



To Savasana or not to Savasana?

*"...After completing their yoga practice consisting of asana and pranayama, the yoga practitioner must rest for fifteen minutes keeping the body on the floor before coming outside. If you come outdoors soon after completing yogabhyasa, the breeze will enter the body through the minute pores on the skin and cause many kinds of disease. Therefore, one should stay inside until the sweat subsides, rub the body nicely and sit contentedly and rest for a short period.
Krishnamacharya Yoga Makaranda (Mysore 1934) p34*

There is no scientific basis to support this statement by Krishnamacharya. Even saying that Savasana must be for a specific period of time implies a lack of understanding.

When practicing asana we make constant micro-adjustments to the posture in order to keep the proprioceptive map of the body from fading from consciousness. That is why I am always saying "if you are breathing, you are moving". Inhalations are for expansions and exhalations are for releasing. Each cycle of breath is an opportunity for mind/body connection or yoga - through movement.

In Savasana we are working in the opposite direction, i.e. releasing the proprioceptive map, via no movement. Stimulation of any of the sensory organs (eyes, ears, nose, tongue, skin) leads to excitation of the reticular formation (brain) and consequently, a state of sympathetic arousal. With this in mind, it is clear why a truly deep state of relaxation in Savasana requires that the eyes be closed with the room lights off, no external sound, and the body being touched only by the floor. Actually, floor pressure does give a sensible signal for a few minutes, but if it is a comfortable contact, the sensory signal adapts and the sense of pressure fades to zero. Further, any muscular movement beyond that of the breath will be arousing to the reticular formation and so has to be repressed in Savasana. No scratching of the nose. No adjusting the hair or clothing. No movement, except for uncontrolled breathing.

When one is totally relaxed and there are no external stimuli going to the reticular formation, then the EEG brainwave pattern settles into the low-frequency, high-amplitude alpha mode. On the other

hand, any sensory input to the reticular formation brings one into a global, nonspecific state of alertness and preparedness, and the EEG pattern then shifts to that of the high-frequency, low-amplitude beta waves. When teaching Savasana, one can talk the student toward a state of relaxation, however, in order for the student to achieve this state, the teacher must then be quiet, so there there is not further stimulation of the reticular formation.

Think of the nervous system and mind as a spider's web (kind of looks like one), with the web representing the physical structure of the nerves and the spider as an active mind. If there is any movement or vibration in the spider's web, the spider is poised to pounce. The spider is in a constant state of anticipation and can never fully rest. If a fly is caught, the spider pounces. Even if there is a gust of wind, vibrating the web, the spider is agitated. As long as the spider (mind) is in this state of activation, the relaxation of the nervous system is impossible.

Playing music during Savasana is stimulating and stops the student from relaxing. Tim Millar (well know USA Ashtangi) used to read poetry during Savasana, so you would be listening to him and blocked from relaxing.

With beginners it is important to teach them the techniques of Savasana, the how and the why. Obviously this does initially require talking. With understanding, students will be better able to perform the techniques and implement them, so they receive the full benefit.

Generally, during Savasana students will do one of two things... drift off towards sleep or increase the activity of the mind by thinking. I have had students tell me they compile their shopping list during Savasana.

One of the physiological benefits of doing Savasana at the end of the asana practice is that it offers the calm condition necessary for optimum transfer of the learned neural pattern from the short-term memory to the more permanent long-term memory. Consolidation occurs most readily when the mind has shifted from beta-state arousal to alpha-state calm.

Relaxation is an opportunity to reinforce the class learning , because short-term memory is more easily uploaded into long-term memory when the brain is quiet. That is, the lesson to be learned and remembered through the practice of yoga asanas will be learned and remembered best if they are followed by a restful period, that is Savasana. Obviously no Savasana equals no uploading.

This raises the question, how long should the relaxation be? However, long it takes to shift from beta-waves to alpha-waves and bring the mind to a point of quiet. Because the mind and the body are connected, this requires moving awareness throughout the body, releasing any tension or tightness in the nervous system. If we are haphazard with our relaxation technique, then it is quite likely areas of the body will be overlooked. That is why it is so important to work systematically, inserting the awareness into each and every part of the body: skin, muscle, bones and organs. A more experienced student will be able to do this quicker than a less experienced one. A simple test is to do a mind/body scan and check that the body is relaxed equally on the right and left sides, i.e. the weight is evenly distributed from the centre line of the spine, into the periphery of the arms, legs, hands and feet.

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