

PHOENIX RISING YOGA THERAPY

Michael Lee, M.A., Dip. Soc. Sci., E-RYT 500

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Michael Lee first became interested in the transformative power of Yoga in the early 1980s based on personal experiences with his practice and study with various teachers in Australia and the United States. He moved to the United States from Australia to live and teach at the Kripalu Center for Yoga and Health in Lenox, Massachusetts, in 1984. Combining his Yoga experience with his background in education and humanistic psychology, he completed a dissertation on the therapeutic benefits of Yoga for life-related issues and gained a master's degree in holistic health education from Norwich University in Vermont in 1986. Shortly thereafter, he developed Phoenix Rising Yoga Therapy, which today has more than 2,000 trained practitioners worldwide.

HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT OF PHOENIX RISING YOGA THERAPY

In the mid 1970s, I worked as a lecturer at the Administrative College of Papua New Guinea in Port Moresby and then as a consultant for South Australian Government in Adelaide, Australia. Exploring areas of humanistic psychology and developing training programs that focused on changing behavior, I held a deep interest in how people change and transform in life. I had attended courses at the Australian National University led by faculty who were trained at the Esalen Institute in Northern California with Fritz Perls and at the Tavistock Institute in England. These programs were considered to be on the leading edge of experiential educational practice with regard to behavioral change.

At the same time, I began to embrace the discipline of Yoga, attending daily classes at the nearby Satyananda Ashram in the Adelaide Hills, and quickly determined that my Yoga practice seemed to be facilitating change in my own life. In my experiences at work, I found that simply talking about "change" may help people initially with new behaviors. However, the outcomes were usually short lived. On the other hand, awareness gained from a deep mind-body connection similar to what I was learning in my Yoga practice seemed to support, not only lasting change, but transformation at a personal level. I was determined to explore this further.

In 1984, I was granted a scholarship by the South Australian Government to study in the United States for a year to examine the viability of new program development based on Eastern philosophies and practices. I chose an independent study master's degree program through Vermont College of Norwich University. My focus was self-study in Yoga Therapy engaging the question, "Can yogic practices and a yogic lifestyle support transformation and change at a personal level in terms of both physical and mental health?"

During my study I lived, practiced, and worked at the Kripalu Center in Lenox, Massachusetts, initially as a student and then as a member of the teaching faculty. It was during this time that I experienced an unforgettable event that changed my life and also gave birth to Phoenix Rising Yoga Therapy.

Here is my story of change:

A friend was using the wall to support me in the triangle posture on my right side when my body began to quiver uncontrollably. I witnessed an intense red-blue, burning sensation in my right hip and believed I had pressed into the posture as deeply as I could, feeling pain that wasn't really physical pain. My mind was shouting, *Get out of here. Stop now! What are you doing? Get on with it.* I was definitely at an edge between the known and safe bodily experience and the unknown, "unsafe" territories. The escalating sensations in my right hip were becoming almost unbearable when my attention shifted from what was happening in my body to what was taking place with my mind. I was becoming more and more agitated and wanted to release out of the posture.

Placing his hand gently against my chest, my friend embraced my growing resistance by simply being fully present to my experience. He didn't reassure or try to calm me. He was just there. This enabled me to surrender again and again into what was happening in the moment, to deepen my breath and simply witness the strange noises emanating from my mouth and throat. The hot, fiery, red burning

poured out of my hip like a volcanic eruption. My whole body vibrated, and I felt warm tears streaming down my face without knowing what they were about or why they were there.

My body began to feel very small as I reexperienced myself as an eight-year-old boy standing on a school playground about to be beaten up by a group of older boys. The terror of that frightened child penetrated every cell of my being as I continued to release emotionally, feeling out of control. Yet, paradoxically, I was totally safe at the same time. I felt a loving presence emanate from deep inside, reassuring me that the experience could be fully engaged. Incredulously, the sensations passed almost as easily as they had



come, and I released out of the posture feeling very different. Internally, I felt stiller, quieter, and suspended in a sense of timelessness. I was very *present*—to the moment and to myself. Serenity had replaced the terror.

