

THE BIRTH AND DEVELOPMENT OF PHOENIX RISING

by Michael Lee, M.A.

"Now the discipline of yoga!" - a time to embrace the ancient practices and begin the search for something more in life. What does Patanjali mean by yoga and how do we get started?

When Patanjali wrote his yoga sutras way back there in time, I am sure his definition of yoga was very different from what most people in the western world today think of when they use the term. To many, yoga, and particularly "hatha" yoga, has come to mean some physical discipline, often difficult to perform and not really connected to everyday life other than possibly being a good antidote for stress. Yoga is a complete science, with the potential of making significant changes in our whole being, not just our bodies. It has the power to affect our feeling state, our total awareness of our selves, and ultimately our understanding of our connection to all that is. There are some basic premises upon which it is based.

Firstly, everything we have ever needed to know as human beings is here with us all the time. We have infinite wisdom. We get in the way of our knowing mostly because we don't know how to access it. I believe that our body is one of the ways we can do that -- to access our inner wisdom and to be able to use it as our teacher. There is a place and a time in the life of each of us for seeking out that inner wisdom. As the lessons are learned we need the teacher less, and we begin to live our lives in accepting growth and change, and moving easily with it. I have learned that in tuning in to our body we are able to learn a process. Later we can follow the same process without the body. We become aware, we accept and fully feel what is occurring in our life and when appropriate we make the necessary changes, often with relative ease. In many cases, to get to such a place to even begin to tune in, requires a catalyst. Sometimes the catalyst is curiosity, and sometimes it is despair. It can be that place where there is but one ember of hope left burning and something inside is calling us to expand our search for meaning.

When I examine my own life journey, I could say that this has been true for me. And it was at a time when the fire of life had burned low for me and one last ember of hope remained that I stumbled upon all that I knew and all that was good in life. The ember of hope was provided by my practice of yoga, and out of the fire that emerged from the ember came Phoenix Rising Yoga Therapy.

Before embracing the discipline of yoga, I had explored the external world with great passion and with what could be considered a degree of "success." I'd been working as an organization development consultant for several years in Australia, leading team-building workshops and personal and organizational growth experiences for management groups. I was fascinated with the powerful changes that occurred for people as a result of a deeper and more honest levels of communication. I was also aware that the changes seemed to be somewhat superficial and, at best, short term. Although the strategies and techniques I shared with these groups were received as both revealing and inspirational, it was often only a matter of time before behaviors reverted back to the old familiar styles, particularly in a crisis situation. It was difficult to teach people new ways of being that endured when the world around them continued "business as usual." I became frustrated at first, and later despaired in knowing that what I was doing was probably not making all that much of a difference. I sensed there had to be more to the process of transformation. I also observed how I still withheld a part of myself from life in general as well as from many people around me. A protective stance shielded me from being too vulnerable among my colleagues in the corporate world as well as at home. Although I had briefly touched moments of deeper truth in my training in humanistic psychology, it did not seem to be the place from which I lived my day to day life.

This awareness created the inner conflict necessary to begin taking more action in finding answers to what was stirring in my soul. I became intrigued by the transformational prospects the science of yoga offered. I began reading yogic texts and practicing hatha yoga postures daily. At first it seemed the traditional hatha yoga postures held little value and I had great difficulty concentrating, coordinating the breath, and putting my body into challenging, unusual positions. I persevered and within a few months, I began noticing change - not only physical changes in my body, but emotional and psychological shifts as well. Day after day, as I listened to my body, following its energy flow, observing sensory impressions and feelings, my understanding of who I had become and who I might become took on new meaning. I looked forward to my yoga practice, finding it easier to concentrate and be absorbed in the moment.

The uncomfortable part was that I was coming to know more of myself. I began to see my imperfections more clearly and the ways I unconsciously avoided living from my truth. My yoga practice was creating the possibility of real and long-lasting change. Fear, uncertainty and desire all struggled within me and I decided to seek out support and guidance from those more experienced on the path in order to continue. I began to frequent a local Satyananda yoga community near my home in Australia, often getting up at five in the morning to do morning practices with the residents there before going to work. I considered living in India for a time to more fully immerse myself in yoga but was reminded by a friend that many of the leading yoga masters in India had moved to the United States and were developing ways to integrate yoga into the West. In meditation one morning the still quiet voice within me spoke and I knew I wanted to be a part of that and that I would find what I was seeking in the United States.

In 1982, I packed my bags and traveled to a diverse number of yoga centers and new age communities throughout the U.S. In my search I discovered many different interpretations and expressions of the spiritual life. My path was strewn with paradox and disillusionment. Although many of the residents in the places I visited aspired to lead truly spiritual lives in tune with their higher selves, the political and material aspects of their communal lives were not always in harmony with the spiritual. I saw signs of repression, dogmatism, material excess, poverty bordering on malnutrition, and good intentions not manifest due to poor organization.

