

YOGA and the MENOPAUSE

At the IYA (UK) national convention in Bath, 2005, Corine Biria gave a very interesting and thorough day on the menopause for Iyengar teachers and trainee teachers.

Kirsten Agar Ward presents a set of notes from that day.



WHAT IS MENOPAUSE?

The menopause is defined as the time when the periods don't occur for 9 months at a stretch. It usually occurs between 40 and 50 years of age. Irregular periods and less abundant periods are signs of its onset. Pre-menopause is the time of life between having regular periods and the absence of periods and this can last 5 to 6 years. Menopause proper is when a new hormonal balance sets in. In this latter phase one can lose the 'inner touch' if one remains motionless and this can result in osteoporosis. There can also be physical disturbances - the thyroids and adrenals become hyperactive and the ovaries less active, which can result in hot flashes, high blood pressure, insomnia, obesity, headaches, loss of balance and emotional disturbance, including anxiety and depression.

- 5) Hot flushes
- 6) Nerve problems
- 7) High blood pressure

In the workshop, Corine looked at each of these areas in turn:

I. FATIGUE

Ia) Head fatigue

This is a result of the change in the lower abdomen. According to yoga there is a relationship between the abdomen and the brain as there are glands in both. Inversions help as they improve the blood supply in the brain. Thus **rø sana sarv ng sana hal sana setu bandha sarv ng sana* with their variations should be practised.

We spent some time looking in particular at *sarv ng sana* as throat congestion can be a common problem during pre-menopause as, if the uterus is hard then the throat is hard so care must be taken to add more height of supports (eg foam blocks and 4 blankets) so that the neck is slanted and released. One can see if it is correct by observing the student's eyes. Add more height until they do not feel they are choking or use two bolsters. Hardness in the neck can also be a problem; it must always be very soft because by this point we control blood pressure and the mind and emotional state are steadied. *Nir lamba sarv ng sana* is very helpful to release the back of the neck. It should feel as if the brain is moving away from the forehead, as if there is a weight on the forehead - this comes from the correct movement in the nape of the neck. To do this, unfold blanket once, then pleat into three sections then place the number of blankets normally used but folded like this widthways close to the wall so there is just enough room for your head (not quite touching the wall). The toes go on the wall at first then the top of feet. First adjust the armpits to fully open, rotating the arms out, then adjust the neck by taking hold of the head and elongating towards the crown - this immediately brings peace. NB this latter pose is not helpful if a person has a neck problem.

Ib) Abdominal fatigue

Abdominal fatigue means that the abdomen is squeezing

YOGA HELPS

Yoga quiets the nervous system and brings balance. However, the sequence and way of practising are both important. During the menopause proper one has to do everything in practice, touch all the corners of the body. In the pre-menopause phase one may have to be soft in one's approach for example if suffering hot flushes and do more at other times, eg if the body is aching.

SYMPTOMS OF MENOPAUSE

- 1) Fatigue (in head, abdomen and/or thighs)
- 2) Bleeding
- 3) Stiffness
- 4) Swelling/heaviness

and dropping. One has to get an opening feeling in the abdomen but without irritation. Thus the standings have to be done diagonally (but backbends avoided): ie trikoi sana p r vakoi sana, ardha chandr sana, v^arabhadr sana I v^arabhadr sana I (with support). It is important to check that the abdomen does not contract; it must be opened before it can be relieved. Also the throat must be elongated (teacher can lift chin if necessary), but if there is a neck problem look at the floor:

To do standings diagonally, have front foot on front edge of mat and back foot on back edge. Ideally use a trestler or a corner of a table keeping the support of the angle for the tailbone. Alternatively have the back to the wall, back foot against wall and front foot on front edge of mat, high brick for hand, and revolve and elongate top hand on wall. Alternatively angularly face the wall, back heel on back of mat and front foot to wall, teacher's knee in tailbone. For p r vakoi sana use a lower brick, teacher stands behind with hand on inner bent leg thigh and knee in tailbone, other hand in ribs and lift up. Do ardha chandr sana from trikoi sana then place lifted leg on a tall stool, teacher stands behind and holds inner thigh heavily, use outer thigh/hip in student's hip to move their outer buttock towards their back leg. Alternatively if there are two teachers, one holds ribs underneath, raises, elongates and turns, the other holds student's lifted leg far back out of line. Student wraps arm round helper:

Ic) Thigh Fatigue

In this case don't insist too much on standing poses - ardha chandr sana and utthita hasta p d ngueth sana can be done. Supta p d ngueth sana (side) is helpful - take side leg to floor with belt then strongly revolve hip towards floor, so there is full elongation on inner thigh of lifted leg. If a helper is available they can have a double looped belt round ankle and round top groin of student's (right) lifted leg and pull away from trunk, with right hand press down their left hip, hold student's inner ankle with other hand. Alternatively one can have foot diagonally under student's lifted leg buttock instead of the belt. It is important to remove the dent in the inner groin. Can also do supta p d ngueth sana (across).



2. BLEEDING

In the pre-menopausal phase bleeding can increase and the frequency of periods can increase. However, technically bleeding is only a real period if it occurs after ovulation. When there is bleeding which is not after ovulation one can do inversions. Baddha koī sana in ^arō sana, baddha koī sana in sarv ng sana and chair sarv ng sana are all helpful if done correctly so that the abdominal organs are levelled. Usually the problem of increased frequency of periods goes away after three months. Daī sana, baddha koī sana, upasviøaha koī sana, L-shaped svastik sana and p r va sarv ng sana with bench, all have a drying effect.

For irregular periods one needs to balance glandular problems and relax the abdomen, minimising the inner irritation. Corine gave us three programmes:

2a) Programme for too frequent periods:

- ◆ Cross bolsters
- ◆ P rvott n sana
- ◆ Supta v^ar sana (with bolsters)
- ◆ Matsy sana
- ◆ V^aparita daī sana (with support for buttocks and brick)
- ◆ Matsy sana in v^aparita daī sana
- ◆ J nu ^arō sana
- ◆ Pariv ttā nu ^arō sana
- ◆ Paschimott n sana with brick
- ◆ Upasviøaha koī sana (sitting & lateral)
- ◆ Pariv ttapasviøaha koī sana
- ◆ Baddha koī sana
- ◆ Supta baddha koī sana

2b) Programme for too frequent and too heavy periods (only to be done after the third day)

- ◆ Baddha koī sana (L-shape)
- ◆ Upasviøaha koī sana (L-shape)
- ◆ Baddha koī sana (sitting with props)
- ◆ Upasviøaha koī sana (sitting with props)
- ◆ Rope ^arō sana in baddha koī sana
- ◆ V^aparita daī sana in baddha koī sana
- ◆ Supta baddha koī sana (buttocks and sacrum upwards)
- ◆ Chair sarv ng sana in baddha koī sana
- ◆ Ardha suptakoī sana
- ◆ Setu bandha sarv ng sana in baddha koī sana
- ◆ Setu bandha sarv ng sana in upasviøaha koī sana
- ◆ V^aparita karairi baddha koī sana OR svastik sana

2c) Programme to do just after bleeding

In between cycles add inversions and standings with the back against trestler with hand on brick. After the third day, the next programme can be done. Do the following for 10 days:

- ♦ Ardha chandr sanawith trestler - to lift & turn lower abdomen,
- ♦ V^arabhadr sana I with trestler - to lift & turn lower abdomen,
- ♦ V^arabhadr sana II with trestler - to pacify abdomen
- ♦ Utthit p r vakoi sana with trestler - to lift & turn lower abdomen
- ♦ Pras rita p dot n sanawith support - to pacify abdomen
- ♦ Utt n sanawith supports
- ♦ Adho mukha v n sana with rope and forehead support
- ♦ I^arø sana with brick - drying
- ♦ Sarv ng sanawith chair in baddha ko1 sanadrying
- ♦ V^aparita da1 sanawith feet elevated
- ♦ J nu ^arø sana with bolster - pacify abdomen
- ♦ Paschimott n sana with bolster - pacify abdomen
- ♦ Upasviøæha ko1 sanawith bolster - pacify abdomen

