

Janusirsasana (Head to knee pose)

Pronounced jaah-noo-sheer-shaah-suh-nuh the word janu means knee and sirsa means head in Sanskrit



This is an asymmetrical seated pose which unfortunately due to its name sometimes causes students to force the head to or beyond the knee at the expense of the mechanical integrity of the body. This pose requires very open hips, adductors and hamstrings. This means it is sometimes better to simply call this asana the seated asymmetrical forward bend! It is an introspective position where the breath can gently move us into a more released state; within this position we can adopt soft, easy breathing to calm and soothe the body into quietness.

Teaching Points:

To Enter:

- Ensure the spine is upright with a normal lumbar curve, with a slight anterior tilt of the pelvis, **if necessary sit upon a block and/or bend the knee of the outstretched leg. (at first everyone can do this)** It may be able to keep hips forwards facing but **if there are back or SI conditions it is often preferable to sit on a blanket so the body can move more freely to avoid asymmetrical pressure & torque experienced.**
- Bend the right knee, placing the right sole against the left inner thigh, allowing the knee to fall to side, **if the thigh does not reach the ground then place padding beneath the thigh so muscles can release. Check the right knee is not overly compressed or rotated and if necessary try placing the sole lower down the left inner thigh or straighten the leg instead.**
- Inhaling lift both arms creating space within the waist as the ribcage lifts away from the pelvis, inducing a very slight backbend.
- Exhaling slightly arch the back lifting sits bones, folding forwards from the hips reaching outwards through the fingertips and crown of the head as you lower both arms, folding forwards.
- Only fold forwards as far as the back can remain extended, **as soon as the back rounds you have moved too far forwards so we may only flex forwards a few degrees.** Try to close the gap between the navel and thigh rather than trying to take the head to knee, as if taking the pubic bone or navel to the floor before the heart
- Place the hands lightly upon the leg or foot, ensuring the straight leg remains active with the left foot dorsiflexed (toes pointing to ceiling), knee pointing upwards to ceiling. **If it brings more comfort to the back or legs remember to slightly bend the outstretched leg.**

To Stay:

- **Stay at the first point of resistance at first practicing more dynamically where when inhaling, lift and lengthen the spine, taking the ribcage away from the pelvis and exhaling lowering the chest to the thigh.** After working in this way using the breath and subtle movement, simply stay still and encourage release through the breath. If at any point the upper body feels to have shortened again lift and lengthen on an inhalation and then exhale to release once again into the pose.

To Exit:

- Engage the core, pressing down into the outstretched leg heel, inhaling reach outwards and upwards through the fingertips and crown of head raising arms back to the vertical and exhaling lower arms to sides. **If this is too strong then simply inhale lifting arms to shoulderheight & exhaling lower arms to sides.**

Caution:

- For the bent leg hip ensure the work occurs at the hip joint itself **and does not create rotation and compression within the knee joint**, if necessary place padding beneath the bent leg thigh, adjust the position of the foot against the straight leg or simply straighten this leg out to the side if necessary.
- Note we can direct the primary work into either the legs or the upper body. If we **wish to work primarily with the legs** then we can hinge forwards as far as the back remains extended and either hold the straight leg foot if we can reach or use a belt wrapped around the ball of the foot if we need to extend the length of arms. If however we **wish to work primarily with the upper body** then we must always ensure the chest can rest along the thigh and as shown above this may mean bending the straight leg to accomplish this with integrity. And when primarily working the upper body aim to first close the space between the navel and the thigh and then slowly allow the outstretched leg muscles to relax over time, becoming more straightened as the muscles relax. **We must choose which alternative we choose to teach and it is good to teach one for a while then the other.**
- We must also ensure we keep the neck long so it is best to look down as we lift and lower arms.
- **Avoid overly using the arms to pull the body forwards**, it is best to primarily rely upon the abdominal and iliopsoas muscles instead.

Benefits:

Quiets the mind and calms the nervous system

Rejuvenates the spine (stretching & strengthening)

Stretches hamstrings and groin muscles

Massages the heart and alleviates symptoms of high blood pressure

Massages the abdominal organs, especially the liver, spleen and kidneys

Improves digestion

Tonifies the sexual and reproductive organs

Good preparation

Simpler forward bends, hamstring, groin and hip openers. Ankle mobilisers & back strengtheners.