At the same time I found places that at some level gave me the experiences I was seeking. One of the most significant experiences I had was at one of the places I found more compatible with my quest, Ananda Ashram in the Sierra Nevada foothills of California. While staying there, during one predawn meditation, I experienced energy flowing in rhythmic waves through my body for the very first time. My practice of meditation created the pinnacle from which I observed my mind in action and I felt the sensations of release and exhilarating freedom throughout my entire being during the course of our daily yoga practices. Along with these feelings of expansion and liberation, I experienced the intense feelings of vulnerability that come with the deepening awareness of self. I felt raw and open as I allowed myself to experience a broader spectrum of life. When I left the insulating sanctity of Ananda to continue on my journey, I was surprised by how my perceptions had shifted and how much more sensitive I was to everything around me. My instincts seemed sharpened and fine tuned; my senses heightened. Reality was all shiny and new like a freshly washed window. I heard even the faintest sounds, felt changes in temperatures, and was acutely aware of people and objects nearby. In several instances, I felt I had the ability to anticipate what was going to happen next.

I asked myself if I might not be better off spending more of my life in the seclusion of an ashram. It seemed safer. My life over the next several years was to embrace both courses and seclusion-in-ashram vs. be-in-the-world was to be an ongoing question for me to ponder.

As I reflected on this question years later, it was apparent that my life was to be in the world. My quest was the pursuit of the truth within -- within me and within each one of us and in all things - that resonated with what my heart already knew. I wanted to practice and teach yoga, but I wanted to do it in a way that allowed me to remain fully in the world, not hidden away from it.

I decided to spend some time at the Kripalu Center in Western Massachusetts, sensing it was a place attempting to present yoga to the western world in a palatable way. I arranged to take an Independent Masters Degree Program through Vermont College that gave me the opportunity to live at Kripalu and use my residency as the focus of a thesis on the therapeutic value of yoga -- using myself as the subject. I drew much needed inspiration for my spiritual journey from the practices, the interactions, and the lifestyle at Kripalu. I thought maybe this was a community I could live in for a long time. The hardships of a confined living space and family adjustments to our new dwellings seemed insignificant. Even the discomfort of diving inwards to confront myself was welcome. It was a humbling, empowering, and challenging experience that provided me with another piece of knowledge and awareness that would later facilitate the birth of Phoenix Rising.

After a short period of time, I was assigned to the programs staff and began assisting, then teaching, a variety of programs: Introductory Yoga Weekends, Yoga Teacher's Training, Raw Juice Fasting, and Holistic Health Education. In my teaching I was developing a capacity to engage in and lead body-oriented experiences that would promote deep inner work. There were times when I would play with other residents. We would assist and support each other in postures using a variety of props to enhance what was emerging naturally in the body. It was during one of these occasions I experienced an unforgettable event that changed my life.

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 a red-blue, burning sensation in my right hip and believed I had come to my edge in the posture, feeling pain that wasn't really pain. **It wasn't my body but my mind that** 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 and the unknown, "unsafe" territories of my **inner** experience. The escalating sensations in my right hip were becoming almost unbearable **although I could tell that the pain was not physical in nature.** My attention shifted from what was happening in my body to what was taking place with my **feelings.** 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 encouraging me to stay in the pose. His affirming presence made me feel safe. I surrendered again and again into what was happening in the moment, deepening my breath and simply witnessing the strange noises emanating from my mouth and throat. The hot, fiery, red burning **sensation** 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 re-experienced 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 totally safe in the memory my body was releasing to consciousness.

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.

Afterwards, I journaled about what had happened using the same kind of questions I'd been trained to ask others during my days as an organizational development consultant - questions capable of revealing deeper levels of truth: "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?” While reflecting, I realized I’d been living in fear of what “big” people might do to me, probably since I was eight years old. A “big” person was usually a male in a position of power or authority who could potentially use his status to affect my life. Whether or not they were an actual threat didn’t matter; I perceived these kinds of people as being capable of influencing me in ways that were destructive and coercive. I reacted to the imaginary threat by staying well away from “big people” or humoring them to protect myself from harm. I vowed never to let these tyrants get to know the real me, particularly the part that was afraid. This defensive coping strategy manifested in a sense of helplessness that had persisted into adulthood. I truly believed I would never have the strength needed to stand up to people in positions of power and authority. I channeled my anger about my helplessness by confining assertive behavior towards people of my own stature and engaging in overt and covert political activity to work against the bigger people.

With this new awareness, I caught a glimpse of how ridiculous it was for me to continue this pattern. Physically, since I had released all these pent-up memories and emotions from my musculature, I not only felt three inches taller, I also felt safe for the first time, no longer afraid to fully inhabit my body. I walked with greater ease and moved with more confidence. Within a few weeks I was making friends with some of the “big” people in the community. I was in awe of the power of my physical body to effect emotional and psychological change. I began to focus my energy working on this primal, intuitive level of body-centered transformation and integration, eventually evolving the work that is now called Phoenix Rising Yoga Therapy.