Afterward, I recall “integrating” the experience using some of the tools I had become familiar with in my work as a change agent. I asked myself questions like *What really happened? What did I feel? What is the significance of this experience? How does this affect my life? What aspects of this experience show up in other areas of my life? In what situations have I felt this fear before?* I was able to begin to see how I had carried my experience as an eight-year-old child into my life practice and noticed the limitations it had created in me. I quickly resolved the issue and began to live my life from that day on with a different core belief around issues of power and the fear of intimidation.

Looking around the Kripalu ashram, I realized that many of my Yoga colleagues there had experienced an “emotional release” in their practices at various times. I also learned that, for many, the experiences they had, while sometimes very powerful in nature, could not be easily integrated into their life experience or used in helpful ways. My own personal experience and subsequent resolution and change led me to develop a process that made use of both the deeper levels of

awareness that come to me in Yoga experiences, as well as the open-ended processes that I had learned from my work in education and humanistic psychology. And so, Phoenix Rising Yoga Therapy was born.

At this time, I also began working at the nearby DeSisto School in Lenox, Massachusetts, a boarding high school for troubled teens. With the support of the school's director, the late Michael DeSisto, I developed a Yoga-based "Wellness Lifestyle" program for the school. Students in the program attended daily Phoenix Rising Yoga Therapy classes and individual sessions. They explored a yogic lifestyle in a special dormitory set up for the program and also received weekly Gestalt-based therapy sessions from the school's psychotherapy staff. Making rapid progress in dealing with emotional issues and finding resolution, these students seemed to do so more quickly than many of their peers who were not participating in the special program. Although no formal research was conducted, several of the psychotherapists working at the school at the time praised the effectiveness of the Yoga Therapy program and recommended it to students.

I was encouraged by this progress at the DeSisto School and continued to develop my work using this Yoga-based mind-body approach and began to see individual clients for Yoga Therapy sessions in both Stockbridge, Massachusetts, and New York City. Before long, many of my Yoga teacher colleagues were asking me to teach them the work I was developing. They wanted to be able to create the same kind of integrated transformational experience for others in one-on-one sessions. So, I launched the first Phoenix Rising Yoga Therapy Training, and seven people registered for the six-day program held over three weekends in Trenton, New Jersey, in April 1987.

As Phoenix Rising Yoga Therapy evolved, I witnessed many people getting in touch with a deeper self that reflected their inner wisdom. They seemed to become aware of the hidden, unconscious aspects of themselves that colored their perceptions and influenced their actions and choices in life. Deep physical, emotional, and spiritual shifts gave them the courage to face self-limiting fears and, in so doing, effect long-lasting and profound change in their lives. Clients changed careers and addresses, ended destructive relationships and self-destructive behaviors, and moved on with greater openness and capacity to change their life experience. They realigned their lives to reflect what they discovered waiting for them at the core of their being as it was revealed to them during their Phoenix Rising Yoga Therapy sessions.

The modality has continued to evolve and grow, gaining recognition in the mainstream of the medical and psychotherapeutic communities of the world. The services Phoenix Rising practitioners offer today are being seen as adjunct therapy in the treatment of various medical and psychological conditions. Phoenix Rising Yoga Therapy is a simple and profoundly effective tool for expanding awareness and supporting people in their quest for greater authenticity and wholeness.

DEFINITION OF YOGA THERAPY WITH THE PHOENIX RISING APPROACH

Life provides us with the opportunity for all to unfold in accord with our “true nature.” Phoenix Rising Yoga Therapy offers process-based practices that facilitate this unfolding. Phoenix Rising teacher and scholar of Yoga philosophy, Jen Munyer, makes the following connections between the Phoenix Rising Process and the traditional roots of Yoga:

The Phoenix Rising Yoga Therapy process invites clients to use presence and focused relaxed awareness on several aspects of their immediate experience including their breath, their body in āsana (posture) held at a point of therapeutic tolerable discomfort (their “edge”), the many layers of their emotions that arise and the thoughts that get sparked by their experience in all layers of their being. The *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* references these layers of being, or the 5 kośas (sheaths) that cover the soul. With refined awareness to these layers, a client is able to gain valuable and meaningful information about themselves ranging from insight into their saṃskāras (imprints left on the subconscious mind from past and present experience) to their behavioral tendencies that influence their present behavior, posture and way of being / vāsana. While a client might be able to do this on their own through practice, the power of having their experience witnessed by a practitioner mirroring to them their vijñāna kośa (the layer of being that has the capacity to receive all experience free from judgment) accelerates the client’s ability to access their own deeper layers of wisdom. (Munyer, 2012)