We looked at some of these poses for bleeding in more detail:

I^arø sana: the anal mouth has to go in and slightly down as the pelvic plate goes up so that the internal organs lift. If problems with these three actions do baddha ko1 sana in ^arø sana - 1st lift hips up so perineum is level to ceiling, then anal mouth will go down, then anal mouth tucks in. Take the shins down to correct. Once all three actions are correct then lift internal organs up towards ceiling. Inner organs front back and side all have to lift together towards ceiling, ie levelise. Take care toes don't tilt.



Baddha ko1 sana: if front abdomen drops or lower back drops lift buttocks on a raise until front and back are levelised. If there is a tendency to tilt the hips don't use a lift instead focus on taking the tailbone in. It is essential to remove any tension in the diaphragm otherwise it is impossible to release the lower abdomen.

Upasviøæha ko1 sana: raise the inner organs without raising tailbone up. Move tailbone down. Inner organs have to go perpendicularly up. When hips are exactly levelised, feels fluid inside

L-shaped baddha ko1 sana: this is difficult to adjust but very good to remove irritation. Always use a slight support under buttocks and knees (blankets) even if very flexible. One belt for each thigh. Supports diagonally under thighs and shins according to hip flexibility. Weights on bolsters in front of shins to push shins forward and slightly downward.



L-shaped Da1 sana: use v^aparita da1 sana bench or chair if bench not available. Three belts on thighs and weights on bolster on thighs. Hands on bricks if necessary. If there is heavy bleeding take the head back on a roll as this brings lightness in the lower abdomen.

P r va setu bandha sarv ng sana: on bench with v^aparita kara block & bolster for head. Do setu bandha on the bench then teacher moves the bench to a diagonal position. Stay 5 minutes each side. This elongates the uterus and repairs it. Can also do with legs in baddha ko1 sana, svastik sana and matsy sana.



How to do backbends for bleeding: one can see the general principles from cross bolsters and v^aparita da1 sana on a bench. When you want to lessen the flow:

- a) Pelvic area should be higher than rest of body
- b) Spread legs and raise on a height of 2 bricks. Belt between feet and weights on inner heels.

Both the above can be done on cross-bolsters and in v^aparita da1 sana on bench.



v^aparita da1 sana on bench is better than chair if available as it supports the whole body. On the bench the sacrum must be lifted so pelvis is the highest point. To do this use a small piece of mat (approximately 2' X2') folded under sacrum/tailbone & legs apart. The pelvis has to be level so the internal organs are levelised, to do this the pubic bone should be absolutely parallel to ceiling. Beginners should not stay too long (5 mins) otherwise it will cause irritation rather than reduce it. More experienced stay 10-15 mins.

J nu ^arø sana: lengthwise bolster on thigh, lift abdomen over and completely rest trunk without rolling the organic body. This stops hip tilting. But if stiff and feel squeezed inside then use bench with bolster on top.

Paschimott n sana: can be done in a similar way to j nu ^arø sana above. It can also be done sitting on bench or with a brick between the lower inner knee corners, support the head and a belt round ankle bones. Hit both outwards and inwards to give abdominal relief.



Standing poses for bleeding:

Pras rita p dot n sana with bolster for abdomen on stool. Lift abdomen up as for seated forward bends. Weights for outer feet. Front and back organs exactly levelised, adjust height accordingly.

v^arabhadr sana II on stool. Have to levelise pubis before lift leg so support has to be correct height. Pacifies kidneys and internal organs.

3. STIFFNESS

Sets in along with hormonal changes, as these result in a natural fall in calcium, which in turn results in the spine narrowing and becoming crooked and compressed over time. The process starts at around 30 years of age. After menopause the joints become less flexible which can result in osteoporosis. The first sign of osteoporosis is the tailbone going back, and after 10-15 years this results in a bent over body. You have to act at the first sign. With osteoporosis it's important to use supports because of the delicacy of the bone, but in all cases the spine shouldn't be narrowed or hardened. The muscles move away from the bone and everything is soft so one loses stamina. It's important to keep the groins and joints free and give extension of bone in the joint. When we get old lordosis comes in the dorsal and the sacrum becomes compact and lifeless.



