

Many Savasanas

Depending on perspective, *savasana* is either very easy or very advanced. According to the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*, “lying down on the ground, like a corpse, is called *savasana*. It removes fatigue and gives rest to the mind.” It is an essential and non-negotiable part of practice. With *savasana*, there are possibilities to be less agitated and to release tension. Without a decent *savasana*, we can be even more tight and even more tense than we already are (especially if we have just done vigorous exercise like yang-style yoga). With *savasana*, there can be a beautiful letting go of everything.

There are many ways of being in *savasana*. A common description of *savasana* is that the head and the heart are at the same level, but there can be other ways of placing the body that promote relaxation. These are a few ideas and obviously you can mix these suggestions. When I am teaching in studios with lots of equipment, I will change the version of *savasana* each week. Encourage participants to do much of the preparation work for themselves; otherwise, it can require a lot of action from you. Often I put one person into the pose and get the others to copy what I have just shown. Be prepared for a few people to still make mistakes or get it slightly ‘wrong’.

What happens when the body stays still for several minutes is that the internal temperature drops. Unless it is a very warm room, people need to be covered with at least one blanket – and more, if possible. A good indication of the benefit of these poses is that people become non-verbal. In these deep states of relaxation, we get much more grounded in the parasympathetic nervous system – where we are less reactive, less defensive, less closed; where we are more responsive, more receptive, more open.

In the last fifty years, the amount that we sleep has declined by about one hour. This is a very significant shift in how we live (and how we are sleeping). Prof Charles Czeisler of Harvard Medical School wrote (2013): “In the past 50 years, there has been a decline in average sleep duration and quality. Since more people are choosing electronic devices for reading, communication and entertainment, particularly children and adolescents who already experience significant sleep loss, epidemiological research evaluating the long-term consequences of these devices on health and safety is urgently needed.”

The body requires proper rest. Sleep is essential for recuperation of all aspects of body. As well as enabling the brain to recover and reorganise, it is also important that other areas of body are able to rest. Of course, there are individual variations of sleeping patterns. But the addiction to screens and the bright light stimulation (whether from one of those small screens or as part of a video game or street lights at night or lighting in shops) has meant that it is becoming increasingly hard for us to have decent sleep.

The consequences of this for our emotional and mental health are very considerable. With lack of sleep, we are more easily irritated, our thinking is less coherent and less clear, we are more in the sympathetic nervous system. Hopefully, *savasana* can be helpful. Part of sensitivity in *savasana* is making sure that there is silence. As teachers, we can try find an appropriate balance between guidance and being silent.

STANDARD SAVASANA

My personal belief is that every time we do *savasana* and that every time we teach *savasana*, there needs to be some support below knees and a slight pillowing of head. It is more important to allow the softening of knees (which aids release of back) than to pillow head. The softening of knees assists profound relaxation which is such a vital element of yoga practice. The support under knees can be as simple as a rolled-up mat – or blocks or blanket over blocks or, if at all possible, a bolster. And use eyebags if available – as well as covering eyes, you can place eyebags over palms of hands. You can also cover eyes with a belt or even a rolled up t-shirt. Covering the eyes reduces light stimulation and aids relaxation.

SANDBAGS AND SAVASANA

Sandbags are a wonderful addition to yoga practice. There are two versions of sandbag: rectangle and almost square. Both are equally good and both can have different uses. I think that if every home had sandbags and bolsters, then there might be less violence and fewer wars in this world. It has been shown that using weighted blankets (which are effectively sandbags) can be a great way of calming and a means of quiet holding, like a big non-judgemental hug. These weighted blankets have been used extensively with autistic people, with people who have personality disorders and others. One well-known researcher of this technique is Temple Grandin. In 1992, she published a paper titled “Calming Effects of Deep Touch Pressure in Patients with Autistic Disorder, College Students, and Animals” in the *Journal of Child and Adolescent Psychopharmacology*. She also has a TED talk on YouTube about her work.

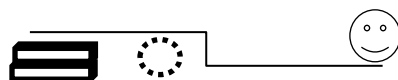
The gentle and steady pressing can have amazing influence on our state of being. Everyone can potentially benefit from sandbags – but not everyone will like having them put on their bodies. You must ask people’s permission: be prepared for people to say no and for you to respect their decision. Here are **where sandbags can be placed**.

- On the abdomen: between top of hips and lower ribs
- On shoulders: if possible, use block/brick as support to avoid the sandbag sliding off; can either be placed just at shoulder or running from shoulder along upper arm towards elbow (the rectangle ones are best for this purpose)
- On hands: from wrists to cover fingers; this part of body is incredibly active and highly sensitive, so an imposed stillness of weight has the possibility of being deeply soothing
- On head: you must make sure that the sandbag is supported by blocks/bricks, otherwise the person might feel like they are being scalped! It is possible to have sandbag running from bridge of nose and over forehead to its support. This is much more effectively placed by someone else. Please be careful to make sure it is in centre of forehead; the rectangle one is best here.
- On thighs: can be supported by blocks or bolster to avoid slipping off
- On ankles
- On forearms

That’s a possible total of 12 sandbags per person...