The final and most important aspect of a Phoenix Rising Yoga Therapy session is a guided meditation (also known as “integration”), which supports the client in integrating all the awareness gained through his/her experience. In Sūtra 2.26, Patañjali suggests that viveka (discernment) is the means for the avoidance of

avidyā (ignorance or misidentification with the Real). This final meditation in a Phoenix Rising session is a process of discernment that guides the client directly to their own source of wisdom, acceptance, and truth. This wisdom is then used by the client to access his/her highest state of mind—their *buddhi*—the aspect of mind that, in its most clear and refined form, can offer action steps that correspond to the soul's wisdom and desire. The vijñāna kośa is directly informed from both ānanda-maya-kośa (bliss body or the realm of where our deepest and most true impressions of self are stored) and the divine consciousness of soul. By receiving wisdom from this aspect of his/her being, the client is able to create meaningful and profound changes in his/her life that come directly from his/her capacity to discern his/her own soul's directions and messages.

From a modern Western perspective, Phoenix Rising Yoga Therapy draws its foundational base from the work of Carl Rogers (therapist and educator) and Malcolm S. Knowles (educator). Rogers declares, "Experience is, for me, the highest authority. The touchstone of validity is my own experience. No other person's ideas, and none of my own ideas, are as authoritative as my experience. It is to experience that I must return again and again, to discover a closer approximation to truth as it is in the process of becoming in me" (Lee, 1999).

This statement is in concert with what the great saints Sri Aurobindo and Patañjali saw with regard to the nature of being human. Phoenix Rising Yoga Therapy uses a mind-body process to support the individual in becoming aware of and learning from his/her unique experience.

Malcolm Knowles was a highly influential figure in education in the second

2.26

विवेक रूयातिरविप्लवा हानोपायः ॥२६॥

viveka khyātir aviplavā hānopāyaḥ

**Discernment is the means for the avoidance
of ignorance or mis-identification with the real**

half of the twentieth century. His work was a significant factor in reorienting adult educators from “educating people” to “helping them learn.” He believed, “Adults should acquire a mature understanding of themselves. They should understand their needs, motivations, interests, capacities, and goals. They should be able to look at themselves objectively and maturely. They should accept themselves and respect themselves for what they are, while striving earnestly to become better” (Rogers in Ingleby, et al., 2010).

Phoenix Rising Yoga Therapy could thus be defined as a process by which one gains a more mature understanding of oneself with the capacity to look upon oneself with greater acceptance, compassion, and the ability to transform by bringing that awareness to action in life.

METHODS AND PHILOSOPHICAL CONCEPTS UNDERLYING PHOENIX RISING YOGA THERAPY

The Phoenix Rising approach to Yoga Therapy is based on both ancient yogic teachings and modern mind-body processes that enhance one’s life in body, mind, and spirit. While many forms of Yoga Therapy might use the term *client-centered*, meaning that the approach gives focus to the needs and wants of the client, Phoenix Rising Yoga Therapy takes this even further. Phoenix Rising Yoga Therapists are trained to guide a “process” and do not offer “prescriptions” or advise a client on how he/she should conduct his/her life. The processes that they facilitate are designed in such a way that the client is very easily able to discern what works for them in their lives in all dimensions . . . and also what does not work. The Phoenix Rising integration process helps the client then decide what they might want to do about whatever they have become aware of and what is the highest priority. At the same time, the process itself has intrinsic benefits and by-products regardless of the content. Clients often report feeling more grounded, more centered, more focused, more aware, and generally less stressed and better able to cope with life. Over time, clients begin to naturally apply the processes to daily life. They are able to take in the experience of a given moment for what it is and notice any judgment or label they might apply to it. They become more accepting of what is going on in their world and more empowered to change.

