

The Spiritual Practice of Menstruation
by Jane Hardwicke Collings

There is so much more to the menstrual cycle than the biology lesson given to explain it, in the same way that there is so much more to sex and childbirth than the mechanics. The menstrual cycle is a cycle to base your life around, in fact your life is based around your menstrual cycle whether you realise it or not, whether you pay attention to it or not. And everyone who lives under the same roof is under the influence of the menstrual cycles of the women who live there.

With the introduction of drugs to suppress menstruation completely - "Feel the same every day", is their catch cry, with the wide spread, almost epidemic use of The Pill by our young women, with the Earth, the feminine, in crisis, now more than ever we must seize our birthrite and know our bodies and reclaim the 'women's blood mysteries'.

There is magic inherent in the menstrual cycle. Each cycle provides a woman with the opportunity to understand and read the messages her body gives her for any specific healing she needs. Each cycle creates the opportunity for as much spiritual growth and personal development that she could want. All a woman has to do to connect with that potential is simply to be with what is, her cycle, happening over and over. The distressing symptoms that so commonly surround a woman's menstrual cycle in our day are often due to women simply not being connected with their cycle and ignoring their body's messages or symptoms, messages there to indicate specific emotional, or physical needs or imbalances. Our menstrual symptoms are usually 'wake up calls' about the amount of toxins in our lives, whether that be in the food we eat, the company we keep or the stress levels we create from our lifestyle.

Women's cycles are effected by the moon.

A woman's cycle and the lunation cycle (moon phases) are the same cycle. Before electricity, women ovulated when the moon was full, and bled when the moon was dark. The pineal gland in our brain sends messages to our ovary, by hormones, to release an egg based on the amount of light our brain senses in the night when we are asleep. At the point of most light in the night, the full moon, we are programmed to ovulate. Women who live in the country are more likely to be in synch' with the moon, as are women living in primitive cultures. Ovulating at the full moon means we bleed at the dark of the moon, the time when the energy is more inwardly focussed anyway. The average menstrual cycle is the same as the lunation cycle 28 days.

Modern life with the artificial light and constantly bright nights has disrupted our natural inclination to be in synchrony with the moon. The biological blueprint for our fertility cycle is very different to how it happens now. Imagine the disruption this creates. Not only are we meant to be synchronised with the moon phases, we are also meant to be synchronised with each other. Like we are sometimes.

Many women have no connection with the moon and no idea what particular phase it is in. When they begin the practice of regularly observing the moon, tracking its path across the sky, noticing its waxing

and waning, most often their cycle begins to synchronise with the moon phases. They ovulate with the full moon and bleed at the dark of the moon or the opposite, depending on their phase in life. And sometimes they change again, depending on external influences.

You can ovulate twice a month.

Each woman has the potential to ovulate a second time in her cycle when the phase of the moon is the same as it was when she was born - her lunar return. This is called the Lunar Ovulation and explains all those pregnancies that happen when women think they are not fertile. This second ovulation happens unless the lunar return occurs at the same time as your normal cycle's ovulation, or you are fully breast feeding (although that's not the case for everyone), pregnant or on The Pill. Its easy to find out your lunar return and so when you ovulate the second time each month. You just need to find out the phase of the moon on the day you where born. Many books have that info, such as an ephemeris and you can find out on menstruation.com.au.

The World's first Shamans were women. Shamans are medicine men and women. In ancient cultures they were the healers who used their special talents to access the hidden realms to receive information to facilitate the healing process. They used trance and drumming to communicate and connect with nature to receive information. It has been supposed that the Shaman was a man's role but in fact anthropologists and archeologists have discovered that the first shamans were women. This is obvious when the tendencies of women at different times of their cycles for prophetic dreams and other worldly communications are considered.

The Sanskrit word for ritual and menstruation is the same - r'ku. The word root for menstruation mens, is the same for moon, month and measurement. The first measurement of time, the first calendar was based on the menstrual cycle.

So, the cycle:

The menstrual cycle is a cycle within a cycle. The bigger cycle is the woman's life cycle, her life seasons, which are just like the Earth's seasons. Spring - Maiden, Summer - Mother, Autumn - Maga, Winter - Crone.

Every cycle is the same as very other cycle, just different lengths. The cycle goes - birth, growth, full bloom, harvest, decay, death, rebirth. The menstrual cycle is the same cycle. And it is also divided into four quarters like the Earth's seasons. Weeks 1, 2, 3 and 4. If you have a cycle that is consistently longer or shorter than 28/29 days it's the first half of the cycle that is shortened or lengthened. Provided that you are ovulating, the second half of the cycle is fixed and is always the same either 13, 14 or 15 days. Each week of the fertility cycle is as different to the other weeks as the Earth's seasons are different to each other. It's the characteristics of each of these weeks that are the opportunities for the spiritual practice that I speak of. Week one resembles spring energy. Week two summer. Week three autumn and week 4 winter. Each week our inclinations, energy levels etc and the messages from our body are

different. They speak of the physical situation of that point in the menstrual cycle and the related emotional situation.

