

Lotus Birth - A Ritual for our times

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Lotus birth is the practice of leaving the umbilical cord uncut, so that the baby remains attached to his/her placenta until the cord naturally separates at the umbilicus- exactly as a cut cord does- at 3 to 10 days after birth. This prolonged contact can be seen as a time of transition, allowing the baby to slowly and gently let go of his/her attachment to the mother's body.

Although we have no written records of cultures which leave the cord uncut, many traditional peoples hold the placenta in high esteem. For example, Maori people from New Zealand bury the placenta ritually on the ancestral marae, and the Hmong, a hill tribe from South East Asia, believe that the placenta must be retrieved after death to ensure physical integrity in the next life: a Hmong baby's placenta is buried inside the house of its birth.

Lotus Birth is a new ritual for us, having only been described in chimpanzees before 1974, when Clair Lotus Day- pregnant and living in California- began to question the routine cutting of the cord. Her searching led her to an obstetrician who was sympathetic to her wishes, and her son Trimurti was born in hospital and taken home with his cord uncut. Lotus Birth was named by, and seeded through Clair to Jeannine Parvati Baker in the US and Shivam Rachana in Australia, who have both been strong advocates for this gentle practice.

Since 1974, many babies have been born this way, including babies born at home and in hospital, on land and in water, and even by caesarean section. Lotus birth is a beautiful and logical extension of natural childbirth, and

invites us to reclaim the so-called third stage of birth, and to honour the placenta, our baby's first source of nourishment.

I am a New Zealand GP (family MD in America), and have 4 children born at home in my adopted country, Australia. I have experienced Lotus birth with my second and subsequent children, after being drawn to it during my second pregnancy through contact with Shivam Rachana at the Centre for Human Transformation in Yarra Glen, near Melbourne. Lotus birth made sense to me at the time, as I remembered my time training in GP obstetrics, and the strange and uncomfortable feeling of cutting through the gristly, fleshy cord that connects baby to placenta and mother. The feeling for me was like cutting through a boneless toe, and it felt good to avoid this cutting with my coming baby.

Through the CHT I spoke with women who had chosen this for their babies, and experienced a beautiful post-natal time. Some women also described their Lotus-Birth child's self-possession and completeness. Others described it as a challenge, practically and emotionally. Nicholas, my partner, was concerned that it might interfere with the magic of those early days, but was happy to go along with my wishes.

Zoe, our second child, was born at home on the 10th of September 1993. Her placenta was, unusually, an oval shape, which was perfect for the red velvet placenta bag that I had sewn. Soon after the birth, we wrapped her placenta in a cloth nappy, then in the placenta bag, and bundled it up with her in a shawl that enveloped both of them. Every 24 hours, we attended to the placenta by patting it dry, coating it liberally with salt, and dropping a little lavender oil onto it. Emma, who was 2, was keen to be involved in the care of her sister's placenta.

As the days passed, Zoe's cord dried from the umbilical end, and became thin and brittle. It developed a convenient 90 degree kink where it threaded through her clothes, and so did not rub or irritate her. The placenta, too, dried and shrivelled due to our salt treatment, and developed a slightly meaty smell, which interested our cat!

Zoe's cord separated on the 6th day, without any fuss; other babies have cried inconsolably or held their cord tightly before separation. We planted her placenta under a mandarin tree on her first birthday, which our dear friend and neighbour Annie later dug up and put in a pot when we moved interstate. She told us later that the mandarins from the tree were the sweetest she had ever tasted.

Our third child, Jacob Patrick, was born on the 25th September 1995, at home into water. Jacob and I stayed in the water for some time after the birth, so we floated his placenta in a plastic ice-cream carton (with the lid

on, and a corner cut out for the cord) while I nursed him. This time, we put his placenta in a sieve to drain for the first day. I neither dressed nor carried Jacob at this time, but stayed in a still space with him, while Nicholas cared for Emma, 4, and Zoe, 2. His cord separated in just under 4 days, and I felt that he drank deeply of the stillness of that time.

His short "breaking forth" time was perfect because my parents arrived from New Zealand the following day to help with our household. He later chose a Jacaranda tree under which to bury his placenta at our new home in Queensland.

My fourth baby, Maia Rose, was born in Brisbane, where Lotus birth is still very new, on 26 July 2000. We had a beautiful 'Do It Yourself' birth at home, and my intuition told me that her breaking forth time would be short. I decided not to treat her placenta at all, but kept it in a sieve over a bowl in the daytime, and in the placenta bag at night. The cord separated in just under 3 days and, although it was a cool time of year, it did get become friable and rather smelly. (Salt treatment would have prevented this). Maia's placenta is still in our freezer, awaiting the right time for burial, and I broke off a piece of her dried cord to give to her when she is older.

My older children have blessed me with stories of their lives before birth, and have been unanimously in favour of not cutting the cord- especially Emma, who remembered the unpleasant feeling of having her cord cut, which she describes as being "painful in my heart". Zoe, at five years of age, described being attached to a 'love-heart thing' in my womb and told me "When I was born, the cord went off the love-heart thing and onto there (the placenta) and then I came out." Perhaps she experienced her placenta in utero as the source of nourishment and love.

Lotus birth has been, for us, an exquisite ritual which has enhanced the magic of the early post natal days. I notice an integrity and self-possession with my lotus-born children, and I believe that lovingness, cohesion, attunement to nature, trust, and respect for the natural order have all been imprinted on our family by our honouring of the placenta, the Tree of Life, through Lotus Birth.

Please contact me if you would like more information on Lotus Birth

The red velvet bag which I made for Zoe has been used for 20 more babies and I am happy to lend it out to local families.

Shivam Rachana, at the CHT has recently published a beautiful and comprehensive book on Lotus Birth and the CHT are keeping a register of Lotus Birth babies in Australia.; phone her on (03) 5965 2325 for more information. Address PO Box 233, Yarra Glen, Vic 3775. Australia. Email golden@xtreme.net.au or, for details of the book, see www.vicnet.net.au/~icsm/lotus_birth/launch.

In the US, Jeannine Parvati Baker has produced a Lotus Birth information pack- see her beautiful site www.freestone.org for details. There is also more about lotus birth on the wonderful site www.birthlove.com