Many new students in training in Phoenix Rising Yoga Therapy face two immediate challenges. First, they are required to let go of their concept of themselves as

the “doer” and take on the role of “facilitator.” They learn how to guide a “dual process.” In one area, they are directive and the other nondirective. They skillfully and professionally guide the physical form of the experience along with the inner process. They then must learn how to “get out of the way” as the client engages this process. The therapist then shifts to practice a form of deep loving presence without interference or trying to “steer” the client in any particular direction. The nondirective part of the dual process in Phoenix Rising Yoga Therapy is yogic in origin based on the ideal of the “inner guru” and the notion that we already know what we need to know—we simply need to be present enough to allow it to surface. Carl Rogers was not known as a yogi but had the same deep faith in the potential and power of human beings to transform. He said, “In my early professional years I was asking the question: How can I treat, or cure, or change this person? Now I would phrase the question in this way: How can I provide a relationship which this person may use for his own personal growth?” (Rogers, 1961).

One study by Aspy and Roebuck showed evidence that the Rogerian approach gave rise to increased scores on self-concept measures, indicating more positive self-regard, gains in creativity scores, greater spontaneity, and use of higher levels of thinking (Gordon, 2006).

Because of this approach, Phoenix Rising Yoga Therapy is seen as an appropriate modality for supporting healing related to the myriad of “lifestyle” disorders and psychoemotional issues. Clients often report the disappearance of physical pain associated with these conditions after receiving sessions or classes or attending groups guided by Phoenix Rising practitioners. It is an ideal approach for stress management because of its capacity to empower the client to take charge of his/her life in new and effective ways.

Through practitioner-assisted Yoga postures and a dialogue process that is both open-ended and nondirective of the outcome of the session, the client is facilitated through an experience of him/herself in the present moment. And whatever happens in the present moment physically, emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually finds richness in relationship to the bigger picture of how that client is being in the world in daily life with work, play, family, and relationships. Using focused breathing and the opportunity to verbalize the in-the-moment experiences—thoughts, emotions, sensations, and memories—clients experience a connection as well as a deeper attunement to their own internal guidance.

In the one-on-one Phoenix Rising Yoga Therapy session, the client is usually

guided through several therapist-assisted or supported Yoga postures accompanied by client-directed dialog to support focused awareness. The key distinction is that the therapist does not provide “content”—only “process” directions. For example, in many guided inner process experiences, Yoga teachers tend to focus on language that relaxes the client or that takes him/her to a calming environment. A traditional talk therapist might direct a client’s attention to a specific feeling or event. The Phoenix Rising Yoga Therapist does neither. Instead, he/she will simply direct the client’s awareness to his/her moment-to-moment experience and only intervene directly in the process if safety becomes an issue. The Phoenix Rising Yoga teacher or group facilitator guides a similar “dual process” experience for clients in a class or group setting in such a way that each person in the room is offered the opportunity to engage his/her own unique experience and explore moment-to-moment awareness as he/she engages it. Surprisingly, when the conditions are right and they are able to let themselves fully into their experience, clients discover themselves in deeper and deeper layers of awareness. Through this process of awareness and discernment, clients have the opportunity to release old undigested experiences, traumas, personal beliefs, and out-of-date habits and patterns, enabling them to move more fully into life with new perspective and personal efficacy.

AREAS OF EXPERTISE AND APPROACH

Phoenix Rising clearly falls into the psychospiritual domain of Yoga Therapy. At the same time, there is a distinct physical part to the work and the client’s body is a key element in the process. It is used, however, more like a doorway to the fuller experience of self than as an end in itself. Rather than treating a specific condition, physical or mental, Phoenix Rising Yoga Therapists guide a process with the client as a key participant. The most significant skill set required for practitioners in this kind of approach centers on their capacity to facilitate an experience for the client while keeping their own interpretations, beliefs, and values at bay. To do this well, practitioners are in touch with their own bodies, are comfortable in using their body as a key source of awareness, are experienced and comfortable in supporting a physical experience (assisted āsana), are skilled at facilitating an inner process that engages the client’s unique experience without interference and/or input from the practitioner, and creates an overall safe container for the client for the entire experience. Phoenix Rising Yoga Therapist, Renne Reusz, states it this way:

There is no intent to fix you in a Phoenix Rising Session. Instead, you are met in the moment, with no judgment or criticism, no matter how (seemingly) wrong, weak, strange, stupid, or bad “things” are. There is allowance and space for all parts of you to show up, and essentially to let you be yourself. Can you imagine what this would be like—to be met just as you are, with no need to change or fix anything, imperfections and all?

