

# Bird of Paradise

*Find proper alignment in Pigeon Pose, then practice it often, and those stiff, tight hips will start to feel open again.*  
~Jason Crandell



Whenever I ask my students before class if they have any requests, I'm greeted with a chorus of "Hip openers!" At first I was puzzled: My students always looked so tense—tight jaws, fierce eyes, rigid necks—while practicing these poses. But as I paid more attention, I began to notice a universal look of relief on their faces by the end of class. Hip openers may be challenging, but they can also be incredibly satisfying, both physically and emotionally.

If you're like most students, you probably feel as though someone poured superglue into your hip sockets. There are perfectly good reasons for this. First, modern life requires sitting all day, which keeps your hips from the rotation, flexion, and extension they need to remain agile. Second, common sports such as running and cycling—and even an everyday activity like walking—demand hip strength but not flexibility. The third culprit is stress, which creates tension in your body, especially in your hip area, which is a complex cluster of powerful muscles, tendons, and ligaments. Even a little bit of stress-induced clenching can really lock them up.

So, short of tossing out your chair (which could lead to other physiological problems), and entirely eliminating stress from your life, what can you do to unstick your hips and get them gliding freely again? For starters, you can start to incorporate Pigeon Pose into your daily routine.

This pose is perfect for tight hips because it stretches the hip rotators (the buttocks area) and the hip flexors (the long muscles that run along the front of your thighs and pelvis). It also requires substantial external rotation in the front leg and substantial internal rotation in the back leg. If you practice it consistently, you'll notice an increased suppleness throughout your practice. You may also find that your body moves more easily even after class, since your pelvis is the central hub of movement.

Sounds easy, right? Well, sort of. If you've ever tried Pigeon Pose, you know how challenging it is. It's effective because it's so good at isolating certain muscles in the hips, ultimately softening stiffness and rigidity and making you feel lighter and more flexible. But isolating those muscles is the very thing that can make Pigeon Pose grueling. So just be aware that you might taste some bitterness before getting to the pose's sweet spot.

All you have to do is be attentive to the many—and sometimes difficult—physical sensations that arise. Your ability to observe and be with these sensations and the accompanying cacophony of thoughts and feelings may be just as rewarding as the physical benefits of the pose.



## Keep Your Waist Long

The first stage of the pose elongates the hip flexors of your back leg and creates a mild backbend. It's also the time to establish stability in your pelvis before moving into the second stage.

Start on all fours, placing your hands directly below your shoulders, and your knees below your hips. Bring your right knee forward until it touches your right wrist, keeping your right thigh parallel to the sides of your mat. Slowly inch your right shin and foot (hereafter referred to as your "front leg") toward the midline of your body until your foot is directly below your left hip. Now straighten your left leg (hereafter referred to as your "back" leg) toward the back of your mat.

Instead of leaning forward, walk your hands back and lower both sides of your pelvis toward the floor. As your pelvis releases, be sure your hips don't lean to the right. You'll know this is happening if your left hip lifts higher than your right. You need to keep your hips as level as possible to get the full effects of the pose and to keep your lower back safely aligned. If you're not able to lower the hips evenly (join the club!), sit on a folded blanket or a block before starting the pose.

As your hips continue to settle, press your fingertips firmly into the floor and lengthen the sides of your waist to help keep your lower back long and free from strain. Using your arms this way allows you to modify the intensity of the stretch.

## Fold Into the Stretch

Walk your hands forward, inhale deeply as you lengthen your torso, and exhale as you fold forward, lowering your elbows to the floor (pictured right). Again, use your arms to adjust the weight you release into your hips. If the stretch feels too intense, lift away from the floor and use your arms to support more of your weight. If you have space to spare in your hips, lower your torso and let your weight settle onto the floor.

As you come into the second version of the pose, you might feel sensations shift from your back leg to your outer front hip and buttock. The sensations that flood your hips might feel great or slightly unnerving—or a combination of the two. In any case, it's important to refine your alignment again to ensure that you're peeling away layers of tension rather than stressing any of your joints.

Start by making sure your hips are level. If you were meticulous about this in the first stage, you are probably in good shape. If not, then any imbalance will increase as you come forward. So if necessary, place a folded blanket under your right buttock so your pelvis isn't off kilter.

Look at your front thigh. Make sure it's parallel to the sides of the mat and that your front foot is directly beneath your back hip. Breathe into the sensations rumbling in your hips. Observe the reactions in your mind and try to let go of them by relaxing your eyes, jaw, and throat. Continue to breathe into your hips and allow your belly to melt toward the floor. Feel your hips and your mind soften as you allow waves of feelings to wash over you.



After 5 to 10 breaths in the forward bend, inhale to come back up. Press down through your fingertips as you lift your hips away from the floor and transition all the way to Downward Dog. Take five deep breaths and observe how your hips feel—lighter? clearer? achy? There's no need to attach any meaning to the sensations. No need to worry or judge yourself. Strong as these sensations are, they'll soon morph into different feelings as you switch to your second side.

Jason Crandell teaches yoga in San Francisco and around the country. You can contact him at [www.jasonyoga.com](http://www.jasonyoga.com)