So if you know where you are in your cycle you can much more easily 'go with the flow' so to speak. You could even manage your life around it. Start new projects in the first and second week of your cycle. Express your creative urges when you have them. Have parties when you're ovulating, finish off things in your third week. Stay home, and be on retreat when you're bleeding. You'll have a lot less strife in your third and fourth week if you know you will be retreating when your blood comes, you'll actually be looking forward to your blood coming, and be ready 'to let go'. Here's an outline of the emotional and psychological energies of the cycle, week by week that you are dealing with, or if you aren't consciously, give it a go. If you are aware of the specifics of the lunation cycle you will see the direct connection.

Week One (Day 1 - first day of bleeding - Day 7):

- Death Rebirth Phase
- Inwardly focussed, quiet.
- On retreat or wishing you were or creating situations in your life so people will leave you alone (for example fights).
- Life review.
- Visions of how it might be this new cycle.
- Letting go of ways or beliefs and attitudes that no longer serve - both metaphorically with your prayers and intentions and literally with your blood. Spring energy, building as your blood stops flowing. A time for metaphorically planting seeds for the new cycle.
- During bleeding: "I feel quiet, inward", "I don't want to be disturbed".
- After bleeding: "I feel soft, a bit vulnerable", "I feel as if I'm peeking back out at the world "Here I come again".

Week Two (Days 8-14)

- High Energy Creative Phase.
- Summer energy
- Increasing physical, sexual and creative energy building to a peak at ovulation.
- Urgent creative feelings.
- Heightened awareness of self and others.
- More interested in physical appearance.
- "I feel happy, excited, full of energy", "I can do anything!"

Week Three (Days 15-21)

- Coming Down and Harvest Phase
- Autumn energy
- Post ovulatory descent - can be positive or negative, a sense of pride or failure
- May experience feelings of failure or elation depending on what you achieved from your creative peak in the few days after your egg has died unfertilised.

- "I lost my chance", "I feel useless". "I am so awesome, look what I did!"
- May feel relief or regret (at not being pregnant, literally and metaphorically)
- Feelings of wanting to get rid of unnecessary things around you or in your life
- Wanting change
- Things or ways of being that are no longer working for you show up.
- This may be confronting or a relief or both depending on how long you've been ignoring these promptings will depend on how you react to them showing up again. This happens to get your attention so you can let go of them in this and the next phase.
- "Everything seems to be hard", "Nothing feels like it's working". "I've been so busy, I'm so glad I can rest now".

Week Four (Days 22-28)

- Distillation and Clarity Phase
- Winter energy
- Lessons from this cycle are available to be seen and felt
- Either glad of the where you're at with your life or fed up (again)
- Feeling ready to let go and surrender or feeling frustrated and annoyed
- Less interested in everyone else, less available emotionally to others. Inwardly focussed
- "Don't ask me to do anything, leave me alone" "I get it now, I'm letting go of this and not taking into my next cycle."

And of course this all goes for the corresponding moon phases and the seasons as well. Understanding the way of cycles brings with it an awareness of the flow of energy, the wisdom in that flow and the opportunity to be in synchrony with that flow.

I believe, honouring her fertility cycle is a woman's responsibility. It is in fact one way she can participate, in helping to correct the imbalances that have been created through not honouring the feminine. An issue that we must address so that we can live harmoniously on our planet. Through honouring your menstrual cycle, you help heal the "wounded feminine" the symptoms of which ravage the Earth and most of her people. By honouring her cycle a woman honours the feminine, the dark, the juicy, the mysterious, the feminine power of creativity, sexuality and our Mother Earth.

Symptoms of the Menstrual Cycle or rather messages from your body:

I was talking to a young woman about her cycle, starting to lead into the flow of the energy in our cycles and how she could be with that to best suit her life and I asked her 'Are you on the pill?' 'Yes', she was 21 and had been on it for seven years because she had bad period pain at 14. I suggested the concept that her body was giving her a message that she wasn't heeding, that maybe she needed to rest in bed with a hot water bottle. She said nothing had worked, her mother even needed to take the day off work to look after her. I didn't feel I had the license, so to speak, to take the conversation deeper, but if I did I would have asked her about what she needed to do at 14 to get her mother's attention, to get her needs met? And I would suspect that her whole story would unravel and she would 'see' that what had been going

on in her life regarding her needs being met or not, was manifesting through her cycle, her period pain. Instead of taking the opportunity to 'hear' her body speak to her of her needs - physical, emotional and spiritual needs, and any imbalances, she was subjected to the enforced regulation of The Pill. The fake version of a cycle, in fact when you're on The Pill, your body 'thinks' it's pregnant. I've heard also that when you're on The Pill your inbuilt pheromone radar system that checks out likely mates for their suitability ceases to work.