Deep down I believe this is what we all need, to be witnessed, in this moment, for all that we think and do. As humans, we seem to have an inherent need for connection with others. We need to be seen as our authentic selves and to be welcomed with an open heart. But for many of us, bearing our intimate selves feels vulnerable, so it is only when we are met in that space, where safety and love reside, where unfinished and irregular are not only welcome, but regarded as objects of beauty, that we can shed the protective skin to expose our ever-evolving, unique selves. This is the realization of Phoenix Rising Yoga Therapy—to be an unconditional, supportive presence to your process. (Reusz)

*“The curious paradox is that when I accept myself just as I am,
then I can change.”*

—C.R. ROGERS, 1961

ILLUSTRATIVE CASE STUDY

Ed was a man in his late forties. He had been a Yoga student for a few years when he decided to have a Phoenix Rising Yoga Therapy session. He decided it was time to deal with an issue that his Yoga practice had so far not been able to change. During his intake information prior to his first session Ed was asked what he might like to get from his experience. What was it he was looking to receive from Yoga Therapy? He quickly declared that he wanted to be happier and happy more of the time. His therapist asked him to say a little more about his desire, and Ed went on to explain that, ever since his teen years, he noticed that most of the time he felt unhappy but didn't really know why. He said that a friend had recently inquired if he was “okay” because his facial expression suggested sadness a lot of the time.

The first session began with a brief body scan. In the Phoenix Rising approach,

this means the therapist directs the clients attention to various areas of their body and asks him/her to focus awareness there briefly and to report what he/she notices. No attempt is made by the practitioner to interpret the information. At the end of the scan, the client is asked to reflect on what was most noticeable. The client may be invited to tell the practitioner a little more about whatever it is he/she notices. This is done purely to deepen the client's awareness. Ed reported that he felt a lot of discomfort in his upper back, particularly around his shoulders. He also felt a tenderness and somewhat vulnerable feeling in his chest. When asked what area of his body he might like to explore in his first session (and possibly subsequent sessions), he said he would like to focus on his upper body, mostly his chest and shoulders.

For the next two weeks in two sessions a week apart, Ed engaged various assisted postures with his therapist's support and focused on the sensations he experienced, most of which were in his upper body. These upper body and mostly chest-opening postures were chosen collaboratively with Ed at the beginning of each session when he was guided through a brief body scan. As the sessions progressed, he became more familiar with the approach and with focusing his awareness and answering his therapist when she asked "What's happening now?" His responses flowed more easily as the process developed, and he became more detailed as he grew more comfortable with this way of working. At times, his therapist would ask him to "Tell me more," and he would go into a little more detail with his descriptions. His responses were sometimes concerning the physical sensations and sometimes the feelings. At other times, he would observe himself thinking about a past event or current concern. After both his first and second sessions, he reported feeling more relaxed and "walking taller."

In his third session, Ed's therapist supported him in an assisted cobra posture with his hips engaged on the floor and his chest elevated and open at the front. She guided his breath to establish the posture at a tolerable "edge" and encouraged him to allow his breath to just "fall out" with each exhale. After a few minutes of further dialog, Ed began to become agitated. When asked, "What's happening now?" he exploded with an outburst of anger saying, "I want those bastards to get off my (expletive) back!" His therapist asked him to say more. He elaborated. His emotions also shifted from anger to sadness as he began to sob. She gently eased him out of the posture and guided him into the child's pose pressing on his back to counterstretch the previous posture, all while staying physically and inwardly present to

him. After a brief transition, he returned to a seated position, and his therapist began to guide the integration part of the session.