In the ensuing years, I developed a repertoire of assisted yoga postures and dialogue techniques to support clients in releasing physical tension that was often connected to some kind of emotional, mental, or spiritual release. The experiences emerging from my practice of facilitating clients in this manner were as varied as the clients themselves. The one common thread running through all the individual experiences was that clients were somehow affected by the work and would have a different experience of themselves after our session together. For some, awareness occurred primarily at the physical level. These people usually felt freer, softer, and more flexible as their bodies released long held tensions during the posture assists. Others were affected more on the emotional level as feelings of anger, shame, fear, and joy were expressed by yelling, crying, shrieking, and laughing. Many shared a sense of “spiritual realignment” that resulted in an awareness of and deeper connection to their “truth within” or “inner light”.

It became apparent that this approach to yoga had the ability to tap into unconscious memories of past experience stored in the muscles and nerves. When brought to awareness, these memories revealed aspects of a person’s core belief system which was usually formed in early childhood and maintained through adulthood. It was not possible to anticipate what would happen or reveal itself during a session. The more invisible and unobtrusive I was, the more permission clients had to surrender to the body’s innate wisdom, expressing itself as energy, awareness, thoughts, feelings, and sensations. The process unfolded naturally, guided by the healer within them, as I simply provided a space of total acceptance and love, affirming all aspects of each client as the work of the divine within.

While my yoga therapy practice with clients was evolving, I worked part-time at the nearby DeSisto school, a special boarding high school for adolescents with emotionally based behavior issues. Most of the students were from professional families, very aware, open to new ideas and often very intelligent. The school was highly innovative, under the guidance of its founder, **the late** Michael DeSisto, a man I greatly admired – perhaps the first “big” person in my life I could also call a friend. He became a great supporter of my work and encouraged me to go further. The school program utilized Gestalt therapy within the context of a

supportive organizational structure. The results of introducing the therapeutic yoga techniques I was developing within this educational environment were encouraging and impressive. Several of the therapists working with the students commented on the impact **of the yoga therapy work on the students I was working with**. After receiving a session, students often opened up and were more inclined to share their whole story, including their emotions. **During this time, as I refined my approach, I also realized that the entire process could be gentle and relaxed. It did not need to include any kind of huge or instantaneous emotional release as I had experienced. It could be quite subtle – almost unnoticeable - and yet just as powerful.** These encouraging results gave me the confidence I needed to continue to practice and develop my yoga-based work more seriously.

When I moved out of Kripalu I took up residence in nearby Stockbridge and began my yoga therapy practice. My clientele grew gradually, from ten clients a week to, a year later, twenty. The larger my clientele became, the more I believed I might really be doing something worthwhile. Yet I still had my doubts. (~~Xxx sentence deleted~~) Even though I wasn't sure where it would all end up, I was enjoying the work and feeling inspired enough to continue.

Before long, several clients were encouraging me to teach them what I was doing. They wanted to be able to create the same kind of transformational experience for others. The first Phoenix Rising Yoga Therapy Training program was born. Seven people registered for our first six day program held over three weekends in Trenton, New Jersey in April of 1987. Reflecting back, I now feel great admiration for those seven pioneers. I knew how to do the work but not much about how to teach it. All I really had to go on was the testimony of clients and my personal experience of a process that seemed quite remarkable. In a way, our innocence promoted quite a remarkable program. We taught each other as we went. Most importantly, everyone affirmed the experience was something they liked to both give and receive, for there was an element of receiving for the yoga therapist as well as for the client.

As Phoenix Rising Yoga Therapy' evolved, I witnessed many people getting in touch with a deeper self that reflected their inner wisdom and becoming aware of the hidden, unconscious aspects of themselves that colored their perceptions and influenced everything they did. Deep physical, emotional, and spiritual shifts gave people 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, pulled up roots and moved on. 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 the Phoenix Rising process.

I believe that we all look for connection to something beyond what we are aware of, even if we don't know it. Generally, we try to find it outside of ourselves. Luckily I was able to find it from the inside and bring it to the world as well, although at times during the journey I have had regrets about ever starting it. The inner path is not an easy one, and I have experienced more growth from my work with Phoenix Rising Yoga Therapy than I would have ever wanted in several lifetimes. But if I ask myself has it been worth it the answer is always a resounding "Yes!"

And now some **almost thirty** years after we began, I celebrate and support the emergence of this modality into the mainstream of the medical and psychotherapeutic communities of the world. No longer are we regarded as "alternative" but rather as a part of the whole. What Phoenix Rising practitioners offer is now being seen to have value as an adjunct therapy in the treatment of various medical and psychological conditions as well as being a simple and profoundly effective tool for expanding awareness on all levels. What I also celebrate is that our success has not stopped us from continuing to learn. Hopefully in the years ahead the practice of Phoenix Rising Yoga Therapy will continue to evolve and to be fine tuned **while forever maintaining its integrity as a process oriented approach that empowers clients to follow their own unique path in body, mind, and spirit.**