

THE COUCH OR THE YOGA MAT: YOGA THERAPY vs PSYCHOTHERAPY

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

Can yoga take the place of a psychotherapy, particularly if engaging a body-mind modality like Phoenix Rising Yoga Therapy?

There seem to be many case studies and reports from clients that indicate a session on the yoga mat might well be more productive than hours on the couch. In the book "Beyond Talk Therapy - Using Movement and Expressive Techniques in Clinical Practice" (and published by the American Psychological Association), Michael Lee in his chapter on Phoenix Rising Yoga Therapy cites two case studies. In one of the cases a 40 year old man finds a lifetime burden is literally "lifted from his shoulders" during the course of his Phoenix Rising session. In another case, a determined and successful career woman lacking an expression of joy in her life is reconnected with her childlike creative and passionate "little girl" as she is guided through a body-scan. These studies seem to indicate on first looking that this new body-mind approach to yoga is indeed an effective replacement of more traditional approaches. Deeper searching suggests otherwise.

"Many people derive tremendous benefit and often change their lives in very dramatic ways as a result of their Phoenix Rising sessions," says Michael, "but this does not mean Phoenix Rising Yoga Therapy is a replacement for psychotherapy or that our yoga therapists are entering the domain of psychotherapy. There are some very clear differences between the practices. Both have their place in the overall spectrum of healing and bring different things to their clients. We feel its very important to be clear about the distinctions and we train our practitioners accordingly."

Quinn Sale, M.A. has a foot in both worlds as a licensed professional counselor and teacher of family therapy in Williamsburg, Virginia and also as a practicing Phoenix Rising Yoga Therapist. She also serves as a Clinical Consultant to Phoenix Rising and is a member of faculty, leading a post-graduate workshop for Phoenix Rising practitioners on the use of the modality with abuse survivors.

"In my own caseload," says Quinn, "I make a clear distinction between my yoga therapy and my psychotherapy clients. I do not attempt to integrate the modalities because they are quite dissimilar. Particularly in these days of managed care, psychotherapists are expected to assess, diagnose, and develop a treatment plan to remedy the client's presenting problem. Most clients present with a specific dilemma, expecting the counselor to suggest a solution. Hierarchy is inherent in this relationship as the counselor must choreograph the desired change, whether that is through a cognitive, behavioral, family systems, gestalt, object relations or other therapeutic lens. Since the client, referral source and insurance company expect results, the therapist must take charge of the treatment and direct the client toward changes intended to remedy the presenting problem."

Quinn carefully points out that, "the relationship between a Phoenix Rising Yoga Therapy practitioner and client is quite different. (Here) the practitioner does not offer direction, therapeutic assessment, treatment plans or interpretation. The practitioner does not take responsibility for solving any particular physical, mental, emotional or relationship problem. The practitioner's role is fourfold:

1. Be fully present to the client's exploration of her/his body-mind experience during their time together;
2. Support the client in learning how to "read" the body's messages;

3. Physically support the client in hatha yoga postures chosen to explore and open parts of the body;
4. Empower the client to integrate the somatic experience into his/her life."

From what Quinn says it's easy to see that a major difference lies in the INTENTION held by the practitioner and the resulting unwritten CONTRACT with the client. Part of the distinction also relates to the issue of power. In the Phoenix Rising context, the power is clearly with the client as person to determine the outcome of the session.

"In order to fulfill this role," Quinn explains, "the practitioner utilizes certain techniques which are quite different from those used in psychotherapy. These include centering meditation, body scanning, yoga posture work that is physically supported by the practitioner, dialoguing techniques intended to facilitate the client's body awareness, and integration of the somatic experience into life. The dialoguing techniques, which distinguish Phoenix Rising Yoga Therapy from other forms of body work, are basically reflective listening and are Rogerian in origin. Therefore, they are nondirective and client-centered. Much of the Phoenix Rising training program focuses on the strict application of these simple techniques. Students are repeatedly cautioned against making interpretations, offering suggestions, or giving any guidance about how what showed up on the yoga mat might apply to their clients' lives. Thus the client learns to rely upon their own resources and inner wisdom rather than on the practitioner. Therefore, the format of sessions and the relationship between practitioner-client differ significantly from psychotherapy."

All of this could very well mean that for a particular client the results they obtain from receiving Phoenix Rising Yoga Therapy sessions, might well be very similar to what they might gain from psychotherapy. But while the destination might be the same the journey would have been very different.

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 an 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

