

## Radical Relaxation

*"Through Relaxation  
we discover a whole  
new way of being."*  
Tarthang Tulku Rinpoche

### The quest for real rest

This article is an exploration of the deepest and most hidden end of the relaxation spectrum - radical relaxation. We might discover it becomes the most vital practice we have in our self-care toolbox to revive and recalibrate our entire being and liberate us from our pain. Radical relaxation could even become fundamental to ageing comfortably and gracefully and the beauty is, it doesn't cost anything.

So how can relaxation be radical you might ask? Isn't it just laid-back rest? Many people save up all their relaxation aspirations for their long-awaited annual holiday. The coveted getaway to indulge, guilt free in the leisurely pursuit of pleasure; like reclining on a comfy lounge by an infinity pool perhaps, sipping cocktails while lazily gazing at tropical sunsets? As a stopgap, for the yawning time in between, many might be found chilling on the sofa watching Netflix with a bottle of red and a bowl of chips. Indeed, some good old escapism certainly has

value diverting us from our stressful working lives to something less arduous and comfortable, but it is not necessarily true relaxation that offers actual regenerative rest. That is because such undertakings are still an act of "doing" that engages our mind, our attention, our senses and even our bodily functions. They will not earn us the life-changing transformation and healing of true relaxation, where the goal is to give our self the rare experience of nothingness with no stimulation, no deadlines, no effort nor strain.

#### Breaking our non-relaxing habits

The most difficult part of finding optimal relaxation is breaking out of our habitual attachment to non-relaxing forms of "relaxation." How habitually we reach for devices and automatically chill with media, socialising, snacking, etc. Sometimes, gratifying or entertaining diversions can be a kind of numbing out from life's painful experiences or hold our attention away from boredom,

sadness or troublesome issues. It is helpful to at least notice when we are doing things out of habit and try to make a conscious choice to do something if we really want to. Otherwise, radical relaxation awaits our attention to temporarily disengage from all the usual things that excite our senses, things we can return to at some other time. Distracting activities may fill in time, but they will not restore, replenish and revitalise all our bodily systems when we most need it, will they? Only deep rest can do this, the "non-doing" rest that immerses us into the vast void of nothingness that we discover to be the source from which everything arises. The self is reconfigured as an intentional, unimpeded flow through the shifting, uncertain fluctuations of life.

#### Opening the gateway to deeper dimensions of Self

To be clear, the most profound expression of functional relaxation is not sleeping nor napping, though

thankfully, daily deep rest does help beget nightly good sleep. This kind of rest is constructive and restorative and will actually serve us better because all the bodily responses are triggered appropriately, unwinding and shaking off tensions and anxiety. Authentic relaxation effectively removes restlessness from the body and quiets the chattering mind. Real relaxation, with practice, can become a gateway to the deeper dimensions of Self. It offers a readily available portal to the great mysteries that expand our consciousness beyond bodily concerns into the higher realms of spiritual realisation. A truly radical form of relaxation brings us into stillness, the fecund ground of spiritual enrichment where we begin to understand that everything works out in its own time. We emerge willing and able to intelligently take on our most irksome adversities.

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*Don't just do something, sit there.*

### The arcane fruits of fatigue-busting rest

Why do we find it so hard to just rest for rest's sake - to simply rest without thinking of doing something else in the next moment? Radical relaxation is very personal and demands solitude for us to completely merge with the immediate moment where all the magic happens. Radical relaxation is about really hanging out with the self, without company to establish a sustained stillness of the body and silence of the overactive mind. It invites us to let go of all of the illusory preoccupations and attachments that entangle and tether us to the story of a life of mistaken identity. A very relaxed state of being reveals who we really are to ourselves, as we melt into the blissful and timeless reality of pure Being. To emerge from such thorough and functional relaxation is to feel next-level rested and refreshed, alert and capable of dealing astutely with whatever

life throws our way. Dissolving our stress, pains and anxieties is a self-compassionate act that will bring far-reaching and enduring transformation to our internal and external life experience.

