

**SHAVASANA
CORPSE POSE**
By Richard Rosen

This thing called "corpse" we dread so much is living with us here and now.

~Milarepa. Quoted by Sogyal Rinpoche in *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 15.

Lying full length on the back like a corpse is called *shavasana*. With this asana tiredness caused by other asanas is eliminated; it also promotes calmness of mind.

~*Hatha-Yoga-Pradipika*, 1.32

When the brain is trained to be consciously quiet, the cognitive faculty comes into its own, making possible, through the intelligence, apprehension of the mind's various facets. Clarity of intelligence lifts the veil of obscurity and encourages quiet receptivity in the ego as well as in the consciousness, diffusing their energies evenly throughout the physical, psychological, mental, intellectual and spiritual sheathes of the soul.

~B.K.S. Iyengar, *Light on the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, 11

For them that thinks death's honesty
Won't fall upon them naturally
Life sometimes must get lonely.

~Bob Dylan, "It's Alright Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)," *Bringing it all Back Home*

[Remaining] still, let him [the yogi] keep his body, head, and neck in a straight line, unmoving; let him fix his eye on the tip of his nose . . .

~*Bhagavad-Gita* 6.13 (translated by R.C. Zaehner)

INTRODUCTION

Many people don't like to think or talk much about dying and death. That's why some teachers prefer to call the Corpse Posture (*shavasana*) by a different name, believing that the macabre associations we have with dead bodies in this culture will frighten students away from this most important asana. But Corpse really has nothing to do with the everyday kind of death of the body-mind, which anyway Yogis view as a relatively unimportant event. The posture instead is a symbolic gesture, a "dying" to or self-release from habitual ways of thinking and acting that promotes both genuine physical and psychological rest and self-recognition of our authentic nature. As the Western sage Karlfried Graf Durckheim writes, the "correct manner of dying gains freedom over life and death, by raising one above both, discovering one's true being and finally being absorbed in the Life which is beyond life and death. What matters is the death of that ego, which is in constant contradiction both to what is absolute and to what is relative" (*The Japanese Cult of Tranquility*, 106).

REQUIREMENTS OF SHAVASANA

You may not be used to practicing Corpse with a lot of detailed instructions. After all, what's so hard about lying on your back and taking a nap? Nothing . . . except that just "lying on your back" and snoring isn't Corpse. To be successful in this posture (as in all the postures) the body-mind needs to be skillfully aligned in a "steady and comfortable" (*sthira-sukha*) position which, according to Patanjali, "loosens" (*sithila*) all physical and psychological tension, and so dissolves the normally perceived boundaries of the body-mind. In this profound quietude you "coincide" (*samapatti*) with the infinite or "endless" (*ananta*) consciousness that pervades the universe, and transcend the perpetual tug-of-war of the conflicting pairs-of-opposites (*dvandva*). Corpse also needs a dispassionate (*vairagya*) and present-centered self-presence and self-recollection. Such "choiceless awareness," as Jiddu Krishnamurti calls it, inspires a completely new way of looking at ourselves and the world.

PRACTICE

Traditionally Corpse is the well-deserved rest at the terminus of a Yoga practice, whether it's asana or pranayama, though some schools of Yoga use it as a way station between postures during the course of practice. I like to spend a few minutes in the posture at the start of my practice too, to gather my thoughts and imaginatively rehearse the upcoming sequence of postures or breathing techniques. Perform Corpse for at least 5 minutes for every 30 minutes of asana or pranayama practice.

You can also practice Corpse by itself, whenever you need a serious rest, like before or after a particularly stressful day at work, or around any holiday that brings out all the relatives. The more experience you get with the posture in your formal practice, the easier it will be for you to implement a Corpse-like frame of mind anytime you need it, even sitting at your desk or walking down the street.

You can pad your practice floor with a folded blanket or sticky mat (but not a mattress). Make sure you will be warm on cool or cold days, either by heating the room or covering yourself with a blanket. Always lie parallel and perpendicular, not angled, to the walls. If you wear glasses, take them off.

You might also honor "purity of direction," an important element of traditional Yoga

practice, by orienting yourself in a specific direction. East and North are often mentioned as being especially propitious, the former because it's the quarter of the rising sun, the "heart" of the world and a symbol of spiritual wisdom, the latter because it's the quarter of the Pole Star, the "pinnacle of heaven."

