

# FREEING UP HIPS & SHOULDERS TO IMPROVE FLEXIBILITY

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We can divide the spinal column into four parts:

• **More flexible areas:**

- 1) *The cervical spine*
- 2) *The lumbar spine*

• **Less flexible areas (as they are connected to larger bone structures):**

3) *The thoracic spine, connected to the rib cage. Its flexibility depends on the ability to open spaces between the ribs and the capacity of movement by the shoulders.*

4) *The sacrum, which includes the last five vertebrae of the spinal column and is connected to the pelvic bone. Its flexibility depends on the capacity of the pelvis to be able to rotate forward or backwards on the hip joint.*



The areas of the spinal column with less flexibility have the advantage to be situated close to joints with a high degree of flexibility: the thoracic spine is located close to the shoulders, and the sacrum is situated close to the hips. When these two important joints are freed up we have the ability to bend forward and stretch backwards maintaining the spinal column aligned (pelvis + heart + crown). If they are not aligned, then both our lumbar and cervical regions suffer when we bend forward forcing our lumbar vertebrae to stretch and bend more than is normally accepted in order to compensate for stiffness in the hip joints. And when the shoulders are stiff, we do the back extensions forcing the neck to bend more than what is natural to compensate that stiffness.

If we want to gain greater spinal column flexibility, we should try to be conscious to keep these two joints open and free of tension. It is also important to be aware of these two areas when we choose to bend forward or stretch backwards so that the effort doesn't take place in the middle of the back or in the neck region because that will cause an effect which isn't productive and might be potentially harmful.

## KEYS IN ORDER TO IMPROVE FLEXIBILITY:

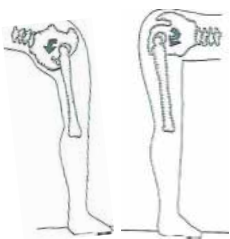
There are exercises that we can do to help unblock both the hips and the shoulders.

We recommend their use after you have sufficiently warmed up the body, as the body needs warmth and heat in order to change.

Remember that to gain flexibility is a gradual and progressive process. To force the body in order to enter into a given posture will only delay the process since by not respecting the alignment of the spine, you will force it and end up contracting the different muscles when the key to flexibility is to let go.

The use of the breath in order to go deeper into the practice of asanas is key. Breathe deeply, use the inhalation to stretch the spine, the exhalation to relax and let go, entering little by little into the posture.

The body is different each and every day. Exercise from the point you are at each day and then begin the work of transformation.



### EXERCISES FOR FLEXIBILITY OF THE HIPS:

To move the spinal column and keep it aligned, the sacrum, which is part of the pelvic bone, rotates forward or backwards on the hip joint. The whole unit of sacrum and pelvic bone has a significant range of movement.

When the muscles of the pelvis and the upper part of the legs are tense they work against the rotation of the pelvis, which then gets literally blocked and fixed in one position. The spinal column is unable to move as an aligned unit either forward or backwards since the sacrum and pelvis aren't free to rotate on the hip joint. This obliges the spinal column to bend from the more flexible region of the thoracic vertebrae and as such, breaking the connection between the sacrum and the rest of the spinal column. This can cause pain and possible injury.

Adapt the following exercises to your own body and not the reverse. Feeling pain in the knees while practicing any of the exercises could be indicative of trying to stretch more than what your hip joint is capable of. Be careful, as too much tension can be harmful for the knees. The exercises are not in sequence but rather just individual exercises of which you can freely choose to include anyone of them into your daily practice. Begin with 5 deep breaths in each posture and gradually work up to 10 breaths in each posture.



**Anjaneyasana - Crescent Moon or Low Lunge Pose.** From Downward-Facing Dog (Adho Mukha Svanasana), exhale and step your right foot forward between your hands, aligning the right knee over the heel. Then lower your left knee to the floor and, keeping the right knee fixed in place, slide the left back until you feel a

comfortable stretch in the left front thigh and groin. Turn the top of your left foot to the floor. Inhale and lift your torso to upright. As you do, sweep your arms out to the sides and up, perpendicular to the floor. Draw the tailbone down toward the floor and lift your pubic bone toward your navel. Lift your chest from the firmness of your shoulder blades against the back torso. Hold for a minute, exhale your torso back to the right thigh and your hands to the floor, and turn your back toes under. With another exhale, lift your left knee off the floor and step back to Adho Mukha Svanasana. Repeat with the left foot forward for the same length of time.