### Loosening the ties that bind

The word relaxation comes from Latin: re- means "again," laxare means "loosen," and the suffix -ation means "the state of." So relaxation is the state of loosening something again. This is very helpful and revealing, because it tells us that the pathway to attain relaxation, is through unwinding and unravelling the tight knots of our mental and physical tension. At its mystical heart it means to release that which binds and attaches us to the egoic worldliness that creates so much stress and suffering within us. When we regularly relax deeply, suspending all bodily and mental activity for a time, we gradually loosen the restraints of self-centeredness. The more we ease into the restorative relaxation practice, our mind shifts to a more subtle kind of awareness whereby physical pain and emotional

stressors can vanish temporarily and there can be a profound and abiding feeling of peace. Effective relaxation fundamentally changes to the core our old way of being so that we are able to experience our lives afresh and ourselves more fully in every way whenever we invest our time to experience it. On a practical, daily level we learn the art of surrendering to deeper wisdoms and satisfying, wholesome actions that cannot be accessed whilst stress and inner turmoil are at the helm, no matter how 'in control' we think we are.

### Adopt a daily relaxation regime

We can be our own worst enemy by creating and maintaining problems because they give us a sense of identity. Perhaps this explains why we often hold onto our pain far beyond its ability to serve us. We replay past mistakes over and over again in our head, allowing feelings of shame and regret to shape our actions in the present. We cling to frustration and worry about the future, as if the

act of fixation somehow gives us power. We hold stress in our minds and bodies, potentially creating serious health issues and accept that state of tension as the norm. To be still is to experience a pause in the constant stream of thoughts and give our nervous system a rare chance to rest and recharge itself.

Every day in this world is a shaky, uncertain, constantly changing landscape full of ups and downs and stressful moments; everything is changing and not always according to our plans. Indeed we are not in control of the transitory nature of life itself but we can be responsible for how we mindfully and healthily live our daily life. Indeed, we can intentionally set time apart on a regular basis to cease identifying ourselves as an individual body with a mind and a life. Instead, we can experience the pinnacle of rejuvenating relaxation by allowing our individual spark of consciousness to dissolve into the vast, unified field of totality consciousness. This is the truest relaxation.

## Deep Relaxation is a window for profound healing

When the body is relieved of its primary survival responsibilities to keep us safe, its faculties are now free to give good attention to digestion and assimilation of all the wonderful herbs and de-stressing techniques that we have employed to feel properly relaxed. Relaxation practice puts our body in a position to naturally heal our overworked adrenal glands. Now our very own therapeutic capacities get to do their stuff, infiltrating our being to exert multi-faceted healing at the very root cause of our ailments and anxieties. Healing, in its most holistic sense of the word, is one of the precious rewards that deep relaxation offers us if we enter it in wholehearted complete surrender. We are rewarded with serenity and a sense of freedom from our self-imposed burdens.

When the mind comes to stillness and the body is comfortable and stable enough we start to emit theta brainwaves that instigate

