

# Profound Presence

Phoenix Rising Yoga Therapy offers people the opportunity to explore and heal their minds and bodies as one.

By Donna Raskin

**T**he winter was tough on Lori Thomas\*, a 36-year-old San Francisco woman who had struggled for three years with infertility. After finding out that she was finally pregnant, Thomas lost her baby just as a friend announced her own pregnancy. For the first time in her life, Thomas couldn't get out of bed in the morning and didn't want to go to work. She felt hopeless and wasn't sure how to pull herself out of the slump.

"I felt like my sadness was genuine and real but that very few people understood how I felt," Thomas explains. "Even my husband wondered when I would get over the disappointment." That aloneness made Thomas feel even worse.

An Astanga devotee, Thomas had heard of Phoenix Rising Yoga Therapy and decided to see if a few sessions could help her.

"I wasn't sure what to expect," Thomas says. "My traditional yoga practice is fairly intense and, on the phone, the therapist told me we would be doing supported restorative poses while I talked a little about whatever I needed to."

## The yoga session that listens

"We witness," says Carol James, a yoga teacher and Phoenix Rising Therapist on the North Shore of Massachusetts. "Phoenix Rising Therapists are really present with their clients and we create a space where they can be listened to."

The witness begins, James says, even before the session begins. "I talk to my clients on the phone and send them a form to fill out even before we meet. They bring that to the session and I use that as a tool to have us get to know each other. That's where the feeding back starts."



PHOTOGRAPHY BY VIDURA BARRIOS



Supported postures  
and verbal feedback  
turn yoga into a  
therapeutic tool.  
A therapist's touch  
helps clients calm  
and focus their  
mind and spirit.



After this initial interaction, James and her client move to the mat and begin with some breathing. “The breathing is an opportunity to make the transition from your physical mind,” James explains. “Something usually percolates to the surface and I’ll ask the client to tell me about that.”

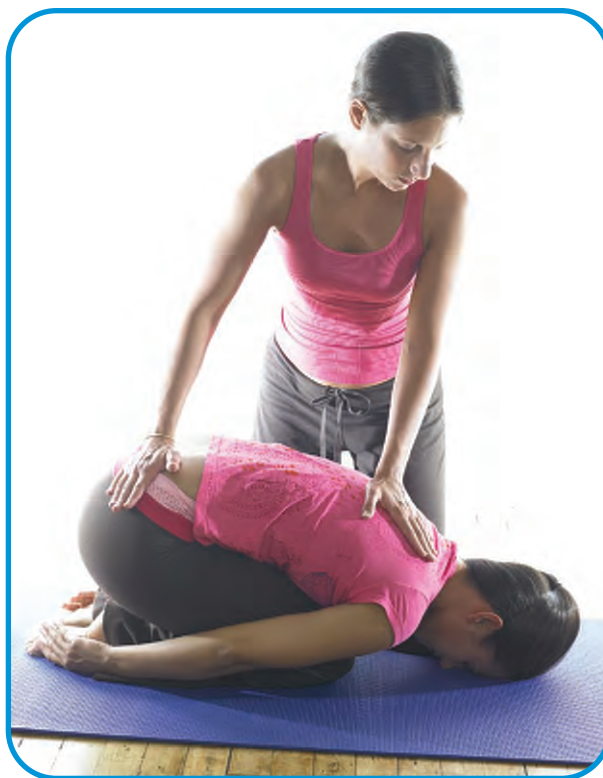
Before officially beginning the yoga work, a Phoenix Rising client will be asked to set an intention for the work she’ll do and what she hopes to receive from the session. “It’s a very empowering feeling,” says Samantha Kaufman, a Boston-based marketing manager and Phoenix Rising client. “I know that I will receive whatever I set as my intention.”

Then, the postures, which are supported by either the therapist or tools, such as blankets and bolsters, begin. As the therapist moves with the client, she’ll ask questions and listen, reflecting back to the client. Therapists want clients to generate their own thoughts and emotions by listening to what is coming out of their bodies. The therapist never interprets the client’s response, but instead offers feedback, and as James

## Bring Phoenix Rising to Your Yoga Class

While it’s impossible to recreate the support and witnessing you experience in a Phoenix Rising session, you can get more than a workout from your yoga practice. Here are some ideas from Michael Lee, the founder of Phoenix Rising yoga Therapy.

- 1. Enter each posture slowly.** Take a full deep breath to accompany each small movement into the posture.
- 2. Focus on what is happening.** Place your full attention on what is happening moment to moment as you engage each posture (on the way to your edge). Ask yourself, “What is happening now?” And answer yourself without changing or fixing anything.
- 3. Play the edge.** It’s not about how far you get in each stretch or how good you are. Find your own edge in each posture and play with it as you breathe. Don’t push or force your effort. Instead, try relaxing into the edge—that place that feels just right—not too much—not too little. Hang out at the edge and then focus again as in Step #2.
- 4. Feel it all.** When you hang out in a yoga posture, breathe and feel. Notice what is happening not just in your body, but also what you are thinking and notice what you are feeling. Whatever it is, don’t try to change it. Just experience it.
- 5. Notice and explore any connection between your yoga experience and your life experience.**



explains, witnesses. “I ask, ‘What’s happening? Tell me about this,’” James says. “And if they say nothing, I say, ‘I’m holding your arm. Do you feel sensation in your arm? Can you describe the sensation in your arm? And so I have to draw them out.’”