STONEHENGE SAVASANA

Place bolster below knees and support (blocks or bricks) below heels so that lower legs are reasonably parallel to ground. The heel support could be two or three blocks for each foot. If there are more blocks available, then have one under each hand (make sure that elbows are on ground). This slight lifting of hands aids flexing of wrists and elbows. There is a relationship between flexing movements of body and deeper relaxation.

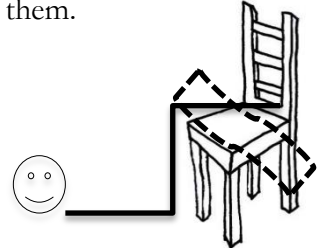


BED OF BOLSTERS SAVASANA

If there are plenty of bolsters available, this is a readily accessible *savasana*: three bolsters below legs (make sure that they are close to top of thighs while bottom and back of upper body stay on ground). If there are more bolsters available, then there can be one over lower legs and also one over thighs.

CHAIR SAVASANA

Take a chair (there are the metal chairs but obviously you can use any chair or sofa). If it is a metal chair, place a blanket over chair seat. The person has their back and head on blanket as pillow on ground; they then place their lower legs on the chair so that the legs are bent at right angle (thighs towards vertical and lower legs horizontal). Having a loose belt around lower legs/ankles can be helpful as a gentle ‘holding together’. You can put a bolster – or two – over the lower legs as a way of gentle pressing down. This is actually an inversion so usual contra-indications should apply. If someone is of fairly small stature, then chair savasana often does not work for them.



LEGS UP WALL SAVASANA

The classic – also known as *viparita karani*. This can reduce fluid pressure in lower body, release tension in low back and back of thighs, reduces overall blood pressure and slightly increases flow of blood to head.

Sit with hips as close as is possible to wall; then swing/shuffle around so legs are up wall and back is on ground. You can place folded blanket below hips/lower back (some people will use bolster); a sandbag on feet can aid tranquility (obviously, this has to be placed by someone else); a pillow below head is also helpful. Place arms however you wish and use as many sandbags as you want. Like chair savasana, this is actually an inversion, so usual contra-indications should apply.

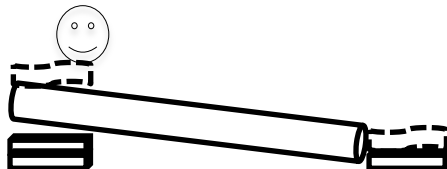
HEART-OPENING SAVASANA

When I first saw this one, I was not at all sure – until I got into it and then it was like “ahhh”.

Have two blocks that are covered by two blankets at one end of mat. Then place a brick at its lowest elevation and lengthways about a four-finger wide distance away from blocks/blankets support. The head goes on blocks/blankets while brick is between shoulder blades – make sure the brick is right in the middle, that the brick is running along that mid/upper spine and not too close to lower back. This does not work for everyone (you can try the brick at its middle elevation, especially if someone has narrow shoulder blades). With legs, either have a bolster beneath knees – or you could place a bolster on each side of the outer legs so that there is then a holding in (this can be an opportunity to put sandbags over front thighs). For some, this might be too strong and not a *savasana* experience – not a way of relaxing. So ask and enquire and be ready to give other options.

RECLINING SAVASANA

Take a bolster and place two blocks or a brick under it at the far end from the practitioner; put a blanket over the bolster, also at that far end. Then put a block covered by blanket just after the other end of bolster (the lower end). Sit hips on that block/blanket so that sacrum is just touching end of bolster; then lower back of body over the slightly angled bolster (so the head is marginally higher than the abdomen which is marginally higher than the hips). You can either have a bolster beneath knees; or you could place a bolster on each side of the outer legs so that there is then that holding in (and another opportunity to put sandbags over front thighs).



SIDE-LYING SAVASANA

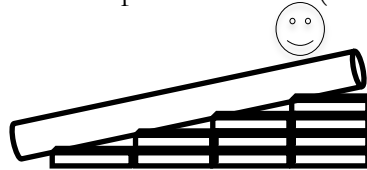
The more padding below the body for side-lying *savasana*, the better. For example, two mats and two blankets.

