this baby, that I am nourishing her from my own body, gives rise to a panoramic kind of joy.

In yoga, we strive to fulfill our highest potential, to be selfless and loving and kind and patient. In the *Bhagavad Gita*, Krishna tells Arjuna, "Slay all that is selfish in you. Extinguish your ego." *Nirvana* means "to blow out." Motherhood is the perfect yogic training ground.

Pandit Rajmani Tigunait discusses meditation and mantra in depth in his book *Inner Quest: The Path of Spiritual Unfoldment*. One marvelous insight reminded me of my experience of nursing: "The sense of delight—the feeling that the burden of your mind is being lifted—is a sign of deep meditation. During deep meditation, your whole body is charged with the divine energy of your mantra. Afterward, you feel like a child of bliss—a princess or prince of peace." While I am breast-feeding, I feel my mind being lifted. Afterward, I feel charged with the divine energy of Greta's ebullient spirit and purified to the quick.

In a recent yoga class, my teacher Ruth gave this commentary from part one, verse 48, of the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika:* "If you can concentrate on a holy object without the mind vacillating, then the mind will pass from the object to the essence of that object—and then eventually even that will pass into something very vast, like love, calmness, well-being or saintliness."

Concentration leads to absorption and union with what you are focusing on and, ultimately, to samadhi. If the concentration is sustained, the relationship of subject and object is eventually dissolved, creating perfect equanimity and unity. Ruth's point was that when you are truly concentrating, you are what you are doing. In meditation at the end of class, Ruth guided us to focus on that which is holy, perfect, innocent, light, and open. My blessed little babe came to mind, the sweetest, rosiest-cheeked lass east of the Mississippi. And the closest thing to samadhi west of the Himalayas—at least in my book.+

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