

How to Practice Savasana

I never chide my students for falling asleep in Savasana. For many of them it is the only opportunity they have for a bit of rest, a little nap before they have to rush home to kids, dinner, homework, baths, and so many other tasks that they routinely get to bed no earlier than midnight only to wake up again a few short hours later. In nearly every class I teach someone falls asleep in Savasana and usually it takes little more than thirty seconds before they are snoring away.

Of course, students are not supposed to sleep through Savasana but I don't have the heart to correct them. I believe that the current pace of life we are all trying to maintain is physiologically unsustainable. We lead hyper-scheduled lives, away from home for hours at a stretch. We lack home-cooked meals, adequate water, rest and sleep. Increasingly, research shows that lack of sleep leads to obesity, high blood pressure, mental disorders, and a depleted immune system. So when my students fall asleep I know they need it and I let them be.

Savasana should be a period of quiet relaxation. One should be awake and alert but relaxed and in a meditative state, not thinking, planning, worrying, or ruminating over past decisions. Savasana gives the body and mind a period of quiet reflection with no motion and no mental activity to distract. The body has time to feel the "echo" of the practice and the mind relaxes in that echo. If you were practicing mindfully and with compassion then Savasana can be a blissful state. The brainwaves slow to a deep Theta, the heart and respiration rate fall, and afterward, you will feel deeply relaxed, calm, and have no sense whatsoever of having thought about anything.

Some students, however, struggle deeply with Savasana and sleep is the least of their troubles. These Type-A students view Savasana as "wasted" time - time that could be better spent moving on to the next task. In relaxation these students work on their "to-do" lists, rehearse conversations with their boss, or come up with dinner menus. They fidget, anxious to be able to get up and get going. Some can't even relax enough to close their eyes. Myself, and nearly every other yoga teacher I know has at least once had the experience of being asked by a student if they could skip Savasana and perhaps leave right after the postures are done.

These students are in a desperate state. They no longer recognize their over-burdened lives and are instead frantically trying to keep up with an impossible schedule. It is these students that cause me the most concern as a teacher, not the ones taking a nap.

So how should we practice Savasana, this most challenging and most valuable of poses? First, understand that relaxation is part of a yoga class. Don't skip it. When you lie down, make sure you are warm and comfortable. If the classic pose (on the back, arms and legs open) is not comfortable for you, discuss an alternate version with your teacher. Remember to take off your glasses and loosen your hair. Get a drink or go to the washroom if you need to before you lie down so you won't disturb yourself or others. Next, unless you are exhausted and chronically under-slept, try to stay awake. Listen to the guided relaxation from the teacher and stay connected with the breath and heart beat. Don't fight with your thoughts. Just don't pay attention to them. Let them go. Imagine that time is now in "slow motion" and that you are drifting, like a leaf on the surface of a pond.

Relax and enjoy your practice!