

The Power of Surrender

One summer afternoon an athletic-looking young man entered the studio where I was practicing yoga. I noticed him as he stood gazing about, and before long his gaze came to rest upon me. I was doing a rather unassuming hatha yoga posture at the time, which seemed to provoke a question from him.

“What do you think is one of the most *difficult* hatha yoga postures, if not *the* most difficult?” he asked.

The question, of course, carried a challenge. The pose I was doing was difficult enough, but I described a more flamboyant pose to satisfy him and demonstrated the motions for getting into it. He paused for a moment to consider, then sat down, took his leg behind his head, lifted himself up on his hands, and did the pose just as I had described it – drawing upon what seemed to be a very natural physical ability.

He came down gracefully, eyeing me for some acknowledgement. I obliged him, praising the beauty of his pose, and described to him another – which he also performed with the same ease. This time his look – which seemed to say, ‘So what’s the big deal about yoga?’ – made me realize that I had been doing neither the practice nor him much service.

“Would you like to know the *most* difficult posture – the one that is still difficult even after you have mastered all the others?” I asked.

He braced himself for a challenge worthy of his mettle and nodded with expectation.

“Lie down on your back, feet together, hands at your sides. Find the center line of your body, from your head to your heels, and center yourself upon that axis – and close your eyes.” I said.

He did so, but his brow darkened with the suspicion. “This isn’t a trick,” I said. “Turn your attention inward toward your heart. Follow your breath inside to the heart. Keep your focus inside, and let go of the body.”

“Oh, like meditation” he said.

“No, this isn’t even meditation – you’re not even doing that. This is the posture called *Savasana*, the corpse posture. This is the posture of being nothing at all. You don’t *do* anything. You’re nobody. Just relax completely.”

Then I fell silent and sat back to watch. At first there was a hardness about his face -- at the corners of his eyes and beneath his eyebrows – which I guessed to be a little confusion and irritation, since he was in unfamiliar territory. At first he held his body apart from the floor, as if unwilling to surrender to it. Yet almost in spite of himself, he began to soften in stages as his breath became even and his limbs lightly twitched as he dropped inward, past subtle inner barriers. His face described an array of moods that shifted like the sky at sunset, until all expression waned and he became still and quiet as twilight.

After some time I softly told him to let his breath deepen, and I slowly brought him out of Savasana. He was silent -- there was little to say. His face was soft and glowed with a hint of tenderness. "Nice," he said, trying to sound indifferent, but his eyes betrayed him. He had emptied himself and found something unexpected -- something that didn't fit into his usual framework of experience.

I just nodded.

More than in any of the other scriptures of yoga, you'll find in the texts of hatha yoga countless paradoxical references to how, through the practice of hatha yoga, one may "conquer death" and, by the same token, conquer time. I can hardly think of a more difficult or sobering challenge. Yet I call these references paradoxical because none of the writers of the texts are around to tell us what this means. And so their meaning remains something of a mystery, one worth looking into.

Savasana, more than any other 'pose' in hatha yoga, is at the crux of the mystery, and is really the culmination of a practice. This 'corpse pose,' in which one lies still as if dead, is an act of profound surrender. The yogi, rather than congratulating himself for the progress made in his practice, instead lies back on the floor with open palms and lets it all go, as if he relishes oblivion. The end of his striving is a release, a death. Yet by this dying daily in his practice, he begins to assimilate his practice and penetrate the meaning of his death -- and of his life and his yoga.

This assimilation takes place on a very practical level. A lot gets stirred up in your system during a practice of hatha yoga; the tissues of the muscles and digestive system in particular are cleansed of toxins. Without a period of rest after the practice, the toxins can go right back into the tissues from whence they came; rest is needed for some time to allow the body to filter the toxins out and ready them for disposal. This in itself rejuvenates the body, bringing freshness to it. It stops and even reverses the wear and tear of the body by which toxins build up and deplete the tissues, causing them to tire and age.

Hatha yoga honors the practical wisdom of this practice as well as its spiritual significance. Savasana refreshes the soul no less than the body because it reverses our habit of expending energy for the sake of accomplishment. This habit -- our life of striving for success -- is the path of time and death that the scriptures mean to conquer. They teach that the process of depletion that accompanies our striving is overcome, not by abandoning work and activity, but by relinquishing its fruits.

This seems to turn everything on its head -- and it does -- but it shows a profound understanding of the burdens we really carry. In practice as in life, completion comes with letting go -- *not* of the *practice* or the *will* to practice, but of the *fruits*, the small victories wrung from our efforts. Those victories, when clung to, really drain us. It takes a lot of energy to keep polishing our trophies, and ultimately death takes them from us anyway. So why not, the yogis ask, die *before* we are dead, and see if death might then lose its sting?

Savasana is precisely this practice, and it provides an experience of being nourished by letting go. The texts of hatha yoga describe this practice as a participation in the 'inversion' of the whole process of creation and manifestation of the cosmos. The world, having come forth into its full glory, must also dissolve and resolve itself into the elements from whence it came. Creation is complete when it resolves itself back into its origin and is renewed.