Corine emphasised how as we age the muscles don't work, so we need to use supports to help us learn how to make the muscles work again. For example, if there is a back problem do supported backbends, with a hip problem do supported standings (once the hip atrophies change the programme). We need to learn through the supports. She also noted how we need to work on compactness in the joints:

Adho mukha v n sana: feet and hands together to get the support to open the joints. (Incidentally this is also good for men, especially with respect to the gastric disorders they often suffer in middle age).

Standings: sciatica is very common as the groins become hard in which case all standings should be done with the trestler and front foot up as this allows the groins and pelvic area to get opened. In old age we need support for standings, for example, in trikoi sana the front leg groin



is closed and from the back the hip is closed and back. Supporting the foot (toes up) and using a brick for hand improves the sacral action and the femur comes closer to the hip joint which gives relief as the muscles are no longer jammed.

V^arabhadra sana I can be done diagonally on mat with front foot lifted up wall back foot crossed over. Work from root to turn, trying to levelise the hips.



Supta p^d ngu^oth sana i:1st bend the leg and get compactness of thighbone to hip then straighten without losing it. As with all the poses find the inner touch/inner feeling.

Bharadv^j sana I one needs compactness referred to above in all poses, eg in the spine. Corine also demonstrated this point in Bharadvajasana I in which there will be problems if the spine is loose. When turning to right look at right muscles in dorsal, lumbar, sacrum and see where they come away from spine - this area has to be taken in and then turn maintaining this. NB never push the ribs of a 40+ woman in adjusting this pose.

4. SWELLING/HEAVINESS

Tends to occur in abdomen, legs and feet. For all these do:

- ◆ standings facing trestler or wall and decrease the quantity.
- ◆ L-shaped da¹ sana (as before)
- ◆ L-shaped svastik sana
- ◆ Baddha ko¹ sana and upasvi^oa^ha ko¹ sana with concave back.

Don't do:

- ◆ Urdhva pras rita p^d san^aathara parivartan sana or n^v sana as in this case they create pressure in chest, stress in brain and hot flushes and so create a fear complex.

Particularly helpful for leg swelling are:

- ◆ Urdhva pras rita p^d san^a against a wall
- ◆ Setu bandha sarv^{ng} sana
- ◆ V^aparita karai
- ◆ And everything for opening the joint

5. HOT FLUSHES

Generally these come because a key hormone is lost, and once the body is adjusted to this they don't come anymore. In particular they occur because of contractions in the lower abdomen or sudden irritation of muscles. Do:

- ◆ Uttⁿ sana with head support
- ◆ P^d ngu^oth sana
- ◆ P^da has^a sana
- ◆ P^rvottⁿ sana
- ◆ Pras rita p^{dot} n sana

- ◆ Adho mukha vⁿ sana with head support
- ◆ Slanting baddha ko¹ sana (instead of ^ar^o sana) on setu bandhabench
- ◆ Forward bends
- ◆ Ardha hal sana
- ◆ Setu bandha sarv^{ng} sana
- ◆ V^aparita karai
- ◆ lav sana

NB Omit ^ar^o sana as it increases hot flushes

Can also add paschimottⁿ sana and mar^achy sana I into the above programme.

If hot flushes suddenly come whilst in a pose when it was all right at first it means the stay in the pose was too long. The person must come out of the pose and not hold so long. Poses should not require an excess of effort. There should be no irritation in the muscles. It is helpful to use a bandage for eyes and brain.

At pre-menopause the groins get hot, the inner groins get stiff and this causes lower back pain. Opening the pelvic rim and inner thighs is very important and considerably reduces hot flushes. Do standings facing a trestler as this reduces pressure on the body and decreases hot flushes, because there is no strain in the abdomen. The head can be rested on the trestler to keep the brain quiet and avoid irritation of muscles, which leads to hot flushes. v^arabhadra sana with chest on a stool reduces hot flushes.