During this part, Ed related what had happened during the session and how it related to his life story. He talked about how as a young boy his father had often been anxious about Ed's performance in several aspects of his life. His father seemed to be disappointed with him no matter what Ed did. He did well at school, but it was never good enough. At sports, he was barely average in talent and his father did not think much of his efforts, but he still played. His grandfather had treated him similarly and even once told him that he was just like his father—not very good at anything much. Later in college the story was the same. He graduated but not with any kind of distinction. He got a job, and he quit after a few years when he hadn't really progressed very far in the organization. The same happened with his next job and the next. He became a freelance technical writer, and, by working long hours and staying focused, he could manage to make a living though he didn't much like the work. He had maintained a distant relationship with his father, who would occasionally ask when he was going to find a real job. When his therapist directed him to focus inward and seek guidance from his "higher self" around what had transpired, he said, "I am free! Free at last of the expectations of my father and grandfather. Free to be me—no matter what I do with my life. My body has set me free!"

During subsequent sessions, Ed allowed the body sensations and awareness in the moment to take him into connection with other areas in his life that had been impacted by his inherited self-limiting beliefs. He set his own "homework" after each session around things in his life that he wanted to change as a result of his new knowledge. A few months later he switched jobs and became a landscaper. He'd always loved gardens and remembered times when he had shared this love with his mother. He seemed happy with the change and, after about six months of weekly sessions, declared that he had achieved his goal. He was experiencing a happier life for most of his days. He also looked different and noticed this physical change internally as well as externally. He felt taller, no longer sensed restriction in his back, and felt like his chest led his body in forward movement with soft strength rather than vulnerability. He visited his aging father and sought ways to support him in his waning years without any expectation of acceptance. Ed knew from the inside that he was indeed worthy of the life he was living regardless of anyone's approval.

RESEARCH AND LITERATURE

Many elements of the practice of Phoenix Rising Yoga Therapy are supported by current and historical research, particularly in relation to the bridge between Yoga Therapy and psychotherapy as tools for self-awareness and transformation. In Harold Coward's book, *Jung and Eastern Thought*, he explores Jung's fascination with Eastern philosophy and examines underlying energy systems comparing prāna with Freud's notion of the unconscious. He saw a primary connection between Yoga and therapy in that both traditions seek self-improvement through self-awareness.

In Phoenix Rising Yoga Therapy, the relationship between Yoga Therapist and client is considered essential to the effectiveness of the work. Research has shown that regardless of technique, the single-most influential factor in reported success is a feeling of empathy, safety, and understanding that exists between therapist and client (Lambert, 1992). This research indicates that it is the therapist's role to facilitate such a relationship that will, in turn, foster personal growth in the client.

The Phoenix Rising Yoga Therapy community is committed to objectively examining the therapeutic modalities and interventions used by its practitioners. Starting in 2009, a large-scale research project was designed and conducted with Phoenix Rising practitioners in their group and individual sessions. Results of the work suggested that individuals who participate in Phoenix Rising group or individual sessions experience decreased depression and anxiety symptoms and concurrently report increased personal awareness (Racanello, 2012). Additionally, when designing the Phoenix Rising Group Facilitator Training Program in 2003, I gathered my own informal research into the effects of my Eight-Week Stress Reduction Program with the initial trial group. To run some controls, I invited graduates of the new training program to collect predata and postdata from participants in subsequent groups using a standardized research symptom checklist. Results collected from over 200 participants showed that 80 percent of participants reported a reduction in stress-related symptoms following the eight-week program.

CONCLUSION

Yoga Therapy is a broad field of study. Within its scope are modalities ranging from those that focus more on the physical body to therapies whose intention is to offer a holistic approach to life enhancement. Some Yoga Therapies diagnose or offer to fix a specific problem. Phoenix Rising Yoga Therapy instead facilitates a process. That process enables individuals to make changes in their lives at all levels of being and brings them into greater balance and harmony, fulfilling one of the major tenets of Yoga. This is done through the body, through simple dialogue, witnessing, and validation—processes that find their roots in both traditional yogic theory and elements of psychological and educational theories compatible with yogic philosophy. The results have impact and people change their lives and themselves. Overwhelmingly, they appreciate those changes. The results are similar to more traditional forms of Yoga Therapy, but the way of getting there is different. Phoenix Rising Yoga Therapy offers a process rather than a prescription. Different approaches serve different needs and, as a community, Phoenix Rising Yoga Therapists applaud the diversity found within the profession of Yoga Therapy and look forward to the opportunity to collaborate with those pursuing different approaches to healing, health, and well-being.

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