Savasana enacts this dissolution of the cosmos in our own body. It's practiced with the understanding that by this act of dissolution we regain for ourselves the perfection and completeness that was ours *before* all time and all creation, before all activity. By this 'death' we return to our greater Self and experience the true completion of our efforts as something that is anything *but* oblivion.

The hatha yoga text called the *Shiva Samhita* describes this inverse process, as witnessed by the yogis in meditation, in terms of the dissolution of the elements: the element earth becomes subtle and dissolves in water; water dissolves in fire, fire in air, air in ether, and so on until everything is reabsorbed into the Great Brahman. This meditative process or technique is sometimes known as *bhutashuddhi*, the purification of the elements.

The yogi practices this same reabsorption and resolution in Savasana. Savasana begins with careful placement of the body, so that we begin in a very balanced state. We start with the feet together, checking to see if the place where the heels touch is in line with the center of the heart and the top of the head.

Carefully balancing the body on its centerline, neither favoring one side nor the other, brings the whole of our personality into balance. Often the body tilts toward the more dominant and stronger side of the body. But balance must include our more reticent side as well; otherwise attention and energy swells the dominant side, feeding its aggressiveness and thus our restlessness.

The arms should be placed only fifteen to thirty degrees out from the sides of the body, so that the diaphragm is relaxed and free to breathe. Bend your elbows and gently press the backs of the upper arms into the floor; then lift your collarbones slightly up toward your head and draw your shoulderblades down your back, so that your upper back can settle down flat on the floor. Then release your arms down to the floor, palms facing up and relax. The sides of your upper chest, beneath the armpits, should feel open and expanded; your neck should feel released. Soften your fingers and thumbs, and allow them to gently curl.

Savasana is a process of release and descent, as if you're sinking into the earth – or into yourself. Once the body is placed well, relaxation begins with the neck and head. The senses need to turn inward -- and the struggle to bring this about usually manifests in the face and throat. Soften and lengthen the back of the neck, letting it extend toward the crown of the head. The energy of your awareness then flows up and over the crown of the head and down the forehead. With this, the bridge of the nose – where the eyebrows meet the nose – turns parallel to the floor, bringing a sense of balance. The chin should lift slightly upwards to balance the descending motion of the head, so that the chin does not press into the throat. The lengthening of the neck, descent of the forehead, and subtle lift of the chin brings a sense of lightness in the head and relaxation in the throat.

The flow of energy throughout the body is felt as a lengthening and broadening of the back of the body, even as the senses – usually experienced at the 'front' of the body – descend inward. The eyeballs themselves should feel heavy and fall inwards, as if they are shrinking and descending and you shift to a different way of seeing, as if you were looking out through the center of your forehead without the use of the eyes at all.

The breath helps you in your descent. Keep the inhalation of normal length, but allow the exhalation to draw out long and feel the skin soften and melt with it. The inhalation is like a parachute that slows your descent; the exhalation gives a sense of settling inward. You follow the exhalation as it slowly fades like the

peal of a bell into silence. As you listen to the breath, you feel suspended on the thin line of your awareness, as all else falls away.

At this point the experience of the body often becomes more ‘elemental’. The weight of the body is felt less as a ‘body,’ and more as the element of earth itself; you release that weightiness and allow it to merge with the earth. You begin to become aware of all of the elements present in your body and release each back to its source, feeling this as a dissolution and merging with your surroundings. You allow the element of water, the fluidity of the body, to become calm and pool in the belly like a quiet pond. Your breath merges with the air all about you, until you lose the distinction between inside and outside. Your sense of space expands to swallow any distinction between yourself and your surroundings. You become aware of the landscape of your body as being like the landscapes of the hills and meadows, of mountains and quiet watery coves. You watch over this quietly, with a sense of calm.

A number of students have told me how at this point of relaxation they have an experience of light inside the head. I have had this experience too – sometimes as distinctly as a vision of the sun or the moon, sometimes as an undifferentiated and bright yet soothing light. Everything else seems to dissolve away into darkness as your attention is drawn toward this light. After some time you come out of this state of Savasana feeling completely refreshed.

One professional nurse shared with me how, after coming out of one such Savasana at the end of a hatha yoga session, she felt renewed even though she had been feeling sick, and was able to be at her best during an extraordinarily trying weekend at her hospital. She attributed it to her experience of that light in her Savasana.

The yogi’s quest, according to the texts of hatha yoga, is to conquer time and death – but not really by defying either. The yogi conquers death by surrender to something even greater than death. By that surrender, death is not so much denied as put in its place; likewise, time is seen to be but a limited point of reference for our present sense of self. Savasana – the practice of dying – is a practice of putting everything in its place and looking beyond the immediate to find the Truth.

Complete surrender is the culmination of diligent practice, great faith and tremendous devotion. This in itself seems daunting – yet there is always an element of grace that makes a taste of what lies beyond the darkness available to us all. Each taste makes death – which is really the death of the ego, not of the Self – a little easier, and so we return to taste it again and again for nourishment to keep us going.

Savasana is a practice that is integral to the spirit of yoga, for yoga is an offering of ones efforts without regard for success or failure. It is the most difficult ‘pose’ in hatha yoga because it is an act of setting *aside* all posing – of undoing our very sense of self, rather than adding to it. Yet it is by this offering that through yoga we conquer time and death by putting an end, once and for all, to our fear of both.