Cautions & possible modifications

- Hamstring problems or low back conditions, sacroiliac problems and sciatica: bend front knee and/or sit on padding; placing a blanket beneath can also be helpful as it allows the body to subtly move potentially reducing torque & asymmetrical pressure across the pelvis and low back.
- Severe spinal disc conditions: avoid this pose using an alternative pose instead (remember flexion, and especially asymmetrical flexion are prohibited)
- Hip conditions: can keep bent leg straight out to side or work with both legs straight in front instead if necessary
- Knee conditions: can keep bent leg straight out to side or work with both legs straight in front instead if necessary
- Hyperextension of straight leg: keep a slight bend at knee and press down into heel

Simple versions and modifications

Use a block, bent knee and a belt

Here we can assist the pelvic tilt using a block beneath buttocks and/or bending the knee, extending the reach of the arms by using a belt



Bent leg straight out to side & blocks beneath bent leg

Here we can avoid excessive pressure into the hip or knee joint by working with the bent leg straight out to sides. Alternatively we can place padding beneath the bent leg thigh to enable students to relax the inner thigh and hips muscles. If students keep the bent leg raised in the air then there is little chance the muscles will relax enabling the knee to lower to the floor.



Reach out at shoulder height

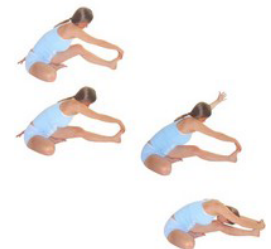
Remember leverage where here we can avoid excessive work within the back by reducing the weight of the arms so rather than lifting the arms vertically instead we reach out forwards as we lengthen the spine. This is a great modification for students with back conditions and can be also used as the first version to be taught to beginner students and where we are teaching a mixed class we can teach this version first and then the second time through work in the versions where arms are raised as we enter and leave.



Variations & Developments

Initial upper back & shoulder stretch

This is a great way of working into the pose where we start by taking the right hand to the left foot, keeping the left leg aligned, and place the left hand behind the left buttock. We press down into the left hand to help us fold forwards as we feel the area of the right upper back being stretched. Once we have stayed here for several breaths then we inhale lifting the left hand up and exhaling taking the left hand to the front foot, holding the foot in both hands. This is performed to both sides and can really help students move into a deeper pose.



Head to knee stretch to circle pose to head to knee pose

An interesting sequence of movements to lead us into head to knee pose is to work as above in an initial upper back and shoulder stretch then lowering the upper arm we place it just behind the right buttock, finger pointing away at 45°, lifting the buttocks from the floor, shoulder above wrist as we reach over head drawing the hips forwards into circle pose (mandalasana) as illustrated opposite. Then lowering the buttocks to the floor we arc the lower hand forwards entering head to knee pose again working with an initial upper back and shoulder stretch, finally moving into the full pose.



Hold wrist beyond the outstretched foot

To develop we can hold the wrist beyond the outstretched foot, lengthening the calf of the outstretched leg along the floor.

Place the bent leg heel beneath the perineum

This is the version often used with maha mudra.

'Concave' shape to 'Convex shape'

An interesting variation is where we start with legs positioned and a rounded slumped shaped spine with a posterior pelvic tilt, then as we inhale we move the pelvis into an anterior tilt, lengthening the spine, and exhale fold forwards. We can then stay for a few breaths and then curve the back again and begin again. We can do this several times as we move further into the pose.

Possible Staging:

There are, as always, different ways to stage a pose, here we could:

1. Practice dynamically with modifications: **Everyone** has the front leg bent, and where necessary blocks beneath buttocks to keep spine long with a natural lumbar curve; inhale arms lifted up to shoulder height only to enter and exit
2. Stay with modifications: **Everyone** has the front leg bent, and where necessary blocks beneath buttocks to keep spine long with a natural lumbar curve: practice using the breath to relax the nervous system – playing the edges – straightening the front leg gradually as the body releases; inhale arms lifted up to shoulder height only
3. Later where possible we can straighten front leg: inhale arms lifted up to full flexion to enter & exit, and those that need to maintain the modified entrance, stay and exit can do so.

Adjustments

We can gently encourage students to realign the straight leg if needed by pointing the toes upwards and directing the leg so the knee is facing the ceiling. If students have tension within the neck we can also lightly brush the neck or head asking that they release the neck. The same is true for shoulders where they have been unconsciously raised. Generally if a student has not entered the pose with integrity then it is best to sit next to the student and demonstrate how to enter, stay and leave the pose working one to one.