The different physical and associated emotion symptoms that you experience through your cycle, are your body, your Self alerting you to a particular need you have that requires meeting. If you chart your cycle you will see that the symptoms happen at different times that have different needs.

The crankiness, impatience or annoyance so infamously called Premenstrual Syndrome, that we may experience in the last two weeks of our cycle, is really more about the feelings you have because you are not flowing with what your body really wants you to do - that is slow down, withdraw from the busyness of the outside world and look after yourself, not everybody else. In your premenstrual week you feel less interested in the outside world and desire quiet time to yourself. If this doesn't happen or isn't possible because of your living arrangements, you may become very edgy, easily upset and in a 'bad mood', this serves its purpose and usually drives others away from you anyway. There's one sure way to get some space to yourself and that's have fights, so no one wants to be around you! Often times, the bad moods, so to speak, associated with the end of the cycle are due to the woman knowing that even though she'll be bleeding next week, and would really rather be having sometime to herself to do that, she will have to carry on regardless, looking after everybody else and not herself. If she knew at this time, that next week she was going to have 3 days to herself, to rest, read, write, draw, whatever, her moonlodge, red tent time she wouldn't be cranky, she'd be looking forward to it.

The other thing that happens in the third and fourth week of the cycle is that everything that's not working in your life shows up. Like, ways you've been behaving in relationships, ways you've been meeting your needs, or not, old patterns, anything, everything. It's Nature's design that at this time, you notice outmoded ways of being so you can let them go with your blood and replace them with their evolution next cycle. Each month when you bleed you can consciously let go of old ways, patterns and beliefs that no longer serve you. You can do this for yourself and also "for all your relations", the collective feminine. It's the contemplative and reflective energy of this phase of the cycle that facilitates this great opportunity, your inner autumn pruning, as it were.

Cramps at bleeding time are to get you to apply some heat to your belly or back, and to get you to withdraw, from the outside world, so you notice what you're feeling and thinking. You will hear your inner wisdom and have new ideas about how to do things differently for those outmoded ways you let it go of with your blood. When we bleed we are more tired and when we sleep, when we bleed we may dream more than usual and it is common to have prophetic dreams at that time. So that's why your body sends you messages of tiredness, so you will sleep more, and have those dreams.

When you emerge from your raw bleeding state, hopefully you will bring with you what you have learned from listening to her inner wisdom. In the tradition of the Native American's Moonlodge, the community waited for the wisdom that the women returned with from their moontime retreat. They would come back with information about when and where to move camp, about where the buffalo were etc. The community valued this highly and made their plans around it, they honoured the wisdom of the feminine.

Watch the cyclical nature of your libido, your sexual desire and your body awareness. Women usually experience increased libido around ovulation for the obvious reason that there's a chance they will conceive, and that's the case even if that's not their plan. They pay more attention to the clothes they wear and how they look, leading up to and during ovulation. Sometimes women feel more sexual just before they bleed too. This is because their vulva and vagina is more filled with blood in that fullness we feel around our pelvic area, just before our blood flows. And because relative to the lower levels of oestrogen and progesterone at this time of the cycle, our testosterone level, responsible for many things including libido, is high.

The severity of symptoms you experience throughout your cycle will be a direct result of all the things that influence your state of health. What you eat, what you think and what you do with your body. Eating a good diet, and a regular yoga and meditation practise are the best things you can do to regulate your system and ensure it functions from a harmonious space rather than out of balance.

Ways to honour the menstrual cycle

The flow of the energy through the cycle gives us the clues for how to honour it. It's a good idea to let the people you live with know if you are going to change the way you do things at your bleeding time. Their support will be important to the success of you implementing these life changes.

Week One

Retreat from the busyness of the world, even just for an evening. Have a relaxing bath by candle light with essential oils. Try geranium and rose. Create your moonlodge or red tent, this is as much a state of mind as a physical space. Wear particular clothes or jewellery when bleeding, red stones or appropriate crystals. This can also serve the purpose of notifying the people you live with that you're bleeding. Suggestions from Cassarne, my crystal advisor: Two crystals resonate with the bleeding time and the choice can be made depending on which the wearer is more drawn to. Carnelian: this relates specific to the sacral chakra and our creative centre, it brings balance to the female sacred organs and empowers the feminine in its process. Moonstone: provides a balancing healing energy, especially of the emotions which may be in a vulnerable and fragile space. It assists in the balance and awareness of our hormones in their "dance" through our cycle. It is also a lovely stone to wear when it's one's bloodtime as it reminds us of our connection with the moon and all her & our rhythms. Moonstone reassures us when we are in retreat at this time. Garnet could also be worn purely because of its deep blood red hue and its resonance to our physical experience at this time. Plus it keeps one grounded and strengthens the healing energy of the Earth with our heart. Experiment with dreaming by asking particular questions of