**Eka Pada Raja Kapotasana - One Legged King Pigeon Pose.**

Begin on all fours, with your knees directly below your hips, and your hands slightly ahead of your shoulders. Slide your right knee forward to the back of your right wrist; at the same time angle your right shin under your torso and bring your right foot to the front of your left knee. The outside of your right shin will now rest on the floor. Slowly slide your left leg back, straightening the knee and descending the front of the thigh to the floor. Lower the outside of your right buttock toward the floor. Position the right heel just in front of the left hip. The right knee can angle slightly to the right, outside the line of the hip. Look back at your left leg. It should extend straight out of the hip (and not be angled off to the left), and rotated slightly inwardly, so its midline presses against the floor. For a deeper stretch, you may stretch forward over the front leg with your arms in stretched to the front. Breathe long and deep, relaxing consciously all tension in the body. Maintain the posture for at least 1 minute. Change sides and repeat the exercise. As you gain flexibility you may move your left foot gradually, until it is aligned with the left knee, parallel to the top of the mat. Do it step by step, increasing the angle very slowly.



**Sucirandhrasana - Eye of the Needle Pose.**

From a reclined position, bend both knees and cross the right ankle on top of the left thigh. Interlace the fingers behind the left thigh and draw the left knee toward you. Flex the right foot to engage the muscles around the knee joint. Relax the shoulders, the jaw, and the face. Close your eyes and breathe slowly in and out, directing the awareness to where you feel sensation in your body. Stay here for about 1 minute before switching sides.

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**Ananda Balasana - Happy Baby Pose.** Lie down on your back. Bend your knees over your stomach and flex your feet. Catch hold of your big toes and open your legs to the sides so that the legs are no longer over the body. Press the big toes and bring the knees towards the floor. The ankles are over the knees with the shins of the legs perpendicular to the floor. Stretch the heels up. Create resistance in the legs by pushing the feet up. Try to lower the coccyx to the floor.



### EXERCISES FOR FLEXIBILITY OF THE SHOULDERS:

The shoulder blades are large bony structures that when correctly positioned, can be used as a fulcrum to lift up the chest area and arch the thoracic spine backwards.

They can be positioned to help the shoulder joints hold the arms up in the air without strain or make it easier for the arms to support the weight of the body.

Each one of the following exercises works on opening up the shoulder area. You can choose anyone of the exercises to include in your practice. Remember to work gradually, and when your muscles are sufficiently warmed up, to work on those blocked areas of the body. Begin with 5 deep breaths and gradually work up to 10 breaths.

**Variation of Garudasana - Eagle Pose.** Sit in Sukhasana or Siddhasana and align your spine. Open your arms wide to the sides and then cross your arms in front of you with the right arm on top of the left arm, the right elbow resting on the left arm. Let the shoulder blades relax lowering them as far as possible. Bend the elbows so that the forearms are perpendicular to the floor. Hug the arms to the chest and press the hands even more together. Interlace the hands, that will be at different levels. Stay in the posture for 5 breaths then change the position of the arms. If you wish to intensify the experience, lift the arms up slightly.





**Yoga Mudra.** Sit on your heels; interlock your hands behind your back in Venus Mudra. Exhale, and keeping the spine elongated, lean forward from the hip joints, not the waist. If possible, rest your forehead on the floor; if not, put a block under your forehead. Stretch the arms up straight until they are perpendicular to the floor. Stay in the posture for 1 minute. If you need more space to bend forward, try opening your knees to the sides. On the contrary, if you feel an overextension of your lower back, keep your knees together to prevent that.

**Grabbing the hands behind the back.** Sitting in Vajrasana (Rock Pose), stretch your right arm up, and rotate the arm so that the armpit faces forward, bend the elbow and bring the hand behind the back. The hand faces towards the spine. Then stretch the left arm to the side, bend the elbow bring the hand behind the back until you are able to catch hold of the right hand with your left hand. If you are unable to catch hold of your hands, use a belt to help you. Remember to lift up your chest and respect the natural curves of your spine. Stay in the posture for 5 deep breaths and then change arm positions.



**Thread the Needle Posture.** Begin on all fours, slide the left arm under the right arm so that the left shoulder rests on the floor. Stretch the right arm forward with the palm on the floor. Stay in the posture for 5 deep breaths and then change sides.