6. NERVE PROBLEMS

Programme for pre-menopausal and menopausal:

- ◆ Supta baddha ko¹ sana
- ◆ Supta v^ar sana
- ◆ Matsy sana
- ◆ Chair v^aparita da¹ sana
- ◆ ^ar^o sana in upasvi^oa^ha ko¹ sana and baddha ko¹ sana
- ◆ Pras rita p^{dot} n sana
- ◆ Uttⁿ sana
- ◆ J nu ^ar^o sana
- ◆ Paschimottⁿ sana
- ◆ Chair sarv^{ng} sana
- ◆ Ardha hal sana
- ◆ Setu bandha sarv^{ng} sana (bench)
- ◆ V^aparita karai
- ◆ Ujj^{yi} pr¹ y ma II
- ◆ S^{rya} bhedhanapr¹ y ma
- ◆ Chandra bhedhana pr¹ y ma

Practice of pr¹ y ma is essential for inner balance, patience and peace

7. HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE

- ♦ Utt n sana
- ♦ Adho mukha v n sana with supports
- ♦ Utt n sana
- ♦ Pras rita p dot n sana
- ♦ Adho mukha v n sana
- ♦ Adho mukha v^ar sana
- ♦ Forward bends with weights
- ♦ Supta baddha ko1 sana
- ♦ Ardha hal sana (check the head position)
- ♦ S lamba sarv ng sana (check the head position) or nir lambasarv ng sana against wall.
- ♦ Setu bandhasarv ng sana (check the head position)
- ♦ V^aparita kara (check the head position)
- ♦ lav sana
- ♦ Pr 1 y ma on exhalation.

GENERAL PROGRAMME FOR BEGINNERS AT MENOPAUSE

Choose from:

- ♦ lav sana
- ♦ Cross Bolsters
- ♦ S lamba p rvott n sana
- ♦ Ardha utt n sana
- ♦ Adho mukha v n sana
- ♦ Bharadv j sana
- ♦ Standing mar^achy sana

Standings:

- ♦ Urdhva hast sana
- ♦ Triko1 sana
- ♦ P r vako1 sana
- ♦ Ardha chandr sana
- ♦ Supta p d nguøth sana and II
- ♦ Utthita hasta p d nguøth sana
- ♦ T sana - lying down hands overhead
- ♦ Supta v^ar sana
- ♦ Supta baddha ko1 sana
- ♦ Matsy sana
- ♦ P d nguøæa dand sana - concave back
- ♦ J nu ^arø sana - concave back, then with head support
- ♦ Upasviøæha ko1 sana- concave back, then with head support
- ♦ Dand sana - concave back, then with head support
- ♦ Backbends:
- ♦ 1st rope
- ♦ 2nd rope
- ♦ V^aparita da1 sana legs parallel
- ♦ Urdhva dhanur sana (1st with support, 2nd without support)

- ♦ V^aparita da1 sana (1st with support, 2nd without support)
- ♦ Inverted poses - s lamba/nir lambasarv ng sana (with chair)
- ♦ Ardha hal sana or ardha supta ko1 sana
- ♦ Setu bandha sarv ng sana
- ♦ V^aparita karai
- ♦ Lying pr 1 y ma with ujj y and viloma II

After pre-menopause start with standing poses:

- ♦ Ardha chandr sana
- ♦ Utthita triko1 sana
- ♦ Utthita p r vako1 sana

Then do twisting standings with trestler:

See also menopause programme on Yoga for Stress CD Rom (available from IYA (UK) - see page 52).

Once menopause is established women have to:

- Do Standing poses
- Elongate the bones
- Lubricate the joints
- Do Backbends
- Do Inverted poses
- Remove the lump in the back
- Do rope movements
- Do forward bends with concave back
- Open the groins

Corine concluded that menopause must be lived as a passage to old age. The mind can get very negative - it is the first thing to say the body cannot do something and it ignites fear. The body must remain healthy to allow the mind to remain healthy.

