

MEDITATION AND PHOENIX RISING YOGA THERAPY

by Michael Lee, M.A. - Founder, Phoenix Rising Yoga Therapy

The June 2001 issue of Psychology Today contains a feature article entitled "The Science of Meditation". In the article the practice of meditation is quoted as "an absolutely marvelous destressor", as a "valid complement to more traditional therapies", as "facilitative of mental health because it brings about a higher level of self-acceptance and insight about oneself", able to "ward off stress related conditions such as heart disease, digestive problems, and infertility", and ultimately helping us in "recognizing that the true nature of all individuals is empathetically nonindividual, neither lasting nor separate."

The article also explores what meditation is and why many people find it difficult. It even asks the question that given meditation is so effective, "why aren't more people taking up the practice?" Much of the article explains how meditation works by stilling the chatter of the mind and by allowing one "to be present for the moment, open and non-defensive".

In terms of the difficulties involved for practitioners of meditation, two key issues are raised. Firstly, many people find it is difficult to practice and even harder to know if one is in fact practicing meditation or not. One of the people interviewed for the article suggests that the only way of knowing if you are practicing effectively or not is by how you feel when you are done. If you feel better, you must be practicing properly.

Reading this article prompted me to examine Phoenix Rising Yoga Therapy as a practice akin to meditation to achieve the same end. And without taking anything away from meditation as a practice, I believe PRYT offers many advantages over meditation in terms of working with clients who do not have a background in yoga, meditation, or spiritual practice.

Firstly, PRYT involves the body as the focus - a much more substantive and easier object of focus than 'watching the breath and watching the mind'. In a PRYT session using assisted asanas, the client has the support of a trained practitioner who guides her in focusing on what is happening in the moment - physical sensation, thoughts, feelings, breath, or whatever. This focus creates in a short time a profound level of self presence or "witness consciousness". Through the dialogue process there is unconditional loving acceptance of all that is witnessed coming from the therapist [i.e., practitioner]. The therapist's [i.e., practitioner] unconditional loving acceptance is then transferred to the client so that he also is able "to be present to the moment, open and non-defensive".

Secondly, during the PRYT session, the client will almost always enter a "different" state of being that is very similar if not identical to the state often attained by meditators. It is a state of inner surrender to the moment - to all that is at that moment. It is a state of "being" and "non-doing". I believe that in that state, one connects with spirit and is open to receive from it. A lot of what seems to be important on the surface of life no longer carries the same importance - it is a relatively stress free state and a reminder to the body-mind "recognizing that the true nature of all individuals is empathetically nonindividual, neither lasting nor separate."

I also think that in the course of a ninety minute PRYT session, most clients will experience a noticeable shift in their experience of themselves by the end of the session, that could easily be compared with what one might expect following a deep state of prolonged meditation.

The meditation article also sites two interesting studies. The first published in the journal, "Stroke", showed that a group of mediators "showed a marked decrease in the thickness of their artery walls" and that the practice of meditation could reduce the risk of heart attack by 11% and stroke by 8% to 15%. Another study was published in "Psychosomatic Medicine" where a randomized group of 90 cancer patients were taught and practiced mindfulness meditation (very

similar to the PRYT focusing and reporting technique). After seven weeks of practice "those who had meditated reported that they were significantly less depressed, angry, and confused than the control group who hadn't practiced meditation".

Although we don't yet have studies to support it, I have no doubt from both my own practice with clients over many years and case material that other PRYT practitioners have reported, that very similar results would be obtained from clients who receive a regular PRYT session over a similar time period. The reason for this, I believe, is that what happens during meditation is very similar to what happens for the client during a PRYT session and therefore it is understandable that the results would be similar.

With the PRYT session there is also the added advantage of a trained practitioner being present to the clients experience, coaching, supporting, and offering an unconditional loving presence. This can be most helpful when the client experiences doubts, fears or uncertainty. This issue of "am I doing this right?" becomes a non-issue. There is also the integration phase of the PRYT session that helps the client connect their "inner" experience to their "life" experience. This has the effect of immediately putting into practice in daily life all the innate wisdom that was brought to awareness during the session. For someone diagnosed with a condition such as cancer, this can often lead to an awareness of the spiritual resonance underlying the disease. For example, I once worked with a person who during the PRYT session became aware of her high need for control in practically every life situation. In letting go of this need just briefly during the session, there came a profound sense of bliss. She identified this state as something needed in her life. Through the dialogue and integration part of the session she became aware of the process she had entered to create this blissful state during the session. It had involved trust, letting go, and being present to the discomfort of doing so. From that experience and the awareness it generated, she was able to re-create a similar experience at will in her day to day life. This in turn helped her to heal.

Rather than offering PRYT sessions as an alternative to meditation, I think what could be more powerful would be to offer weekly PRYT sessions in addition to a daily meditation practice. One would reinforce the other and there would be two different forms of practice supporting the same ends.

MICHAEL LEE, MA, is the founder of Phoenix Rising Yoga Therapy. Michael presents at both mainstream and alternative medical, psychotherapy and yoga conferences throughout North America, Australia and Europe and writes about his work. He also serves on faculty at the Omega Institute, the Open Center in New York, and has presented his work at both Duke University and at Findhorn in Scotland.

Michael's recently published book - "Phoenix Rising Yoga Therapy - Bridge from Body to Soul" - shows how the practice of yoga with a body-mind focus, has application to many life issues - relationships, parenting, and day to day life in general. Michael's work has also been published by the American Psychological Association in the book "Beyond Talk Therapy - Using Movement and Expressive Techniques in Clinical Practice" edited by Dr. Daniel Wiener.

Originally from Australia with a background in education and psychology, Michael followed his love for yoga and moved to the United States in 1984 and became a resident and teaching staff member at Kripalu Center. He directed several of Kripalu's professional training programs in the mid to late 1980's including Yoga Teacher Training and Holistic Health Educator Training. Based on his work there and his background in education and psychology he completed a dissertation on the therapeutic benefits of yoga for life related issues and gained a Masters degree in Holistic Health Education from Norwich University in Vermont. His leading edge body-mind work has found many applications including a residential program in a high school serving adolescents with

emotionally related behavioral issues. Since its inception in 1986, Phoenix Rising Yoga Therapy has grown to become a widely accepted modality in the field of body-mind therapies.

Further information about Michael or Phoenix Rising Yoga Therapy can be obtained by calling 1-800-288-9642 or through the website www.pryt.com. Michael's books and tapes can be ordered by contacting theyogashop@pryt.com