

Sweet Surrender

Rajakapotasana – Royal Pigeon pose

In this variation of Rajakapotasana, we have a golden opportunity to embrace surrender as a means towards a deeper and more lasting release of mental, energetic, and physical tensions.

The attitude of surrender can often be neglected in our asana practice. Too often the strive-strain-attain mindset causes us to be aggressive and forceful, creating stress rather than diminishing it.

Pigeon is a great stress-reducer. It has the potential to melt away tensions and bring you to a state of deep calmness. It is important to find the variation that works for you, perhaps using props to allow for you to fully relax into the asana. You may find when holding the pose for a few

minutes that time seems to slow down as the body releases deeply through successive layers of tensions.

As we stand, walk, and sit in our daily life, tensions can gather around the hip and pelvic areas. This can contribute to pain and restrict movement both in our asana practice and in our day-to-day life. It is well known that tight hips can contribute to knee and lower back problems. Pigeon can effectively free-up restricted hips increasing freedom of movement and protecting joints that are both above and below.



In addition, to be able to sit comfortably for pranayama and meditation, the hips need to be loosened up so we can sit with ease, free from bodily tension. When this pose is practiced consistently you may find sitting cross-legged becoming much more comfortable. Looking at the big picture this is a major reason and benefit of all the asanas. Yes, the poses give you strength, flexibility, endurance, and coordination, yet they have deeper significance and benefit: the ability to dissolve restlessness and abide in a state of profound peace.

Consult an experienced teacher if you have any knee, sacroiliac joint, or lumbar spine conditions before practicing this pose.

TRANSITIONING INTO RAJAKAPOTASANA

To keep these instructions clear we will describe the pose with the right knee forward and the left leg back. In actual practice you may want to alternate which side you practice with first.

Moving into Pigeon pose can be done in a number of ways –

- From a cross-legged position lean to one side and swing the left leg back behind you.
- From Table pose, simply bring the right knee forward behind the right wrist.
- From Three-leg Downward Dog. Exhale square the hips and bring the right knee forward behind the right hand. See photos 1 and 2.

Place the right knee behind the right wrist. For now, keep the back leg straight with the toes tucked under. Press into the back toes and either shift the pelvis forward towards the right heel for less hip stretch or backward away from the right heel for a deeper hip stretch. Through this tucked-toes technique you will also be able to square the hips and chest towards the front. See photo 3.

Now you can ease the back leg front thigh and the bent knee hip towards the floor. Place any props you use in place (see prop section on the following page). Do your best to keep from rolling off of the back leg front thigh. Press the hands into the floor for support.



USE OF PROPS

- A firm cushion or folded blanket can be placed beneath the bent knee hip to keep the hips square and avoid collapsing to that side. See photo 4.



- A folded cylinder-shaped blanket can be placed diagonally under the bent knee hip and back under the straight leg front thigh. This will maintain level hips and give the back leg thigh a reference point to press into. See photo 5.



- A bolster can be placed under the belly, chest, and head making the pose more easeful and restorative. In addition, a blanket can be placed over the pelvis and lower back as shown. See photo 6.



Keep some weight moving back into the back leg and foot. Turn the toes away and press the top of the back foot into the floor.

Approach the pose in stages. Ease your weight forward on an exhalation and prop up on your forearms for a few breaths to allow the hips to release slowly.

IMPORTANCE OF ALIGNMENT FOR THE JOINTS

Knees

In the forward-bending variation of Pigeon, the most vulnerable area is the knee of the forward leg. As you lean forward the torso's weight can exert pressure into the knee joint. You do not want to experience pain in the knee in this pose. The use of props can be very useful for joint safety as well helping you to hold the pose, thus increasing the benefits in body and mind. If the right heel is forward of the left hip, the main protective measure for the front knee is to press out through the ball of the foot towards the side. A self-assisting method is to press the left palm and ball of right foot into each other before melting down into the full prostration position.

Sacroiliac joints

If you have any sacroiliac joint issues you will want to also proceed very gently into the pose. In Rajakapotasana, the hips are in an asymmetrical position – the forward leg hip joint is in flexion, while the back leg hip joint is in extension. This may aggravate an existing sacroiliac joint injury. While propped up on your hands or forearms, squeeze the thighbones into their respective hip sockets for a few breaths. With the right leg bent and forward, the thighbone hugs backward into the right hip socket, while the left thigh hugs forward into the left hip socket. Through this action the hips will be moving towards symmetry. Hold this muscular tone for a few smooth breaths, then exhaling slowly, release and soften into the pose.

Lumbar spine

To protect the lumbar spine keep the hips and chest square, evenly facing forward. If you roll off the straight leg thigh and collapse onto the bent knee hip and attempt to turn the chest square to the front then the lower spine will be rotating, possibly stressing the area. Use the props described to keep both hips level and facing forward.

MERGING INTO THE POSE

On an exhalation place the palms down and begin folding forward onto your forearms. It is important to avoid quickly collapsing all your weight over the front knee. Instead be here on the forearms for a few breaths. When you are ready, spread the elbows, turn the fingers inward and place your forehead on the floor or on the back of an arm or hand. An option is to walk the hands forward in a full surrendering gesture. Be here for few breaths up to a few minutes. See photo 7.