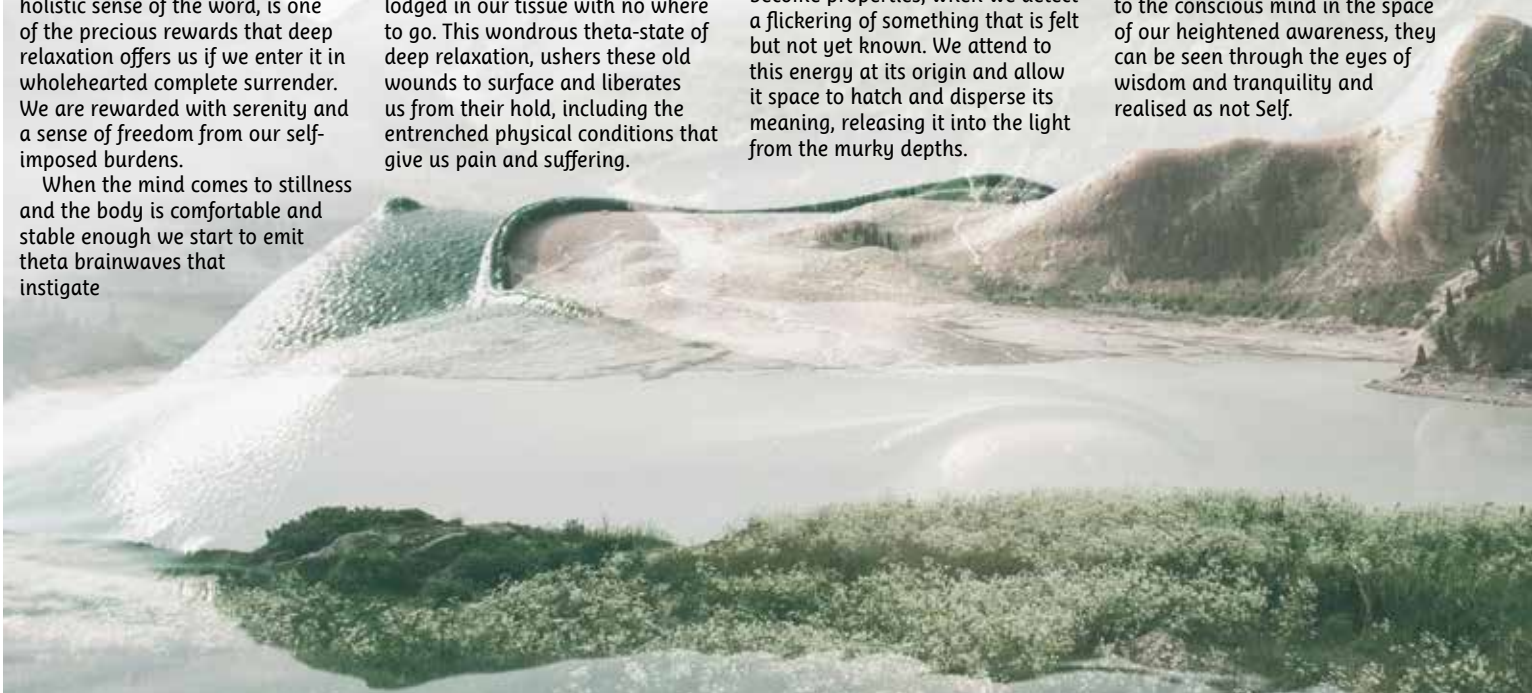
the release of GABA, the "peacemaker" chemical in the brain that inhibits over-excitement. This frequency has the ability to lower stress and anxiety, lead to deeper relaxation, enhance mental clarity and creativity, minimise aches and increase euphoria. It is in this transient window available to us that we are super sensitive and receptive. It is the best place to negotiate, in a non-attached, compassionate and non-judgmental way, the myriad undifferentiated old hurts and emotional pain that has been lodged in our tissue with no where to go. This wondrous theta-state of deep relaxation, ushers these old wounds to surface and liberates us from their hold, including the entrenched physical conditions that give us pain and suffering.

### Emergence brings relief like fresh air

Dedicated relaxation may also unearth deep-seated emotions that we haven't perceived before. By immersing ourselves into the bodily feelings with mindful breath, we might witness how and where the hurt arises in our physical body. Only then can it naturally surface and dissipate which it is often striving to do in this ordinary yet mysterious experience. The effort should be directed at the emergent stage, before the feelings have become properties; when we detect a flickering of something that is felt but not yet known. We attend to this energy at its origin and allow it space to hatch and disperse its meaning, releasing it into the light from the murky depths.

This shift brings a sense of physical and mental relief.

Our unconscious tendencies, subtle habits and desires, psychological imprints or buried emotional traumas are called samskaras in Vedic terms. In this higher state of relaxation, these samskaras are usually lying beneath our conscious mind. When we allow ourselves to experience the deepest relaxation, we are purifying the subconscious mind and conscious mind by increasing our life force, wisdom, awareness and lucidity. By bringing subconscious contents up to the conscious mind in the space of our heightened awareness, they can be seen through the eyes of wisdom and tranquility and realised as not Self.



# Letting go of the need to control

*"If you let go a little, you will have a little peace. If you let go a lot, you will have a lot of peace."* Ajahn Chah

Within and without our body is a river of change to which human consciousness must learn to surrender. Surrender requires practice. The great paradox about it is that though we can practice surrender, invoke it or open up to it, we can't actually make it happen. Holding on means trying to control outcomes and resisting life's intrinsic rhythms and processes. Letting go means relinquishing control and being willing to let life carry us to a new place and maybe into a deeper truer version of Self. Deep relaxation opens our self-awareness that allows us to see ourselves in a different, more honest light. Letting go in this sense is releasing all doubt, worry and fear about a situation, person or outcome. It is releasing anything that disrupts our innate joy.

We do our best to relinquish any struggle or striving. We then let go of the result.