There are various props that complement Corpse, including an eye bag, a bolster, blankets, and sand bags. I'll give you some ideas on how to use these props below. If you aren't used to props, they might feel uncomfortable at first, but give them a chance. Don't be reluctant to tinker with props, or even devise new ones of your own. Remember that Yogis have been experimenting with a variety of props for centuries.

We will look at four successive levels of relaxation in Corpse, the physical body, the five sense organs (tongue, nose, eyes, ears, and skin), the brain, and the breath.

Sit on the floor with your knees bent at right angles and feet on the floor, then lean back onto your forearms. Slowly push out through your heels, one at a time, until your knees are straight. Then soften your legs and groins, so your legs and feet to turn outward. If you can't easily release your groins, lay a 10-pound sand bag on each of the creases where the legs join the pelvis (over the head of each your thigh bones).

Ideally your heels should be few inches apart, and resting evenly on the floor (so your feet are angled equally away from an imaginary line drawn perpendicular to the floor midway between the heels). If you have any back pain though, slide your heels maybe a foot or two apart, or support your knees on a bolster or thickly rolled blanket.

Now lie back all the way, rolling your spine slowly down onto the floor. With your hands, widen and lengthen your sacrum, "unreeling" your vestigial tail bone toward the heels, then press and narrow the two hip points on your front pelvis. Soften and widen (but don't flatten) your lower back. When your pelvis is aligned, your right and left waists will be equally long, and your two hip points equidistant from the ceiling.

Again with your hands spread and lift the base of your skull away from the back of your neck. Imagine two lines of energy streaming away from this point in opposite directions, one upward to your crown, the other down along the nape to your tail. Your head, like your pelvis, should be aligned, with your ears equidistant from your shoulders, your eyes equidistant from ceiling, and the underside of your chin perpendicular to the floor. If tight shoulders or neck pull the base of your skull down, jutting your chin toward the ceiling, lift your head on a thickly folded blanket to bring it to neutral.

Now hug yourself, stretching your arms across your front torso so each hand can pull on the opposite shoulder. Widen the back ribs and the shoulder blades away from the spine, then release the latter down the back, toward the tail. Lengthen your arms out to your sides, each equally angled somewhere between 30 and 45 degrees relative to the sides of your torso. Rotate the arms outwardly and set the backs of the hands on the floor, on (or at least near to) the index finger knuckles. Roll your front armpits up to the tops of your shoulders, and slide your back armpits down along the backs of the arms. Widen your collar bones away from your sternum, and sink the heads of the upper arm bones into the floor.

How do you feel now? A fellow student once asked one of my teachers what Corpse

is supposed to feel like. “Nothing,” he replied, and we all laughed, but he was serious. Remember that when all movement ceases and we’re precisely aligned, we enter a “neutral state” in which all self-feeling and self-limitation vanishes into thin air.

For many beginning students this state isn’t easily realized. Almost everybody is more or less crooked in some way, and over time we get used to our crookedness. We honestly believe we’re lying “straight,” but actually our head is turned, our shoulders are skewed, one side of our torso is shorter than the other—the list of possibilities is long. Though we’re not overtly aware of our crookedness in Corpse, still in some deep recess of our consciousness we *feel* it, and this generates physical and psychological tension despite our best efforts. If you are a beginner, ask an experienced yoga friend or teacher to help clarify your misalignments and suggest some corrections.

SENSE ORGANS

In Yoga parlance the sense organs are collectively known as the *jnana-indriya* (pronounced GYANA-IN-DREE-YA), which literally means the “wisdom (*jnana*) pertaining to Indra (*indriya*).” Indra (“Ruler”) is the chief deity of the Vedic pantheon, akin to the Greek Zeus. This means that our sense organs are the source of our “wisdom” about the world, and ultimately they are in the service of the divine.

TONGUE

Open your mouth wide and extend your tongue out from its root, which is deep in your throat at the U-shaped hyoid bone. Hiss out a long “HA” sound. Feel the full length and width of your tongue, then retract it and soften and spread it on the floor of your mouth, resting its tip behind your lower teeth.