Then lying on whichever side is preferred by practitioner, place a block plus two blankets below head so neck is supported. Lower leg can slightly soften around hip and knee (sometimes people prefer keeping that leg fairly straight). Top leg draws towards abdomen – place a bolster beneath that top leg so that knee and foot are both supported. Place a bolster between the arms which are easing towards chest (so it is almost like hugging this bolster). Have a bolster against their back – this bolster can be made firmer by wedging in a sandbag against it to keep it steady. As well as using blankets to maintain warmth, you can put a folded blanket over their head to reduce stimulation of light — like putting a cloth over the parrot’s cage so that it becomes quiet...

FLYING FIRST CLASS SAVASANA

This can be an absolute treat – but it does not work well for absolutely everyone. A person might feel too exposed and thus unsafe and insecure. You must keep checking in with practitioners and keep giving them the option to adapt and amend. There are many alternatives.

Take a bolster and place it at approximately 30 degree angle by setting up support.. You can use ten bricks at their lowest elevation – one down, then a pile of two, a pile of three and finally a pile of four. Or you can use a combination of bricks and blocks and other bolsters – even chairs. The person lies down on the bolster with a blanket as pillow for head (this is not completely necessary for everyone).



Place a second bolster below their knees. They can either have legs straight or soles of feet together (in which case, a sandbag could be put over feet). Then there are armrests (remember, this is a first class flight). A bolster for each arm is best (you could place sandbags on forearms and hands). Then a bolster over the top of thighs and maybe a sandbag on abdomen ... and now they are ready to fly (you can ask them what film they would like to watch). This angle is slightly higher than that of the reclining *savasana*. Having upper body at this angle can be deeply deeply soothing and help create a state where we are releasing without falling fast asleep.

BOLSTER TWIST SAVASANA

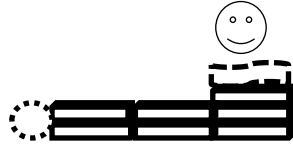
This is a valid version of *savasana* – and sometimes it is not a problem that people do just one side. Or you can do both sides.

Sitting on ground (can also be helpful to have extra padding below hips and for legs), place a bolster against right hip and then make a right angle (90 degrees) between right thigh and that bolster. Place left thigh over right leg with left shin on inside of right foot. Have a blanket as padding between knees. Turn upper body onto bolster and gently lower down so there is a resting of body into bolster with a mild twist.

SUPTA BADDHA KONASA WITH SEVEN BLOCKS SAVASANA

You need seven blocks and at least two blankets. Have the blocks at their lowest elevation – one pile of three (on which you also place a blanket); and two piles of two. Take the second blanket and make that into a roll which is then firmly placed lengthways against end of blocks (a pile of two).

The sacrum goes against that rolled-up blanket and back of upper body is placed over blocks with head resting on pile of three blocks plus that pillow of blanket. You can either have legs straight (in which case, it can be useful to support legs with bolsters on each side or perhaps a blanket wrapping around lower body); or you can have soles of feet together. If you choose this second option, make sure knees are supported (with bolster, bricks or maybe belt) – and you can also place a sandbag over feet.



Having this firmness of blocks below upper body can encourage opening; this is a wonderful gentle stretch of front upper body (particularly abdomen and also chest). This is also a posture in which you can do *pranayama* practice.

BLANKET BELOW SPINE SAVASANA

Have support under head – such as block plus blanket. Firmly roll a blanket and this is then going to run along the length of spine – from sacrum to top of shoulders. Then lying down with that rolled up blanket below spine so that there is a gentle broadening and widening of upper body. Again, like the previous version, the legs can either be straight or soles of feet together.

UPPER CHEST SAVASANA

Have support under head – maybe block and blanket or perhaps two folded up blankets. Firmly roll a blanket and this time place it under the body at the bra line (just below shoulder blades). Make sure that this lift is even and equal. Again, you can choose what you wish to do with legs. Like ***blanket below spine savasana***, there can be this broadening and widening of upper body – and make sure that this is gentle.

CONSTRUCTIVE REST SAVASANA

Of course, this can be a great way of being *savasana*.

There is the basic version – with feet flat on floor and knees raised. You can also take the feet as wide as mat and allow the knees to rest against each other; or you can use a reasonably loose belt around mid-thighs. Another version is to have each foot on two blocks – and then place a sandbag over each foot. And obviously there are other ways of assisting: pillow below head, eyebag over eyes, blocks below hands, eyebags on hands and sandbags elsewhere on body.

Good luck and enjoy the resting and the relaxing!

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I am based in London, UK and teach five-day Yin yoga intensives and eight-day advanced Yin yoga teacher trainings – as well as monthly Yin yoga workshops and weekly classes. Dates and more details can be found on my website www.yogawithnorman.co.uk.

With great thanks for all the trainings and the tips from Judith Lasater: a continuing inspiration. And thanks for ideas and information from Dina Cohen, Anna Taylor, Alaric Newcombe and Maitripushpa Bois. I teach *Many Savasanas* as a one-day workshop; please contact me for more details and dates.