Surrender is an empowering form of release, that when used in a spiritual context, is not giving up but more about letting go of that, which no longer serves us. To let go like this is not a passive resignation to fate, but rather a vital engagement with the way things actually are, unfiltered and undistorted by rigid mental lenses. It is spiritual surrender to stop struggling against "what is", to let go of the smallness of our life and fully embrace its totality.

By surrendering to the love and wisdom of the universe, we choose not to resist or control our circumstances and emotions, but rather to be soft and open to receive whatever comes our way, for better or worse. Our heart expands when we relax into life's shifting setting and we smile with friendliness and curiosity at the beautiful and amazing world just as it is. We discover it takes so much less energy than control.

## The physical stress response

When we are under stress our pituitary gland reacts and sends a signal to our adrenal glands to produce the right amount of cortisol. As the body's primary stress hormone, cortisol surges when we perceive danger and causes all the symptoms we associate with "fight or flight." The trouble is, constant chronic stress and anxiety, maintain far too high levels of cortisol in the body. It causes increased blood pressure and heart rate, muscle tension and the digestive system slams to a halt with a cascade of associated health conditions such as thyroid issues, weight gain and fatigue. The long-term activation of the stress response system and the overexposure to cortisol and other stress hormones that follows can disrupt almost all our body's processes. The human organism in this case is in urgent need of high functional relaxation to heal.

## The plant world can revolutionise relaxation

The good news is that herbs and their superior extracts can directly and indirectly shift and facilitate the deep relaxation response within the body and mind. Herbs aid relaxation by releasing in the brain the corresponding, neurotransmitters that alter the brain's signal processing to relieve tension in the body/mind complex. For example, valerian root modulates gamma-aminobutyric acid receptors in the brain, which promotes relaxation and reduces anxious feelings. Some herbs help reduce levels of cortisol as well, including ashwagandha, rhodiola, lemon balm and chamomile. Some herbs, prized by yogis, even give us an inspiring prompt to delve deeper into the world of true stillness and meditative peace, such as damiana, holy basil or ashwagandha.

Herbs that are in the "nervine" category can be very nourishing and soothing to the nerve tissue helping it to heal if it has been damaged. Calming herbs offer safe, valid and sustainable relaxation

## The physical relaxation response

The relaxation response is a physical state of deep relaxation in which our body releases chemicals that slow down our breathing, heart rate, reduces our blood pressure and relieves tension. This brings healthy blood back to important organs, especially the brain. The relaxation response works best when we practice 1-2 times a day for 15-20 minutes at a time. During the deepest relaxation, the frontal cortex tends to go offline, the part of the brain that processes sensory information about the surrounding world, orienting us in time and space. During meditative states, activity in the parietal lobe slows down into that state where our mind quiets and we feel calm yet alert. Then there is the even slower brainwave state of Theta, a state where we are right on that edge between being awake and asleep.

Gamma-aminobutyric acid (GABA) is a neurotransmitter, a chemical messenger in our brain that slows down our brain by blocking specific signals in our central nervous system (our brain and spinal cord). GABA is known for producing a calming effect. When we relax, the flow of blood and life force (Prana) increases around our body giving us more energy and a calmer and clearer mind conducive to positive thinking, concentration, memory and decision making.

## Natural ways to Relax - to increase GABA and serotonin and decrease cortisol

- ~ Enjoy yourself and laugh, laughing promotes the release of endorphins and suppresses cortisol
- ~ To lower cortisol in the body eat an anti-inflammatory diet
- ~ Eat clean, fresh unprocessed, plant food little and often
- ~ Keep blood sugar levels stable
- ~ Get enough B6 and magnesium (Go easy on the B6)
- ~ Take Omega 3 fatty acids
- ~ Replenish the gut biome
- ~ Regular conscious breathing exercise or pranayama
- ~ Yang style yoga asana to build strength and stamina
- ~ Yin style Yoga asana with many forward bending poses
- ~ Always practice corpse pose after yoga asana
- ~ Focus on getting quality sleep
- ~ Have a stress-reducing "moon milk" (ashwagandha) before bed - Ashwagandha works by reducing the body's levels of cortisol
- ~ Write about your feelings
- ~ Build in daily low intensity exercise
- ~ Have deep tissue massage with essential oils to release fixed tension
- ~ Get enough sunlight and vitamin D
- ~ Walk in nature everyday rain or shine
- ~ Soak in a warm aromatherapy bath
- ~ Listen to soothing inspiring music
- ~ Practice legs up the wall pose - viparita karani (Fully supported)
- ~ Practice meditation with discipline and joy

pure essential oils is that they give a tremendous advantage to us in achieving effective relaxation. They work on multiple levels, to safely and efficaciously bring our body and mind into the most optimal and enduring condition to receive the Divine gift of profound healing.

