



## WHAT HAPPENS IN SAVASANA

By Beth O'Brien, Ph.D.

*Savasana* (relaxation pose) encompasses the period of time at the end of yoga class where you settle down and rest. My class participants eagerly look forward to Savasana. In fact, it is the most frequently requested pose in my yoga classes!

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**Getting into the Pose.** In Savasana, yoga practitioners lie on their backs with their palms facing up toward the sky. Some prefer using props to aid in relaxation, such as a blanket placed under the head or a bolster under the knees. It is helpful to feel spacious in the practice, so I recommend practitioners create room surrounding their mat.

**The Purpose of Savasana.** When I asked my fellow practitioners and students how they viewed Savasana, most said that this pose enabled them to integrate the physical part of their yoga practice. Yoga devotee Jennifer Shoemaker commented that savasana "instills the different stretches in such a way that the positive resulting feelings from the session last throughout the day." Faith Brandt, a local Yin yoga instructor, was taught that Savasana allows us to practice being still (in body and mind) and therefore, it is the most difficult of all poses. One of my class participants said Savasana is "the transition from the yoga practice back to another phase of our busy days."

During teacher training, I was taught that the purpose of the physical practice of yoga is to prepare us for Savasana. By moving and stretching and breathing, we release tension from our body, soothe tight muscles, and begin quieting the mind. From this perspective, Savasana becomes the central part of our practice, a time when we are enticed into stillness.

**Stages of Relaxation.** In an article published in Yoga Journal magazine, Judith Lasater wrote that there are three stages in Savasana: 1) physical relaxation 2) becoming less aware of the outside world and 3) allowing the mind to completely let go. She strongly believes that Savasana should be practiced daily for a period of at least 15 minutes to gain the full benefit of the pose. Sadly, I have heard that some yoga

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— Pam Phifer, yoga teacher

classes are offering just two minutes of relaxation, or skipping the practice altogether. This leaves out the restorative aspects of the yoga practice. My fellow yoga trainee Pam Phifer pointed out that she felt more rested after five minutes of Savasana than after a night's sleep. Now that's rest!

**What Really Happens in Savasana?** When we finally do enter Savasana, what happens? Some practitioners told me they fidget and struggle with lying still, eager to get up and move again. Others said that Savasana helps their body and mind relax. According to yogini Stephanie Kopsch, Savasana is a form of conscious relaxation in which she maintains a light awareness of her surroundings. Several respondents said they fall asleep in Savasana, and yoga teachers have noticed their students softly snoring in Savasana. Other practitioners regard Savasana as a spiritual practice, a time of prayer or meditation.

Yoga practitioners frequently feel a vast emotional release in Savasana, sometimes being moved to tears. As a practicing psychologist, I have seen how many of us react to stress by bottling up or putting aside our feelings. When it is time to become quiet, these emotions are given permission to speak.

“Yoga provides a time to be with your body and mind, both in movement and rest,” wrote yoga practitioner Diane Fusaro. I share Diane's viewpoint--entering into Savasana involves becoming re-acquainted with our essence. Who is the "I" that dwells inside? What is this self thinking, feeling and experiencing at this moment? The period of Savasana is a chance to say hello, affirm and appreciate the self. It involves a realization that our journey into this world and our exit from this world is one we make on our own. In Savasana we acknowledge our aloneness as well as our connection to something bigger. Feeling the earth's support beneath us, and comfort from within us, we can surrender.

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