your dreams. Invoke a particular Goddess archetype to be with you during your bloodtime, perhaps Maeve or Kali. Draw or paint. Meditate - with or without questions and perhaps focussed on what it is you will let go of with your blood this cycle. Do gentle exercise such as walking in nature and consciously connecting with it. Feed yourself well. Use special linen at bloodtime, like red coloured! Use red towels. Be kind to yourself - go with your flow! The bleeding phase of the cycle is as if a monthly enactment of a vision quest. On day 3 of your cycle, just like in a vision quest, do a meditation and ask for a vision. You will be gifted with a vision to inspire and fuel you for your next cycle, write about it, draw it and refer back to it. Make Blood Prayers - collect your blood by soaking your pads, and return the blood to the Earth, in a ritual with your prayers and intentions for your next cycle and beyond. With your blood that you give, return to the earth, metaphorically attach the unwanted ways you want to let go of. The Earth transmutes everything that returns to her, your prayers for your new cycle are made new from that. Pour the blood on the garden, many women have a special blood rose to pour their blood around, and they grow so beautifully!

The red dot that the Hindu women put between their eyes, on their third eye, used to be menstrual blood and was done so to invoke the potential visionary aspect inherent in the bloodtime. Your blood carries with it all your genetic information and your ancestors genetic information, so this practice could open your third eye to specific personal information and ancient knowledge. The third eye area is also the place of the pineal gland, referred to in ancient knowledge as the "seat of the soul", so this practice could well increase connection and communication with one's 'higher self'. This practice could be done at bed time with a special invocation to remember your dreams in the morning. Once you've stopped bleeding, when you are ready, gently reintroduce yourself back into the world.

Week Two

Use your creative energy, make something (make your own pads). Express your sexuality, beautify yourself, be indulgent. Celebrate the energy of your ovulation (just like you would the full moon). Dedicate your egg to something you wish to give the creative life force to.

Week Three

Celebrate what you have achieved, created, succeeded in this cycle and let go of what you haven't. Don't be hard on yourself. Start to notice the things that aren't working in your life in readiness to let them go with your blood. Don't start any new projects, rather finish things off.

Week Four

Be ready for your approaching bloodtime, adjust your plans around it. Cook in preparation for your retreat time. Make a pot of hearty soup that you can easily feed yourself and everyone else from during your bleeding time. Slow down. Start to imagine how you want your next cycle to go.

"The whole menstrual cycle is an alchemical process in itself, during which every woman who bleeds goes through a transformation inside herself. To menstruate means to live through a cyclical transmutation in

which the past is shed and the new in embraced. Experiencing this transformation through conscious ritual awakens us to our connection with the cycles taking place all around us and to our relationship with all life."
Lara Owen - "Her Blood is Gold"

Honour the Rites of Passage

Welcome your daughters to womanhood with an honouring ceremony, as little or as much as she will allow you! What happens around a rite of passage teaches you about what's expected of you in your new role. Think about what happened around your menarche - What did it teach you about being a woman? Maybe you want to re enact your menarche. Honour and understand peri-menopause and menopause - it is a time of transformation, a labour of sorts with a birth of a new you.

So, there you have it - the menstrual cycle is such a gift if you bring your awareness to it. It's that extra special thing about being a woman, not only can we create new life but we can re-create ourselves anew each cycle. And it's so important to get this, because this happens whatever the energy is, whatever thoughts and feelings you start your cycle with will be what sees you through that cycle, it will be the theme (just like at a new moon). So if that's negative, like "yuck, here I am bleeding again, I'm so tired, what about me, I'm in pain etc etc", then those thoughts are the metaphoric seeds you've planted at the start of the cycle that will grow, full bloom, harvest, decay, die and then be reborn again. So make sure you spend time at the start of your cycle, and on the new moon, setting your intentions for the new cycle, planting the metaphoric seeds that will nurture and feed you as they grow to their fullness during your current menstrual cycle or as the lunation cycle takes its course.

So, in closing I shall say again, there is so much transformational magic available to women through their cycles. Such opportunity. And I'll leave you with a thought.. You know, if we, all the women, got it together with our prayers and intentions maybe even resynchronise our cycles with the moon and with each other - we could use this energy to heal the planet.

For further information read:

The Wise Wound by Penelope Shuttle & Peter Redgrove (Chapter 4)

Lunaception by Louise Lacey (Chapter 6)

The Woman in the Shaman's Body by Barbara Tedlock