## The Remarkable Relaxing Herbs

Valerian, passionflower, skullcap, ashwagandha, holy basil, liquorice, chamomile, rhodiola, St John's Wort, vervain, damiana, hops, lavender, lemon balm, lime flowers, oat straw.

## The Remarkable Relaxing Essential Oils

Lavender, chamomile, sandalwood, vetivert, jasmine, tangerine, amyris, bergamot, clarysage, frankincense, valerian, geranium, ylang ylang, marjoram, patchouli, elemi, spikenard, tuberose, champaka.

# The body needs movement and the mind needs stillness

It has been well documented in recent times, how the efficacy of our physical training is greatly upgraded when followed by good rest. Good rest begets good energy, they are mutually beneficial and we can't have quality rest or energy without the other. The body is designed to move and as long as we are moving, it doesn't matter what we do. We might walk, run, ride our bike, dance or do yoga. The goal is simply to get a fresh supply of blood and energy to all those areas of the body that tense up during the workday. Once we have moved the body, we are then ready to practice efficient relaxation because we will feel less fidgety, restless and uncomfortable and more predisposed to experience stillness.

We can greatly facilitate this by doing breath work that slows down the brainwaves to silence the mind and bring greater interoceptive awareness within the body. Calm, unhurried breathing is crucial to create relaxation and stillness, it slows down the torrent of sensory stimuli and helps us disengage from the all other objects or impressions to which our attention would otherwise flit. The good news is that since our breath matches our inner state, all we have to do to relax is change our breath. We simply bring our attention to our breath inhaling deep into our belly and extending each exhale allowing our self to unwind. Eventually, we cease all control of breathing and just witness our body being breathed.

Finding stillness, post exercise in the body also enhances our ability in find tranquillity or calm in all the chaotic areas of life. It would be enough to settle for the fabulous makeover that restorative rest can give us, but we also have the choice to keep going, because good rest predisposes us to attain and sustain meditation.

## Relaxed and powerful - the natural yogic state

There's no single way to experience stillness, however for time immemorial, Yoga has presented us with a sure-fired methodology to hugely enhance our relaxation. The eight-limbed path of Yoga clearly illustrates how movement with yoga poses and

pranayama (conscious breathing exercises) effectively relaxes the body and calms the mind enough to merge into the higher states of consciousness. Indeed we need to experience deep relaxation as a prerequisite to attaining single pointed focus (Dharana). This sustained concentration leads to meditation (Dhyana), when all the horizons of perception are continuously expanding. At this point we won't have to do anything to attain functional relaxation but just settle into Being, the elevated state that incrementally awakens us to the nature of Totality consciousness or the True Self, should we be so blessed.