DEEPENING THE POSE

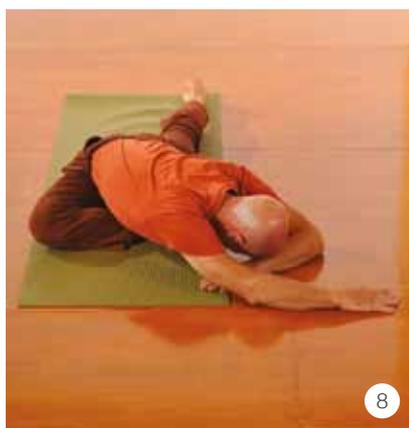
With the breath

Begin with some ujjayi breaths, equal inhalation to exhalation ratio. Then as an option slowly transition to a 1 to 2 ratio. For example, inhale to the count of 4 and exhale to a count of 8. Allow for the natural pause following the exhalations. This technique will slow the heart, quiet the mind, and usher you into a deep experience of peace. Be here melting into each exhalation and the natural post-exhalation pause.

With the body

To deepen the hip release, walk your hands and chest over towards the left (away from the bent knee hip) forming a side-bend in the spine.

Reach your right hand and arm way over towards the left. The left elbow can be bent with the forearm under the forehead. An option to is press the right hand forward into the floor while you lengthen back through the right hip. This will open-up the whole right side of the torso and effectively increase the stretch in the hip. See photo 8.



MORE ADVANCED VARIATIONS

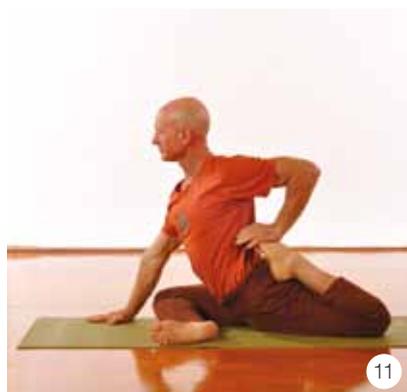
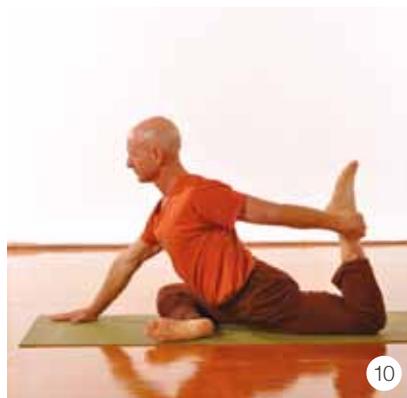
Pigeon back-bend variation

Come up onto your finger pads (or hands on blocks) and as you inhale draw the thighbones into the hip sockets and dynamically lift up through the breastbone. Pressing down with the legs and feet, emphasise drawing muscular and pranic energy upward from the hips to the heart. Maintain the squared hips as you hold the pose. Turn the inner elbow creases towards the front to spread the collarbones and as the breastbone ascends you have the option to ease the head back. Hold for a few breaths, and then melt back down into the forward bend variation as described. See photo 9.



One leg variation

Place the hands under the shoulders and pressing them down float the chest and head back up. This first variation can be done with a strap around the back leg ankle. You may have to walk the pelvis forward moving the left hip towards the right foot. Bend the back leg knee and reach for the ankle or foot. Do your best to keep the hips squared to the front. The tendency may be for you to roll off the front of the back leg thigh and towards the bent knee hip. You can lean forward onto the right hand or even take the forearm to the floor. You will be stretching the quadriceps and hip flexors of the back thigh. Breathe consciously into the stretch sensations. As the front of the back leg thigh releases you can draw the heel inward towards the hip. Hold for a few breaths; then slowly come out of the pose. You can then smoothly swing the back leg around to the front and lie on your back hugging the



knees to the chest for a few breaths before practicing on the other side. See photos 10 and 11.

In this wonderful hip opening pose, perhaps the most fruitful attitude we can bring to our practice is one of wholehearted self-acceptance. Rather than subconsciously feeling that we are never quite good enough, which affects asana as well as daily life, we can be fully present with ourselves where we are, right now.

In Patanjali's Yoga Sutras, in the very first sutra, he tells us that NOW we have come to the sacred practice of Yoga. This NOW teaches us to embrace the present moment, and in so doing, to embrace ourselves in the here and now.

Patanjali goes on to say in the second section of the Sutras that to attain Samadhi (Oneness) the most important key attitude is Surrender (Ishwara pranidhana). Rajakapotasana can help us shift gears from over-striving and its accompanying restlessness into the majesty and grace of surrendering the ego into the vastness of all that is. Namaste.

Adam and Maaji (Akash) have each been dedicated to the path of yoga since 1982.

They share their love and experience from Nataraja Yoga Temple located on the Sunshine Coast hinterland of Queensland. They offer yoga teacher training (commences in November), weekly classes, retreats, kirtans, fire ceremony, and fellowship with other truth-seekers. See the website www.radiantlightyoga.com for more information.