## Listening to your yoga

The majority of a Phoenix Rising session comprises hands on and assisted postures with breath work and Rogerian dialogue [the therapist repeating back and validating what the client says]. The entire session supports a therapist being present to the client’s experience without judging or analyzing it. This support and unconditional positive regard from another person encourages the client to become loving and present to themselves.

“We use very classic supported postures, such as forward fold, Child, or supported back bend,” James explains. “It’s similar to restorative work but often I’m physically supporting somebody. I may be holding the sacrum or shoulder blades.” James might use a yoga tie, up behind the heart or when someone is in cobra.

As therapist and client are performing the assisted postures, the client continues to talk. James might prompt, ‘What’s happening now?’ and a client might begin with ‘There’s tightness in my hips,’ James will ask them to tell her more about that. “My client might say, ‘the last time I had this feeling was....’ It clues them into what’s going on with them,” relates James. “Some people make

the connection in that moment and other people make it when they walk out their door or a week later.”

Phoenix Rising therapists call this “working the edge.” The edge is significant and it describes a stretch that is neither too intense or too gentle, but instigates an intensity and focus on the body part.

“What is happening to your body is happening to your life,” says Michael Lee, M.A., the founder and creator of Phoenix Rising. “Your life is unfolding in your body but you don’t usually get to listen to it.”

It is the edge that forces you to listen to your body.

## How touch was added to talk

“One day I was doing partner posture triangle against the wall and my friend put his hand on my chest and I felt this burning in my hip. It wasn’t a physical pain, it was into another realm. He said just go with it,” explains Michael Lee, founder of Phoenix

**Photographed by Vidura Barrios;  
hair & makeup by Melissa Sarkis; Pink tee  
shirt by Hermitwear, pants by Danskin.**

Rising Yoga Therapy. “I had a memory of being beaten up as a kid in a school playground. I really cried, trembled, and released it. With support and encouragement I was able to let it happen. I was able to see how I was holding onto this feeling.”

That experience led Lee to think about the way his body—and other bodies—hold onto emotions. “At various times during yoga practice emotions arise that are somewhat out of your normal reality,” Lee continues. “I dismissed a lot of those things even after practicing yoga for many years. I would go on to the next posture and forget about it. Then, I started to play with the idea, because I figured if it happened with me, it must happen with other people.”

Over a period of years Lee refined the poses and developed a method around how the therapist was to listen and respond to her client.

“The key elements are and have

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The therapist provides a connection and validation for the client that stimulates validation and growth.





## Profound Presence

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always been a loving presence, a stretch with an edge, and a breathing technique,” Lee says. In fact, Phoenix Rising has a set of 16 basic postures derived from traditional hatha yoga postures. “We have two to five variations for every postures so that a therapist can craft a session to support any body,” Lee explains. “Leaning on somebody is really a metaphor for your life.” It’s a physical validation because you’re not alone in your pose. That other person has that presence.

This is what worked for Lori Thomas: The postures pushed her to really feel her feelings and, yet, at the same time, having her therapist with her gave her the validation she needed and the reassurance that she wasn’t alone.

“I had the same feelings with her that I had alone, but her presence soothed me, while, at the same time, made me feel safe when I sat alone with my feelings,” Thomas explains.

### From therapy to life

“As the session comes to its end, we move into integration,” James says, “and I ask what pieces stood out.” James has heard all sorts of responses to this question, from “I was able to live by my intention,” to “My heart spoke to me,” to “I got a lot of information from my shoulder.” Then, to wind down, James offers her clients some water and leaves the room for a couple of minutes, so they can make the transition without her.


“I couldn’t speak during one integration time,” Kaufman says. “Because I knew if I spoke it would ruin the experience. All I knew was that I was just in a place of bliss and

I knew it was bliss. I had never used that word before in my life. I couldn’t even imagine it was me talking.”

“When I come back, I ask them to tell me about the rest of the wisdom they received,” James explains. “How are they going to let that show up in the rest of their day?” She suggests that they imagine themselves at a time in the future with this new concept in mind.

Kaufman says that the end result is something extraordinary and bigger than yoga or therapy on their own. “You get into a place of knowing as opposed to a place of thinking,” Kaufman says, “which is a much more powerful place to be. Now I have the feeling that truly all the answers I really need are within me. As long as I can get into my parasympathetic nervous system and drop down into a quiet place then I’ll hear what I need to hear.”

In fact, says Kaufman, it is this knowing versus thinking that brought her to Phoenix Rising in the first place. “I saw this line describing Phoenix Rising in a Kripalu catalog and I’ll never forget it: ‘Learn to discern the voice of the mind from the voice of the soul,’” Kaufman explains. “I’m very much an ‘in my head’ person and I didn’t know there was a difference between my head and my soul. I was interested to see if this was true.”

Turns out, Kaufman says, that not only is there a difference, but that Phoenix Rising delivered on its promise. 

\*The names of the clients in this article are pseudonyms.

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To learn more about **Phoenix Rising Yoga Therapy** or find a Phoenix Rising practitioner, go to [www.pryt.com](http://www.pryt.com). Lee’s book, *From Stress to Bliss*, is available now from Fair Winds Press (\$19.95).