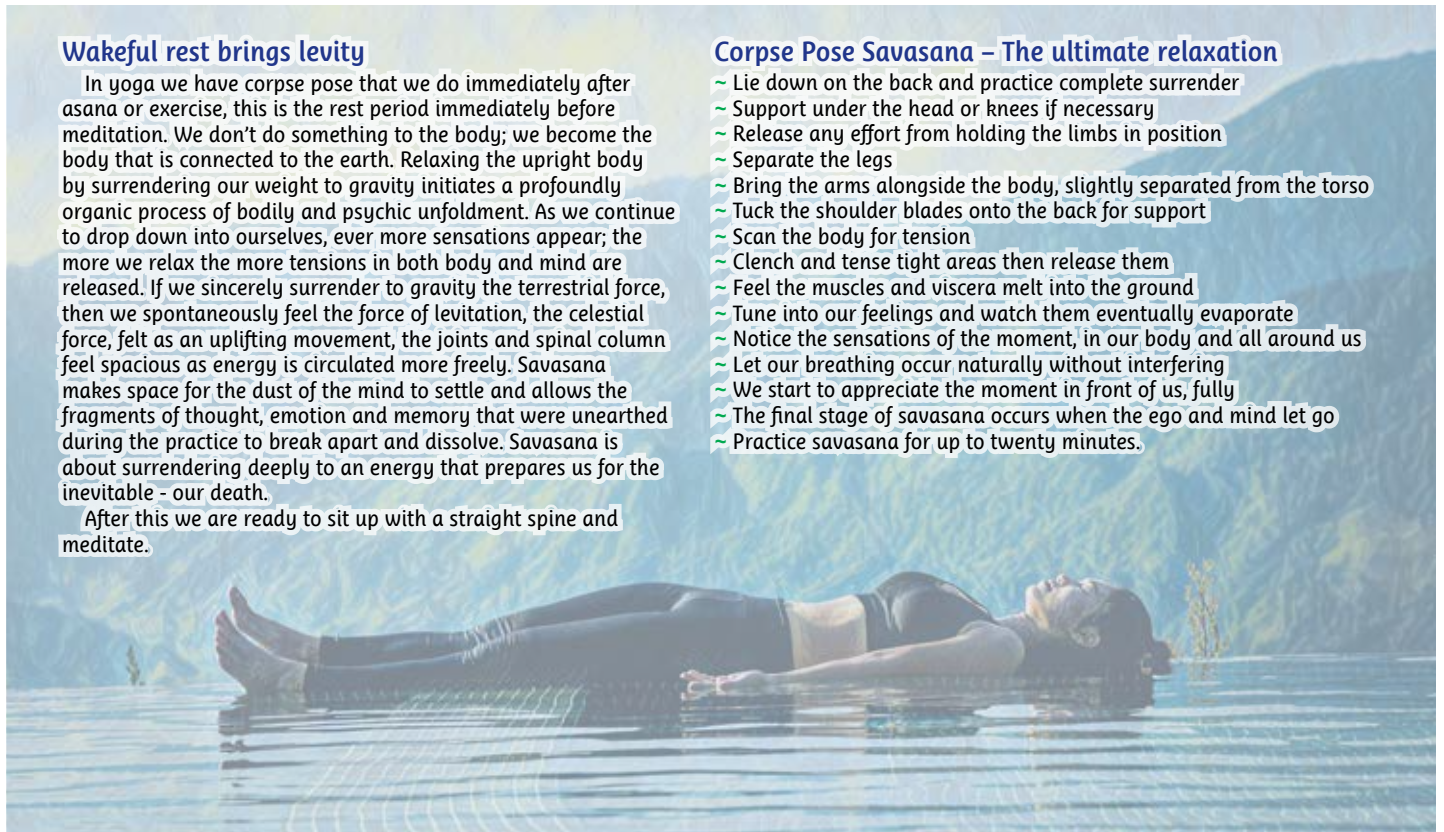
## Wakeful rest brings levity

In yoga we have corpse pose that we do immediately after asana or exercise, this is the rest period immediately before meditation. We don't do something to the body; we become the body that is connected to the earth. Relaxing the upright body by surrendering our weight to gravity initiates a profoundly organic process of bodily and psychic unfoldment. As we continue to drop down into ourselves, ever more sensations appear; the more we relax the more tensions in both body and mind are released. If we sincerely surrender to gravity the terrestrial force, then we spontaneously feel the force of levitation, the celestial force, felt as an uplifting movement, the joints and spinal column feel spacious as energy is circulated more freely. Savasana makes space for the dust of the mind to settle and allows the fragments of thought, emotion and memory that were unearthed during the practice to break apart and dissolve. Savasana is about surrendering deeply to an energy that prepares us for the inevitable - our death.

After this we are ready to sit up with a straight spine and meditate.

## Corpse Pose Savasana – The ultimate relaxation

- ~ Lie down on the back and practice complete surrender
- ~ Support under the head or knees if necessary
- ~ Release any effort from holding the limbs in position
- ~ Separate the legs
- ~ Bring the arms alongside the body, slightly separated from the torso
- ~ Tuck the shoulder blades onto the back for support
- ~ Scan the body for tension
- ~ Clench and tense tight areas then release them
- ~ Feel the muscles and viscera melt into the ground
- ~ Tune into our feelings and watch them eventually evaporate
- ~ Notice the sensations of the moment, in our body and all around us
- ~ Let our breathing occur naturally without interfering
- ~ We start to appreciate the moment in front of us, fully
- ~ The final stage of savasana occurs when the ego and mind let go
- ~ Practice savasana for up to twenty minutes.



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