“WINGS” OF THE NOSE

The little bumps on the sides of your nose are its “wings” (*alae*). With your fingertips, gently stroke down from the inner corners of your eyes across your cheeks just outside the wings to the “corners” of your mouth. Repeat this several times. As you breathe in Corpse, this skin should continue to descend, especially on the inhalations.

EYES

The eyes are connected to the brain through the optic nerve, and the Yogis claim that a “wandering gaze” upsets the brain’s repose. To fix the eyes then, they typically gaze toward one of two points, the “interval between the eyebrows” (*bhru-madhya*) or the “tip of the nose” (*nasa-agra*).

The simplest way to quiet your eyes is to cover them with an eye bag. Imagine too they are sinking heavily into their cup-shaped sockets, then turn them down and gaze steadily “underneath” your cheek bones.

EARS

Imagine that your outer ears are like two little pinwheels on the sides of your head, joined by an axle passing through the two ear holes. Touch a fingertip to each tragus (“goat”), the little projection just in front of each ear hole, and gently stroke down to

the lobes, up the backs of the ears, around the tops, and down to the tragi again. Repeat several times, until you set your ear pinwheels spinning. Then soften the inner ears, so the ear canals feel very deep and round.

SKIN

For the skin we'll focus on the frontalis muscle, on your forehead. According to Alan Combs, author of *The Radiance of Being* (246), this muscle tends to tighten when we're under stress, and so is a "good rough gauge of the total stress level of the body." By learning to relax the frontalis, we can simultaneously relax the entire body.

With your fingertips, stroke downward several times along the vertical midline of your forehead, releasing the skin from the hair line to the space between the eyebrows at the bridge of the nose. Next stroke outward a few times from the midline, "melting" the skin over the temples and down toward the floor.

BRAIN

B.K.S. Iyengar contends that the brain is the hardest part of the body to adjust in Yoga practice (Iyengar: *His Life and Work*, 497). While many people naturally assume the brain is the "seat" of consciousness, Yoga teaches that consciousness infuses every cell of our body. The brain, continues Iyengar, should be treated not as the "subject" or observer, but merely as another "object" for observation and adjustment, the same as an arm or leg.

Feel your brain inside the skull case. Imagine that it's shrinking, especially on your inhalations, and then sinking onto the back of your head. Open a space between the front of your brain and the inner lining of your forehead.

BREATH

Lastly direct your awareness to your everyday breathing. Notice in particular the length or time of your exhales and the following brief natural pauses. After a minute or so, slow the time of each exhale by a count or two, and then every few cycles, add another count until you are exhaling as slowly as you can without any discomfort, physical or otherwise. Carefully monitor the sound the breath makes as it leaves your body.

Next extend the natural pause after each exhale by a count or two, but don't struggle to prolong it. During this breathing hiatus observe first the slight diminution or "restriction" (nirodha) of the incessant chatter or "fluctuations" (vritti) of your consciousness. Then scrutinize your body-mind in the moment just prior to inhalation. Many people "do something" to prepare for the inhale, such as gripping one of the sense organs, the throat, the shoulders, belly and groins, or the limbs, which only interferes with your spontaneous breath. Try to inhibit all doing. Instead allow yourself to "be breathed" so the inhale flows through you like a wave without effort or resistance. Continue with extended exhales and pauses until the innate intelligence of your breath emerges to guide you through the rest of your Corpse.

EXITING CORPSE

Exit Corpse slowly. First gently wiggle your fingers and toes. Gradually make your movements larger—stretch your hands and feet, then arms and legs, then torso and neck. But be sure not to disturb the brain or breath with any quick movements. When you have stretched as much as you like, exhale, bend your knees, and roll over to one side. Some teachers recommend you roll to the right, others that you roll first to the right, then back to the left. Keep your head on the floor and pretend it's very heavy. Wait a few more breaths. Then push your hands against the floor, lift your torso, and drag your head up slowly so your brain is the last part of you to sit upright.

Properly performed, Corpse can serve as a tool of self-investigation, self-transformation, and self-integration. Its effects on the body-mind will radiate outward, like waves from a pebble dropped in a pool of water, to embrace both your wider Yoga practice and day-to-day existence. Corpse, like all its companion postures, only has significance as it reflects on and then informs everything we do.