

Reiki Therapy

By Jeremy E. Scarbrough

Definition: Meaning “universal life energy,” Reiki is a procedure intending to physically heal by the practitioners moving their hands over their patients’ bodies, thereby allegedly manipulating invisible energy (*chi* or *ki*) and clearing blocked chakras. The philosophy behind Reiki was developed in 1914 when Mikao Usui, the founder of the practice, allegedly experienced energy entering his crown chakra while standing under a waterfall in Japan. Usui was subsequently able to miraculously heal individuals without any reduction in his personal energy level. The practice was brought to Hawaii in 1937 by Reiki master Hawayo Takata. Reiki is a form of touch therapy that brings with it a distinct worldview—a plethora of misguided philosophical baggage and theologically unfounded assumptions. It is a syncretism of Buddhist and pagan ideologies that values secret insight in a manner reminiscent to early Gnosticism.¹

Key Words: *Rei* (spirit), *ki* (energy) Chakras, Meridians, Attunement, Touch Therapy

BACKGROUND

Reiki can be difficult to explain because it is often an ambiguous term. Although some Reiki practitioners never literally touch their patients,² Reiki may be classified as a form of “touch therapy.”³ This perspective focuses on the natural benefit of warmth and touch—primarily the physiological effects of relaxation and the feeling of being cared for. Others describe Reiki as the “laying on of hands,” with practitioners allegedly functioning as energy channels through which healing flows from some higher source through the practitioners and to the recipients. Still others see Reiki as a source of spiritual knowledge or enlightenment. Although often marketed as a healing art or therapy, Reiki is best associated with the latter view—a practice intended to foster a sense of enlightenment.

While there is a great deal of variation among practitioners, Anthony Dalessandro of Conscious Energy Healing describes his typical \$100 Reiki session as beginning with a brief conversation or intake process. Dalessandro explains:

This conversation is very important and allows a few different things to happen. The first one obviously is that it lets the client tell the practitioner why he or she is there, what is going on in his/her life, and what he or she is hoping to get out of the session(s). The second thing that happens during this conversation is that it gives the practitioner a chance to get a feel for the client's energies prior to starting the session and allows for even more insight into the client's current situation. The third thing that happens, and one of the most important, is that it gives the practitioner and client a chance to build a rapport. This allows the client to let go and open up more to the energies during the session.⁴

After the initial intake process, Dalessandro describes his typical Reiki session itself as follows:

The next step is to have the client (fully clothed) lay down on his or her back on the massage table. The practitioner then generally starts at the head and works down toward the feet, stopping at the knees or possibly the ankles. There are general hand positions that the majority of practitioners follow, at least to some degree. These hand positions attempt to cover all the seven main chakras and all the major organs. Each hand position is held for anywhere from 2 - 5 minutes or longer. During this time the practitioner simply allows the energy to channel out his or her hands and into the client. There is no physical manipulation whatsoever during a traditional Reiki session. Everything is done on a purely energetic level. After the practitioner has finished with the front of the client, they generally will have the client turn over, and will continue with similar hand positions for the back.... [I]t is now time for the practitioner to "ground" the client back down to the planet and back n [sic] the body. This is done by moving to the feet and channeling the energy into the soles of the feet. This works to open the chakras on the bottoms of the feet which connect us to the planet.⁵

When evaluating the spiritual aspects of Reiki, it is important to grasp the deeper, and for Christians, more troubling concerns within the philosophical worldview that underlies the practice. Specifically, this includes evidence that: 1) Reiki may be viewed to some degree as a syncretism of Zen Buddhism,⁶ Wicca,⁷ (Pagan ideologies) and misconstrued Christian jargon; 2) Reiki actually

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seems to be a modern cultic practice that interestingly resembles early Christian Gnosticism, and is spiritually dangerous in that proponents imply that the teachings of Reiki are completely compatible with the teachings of Christianity.

HISTORY AND PRACTICE

Reiki comes from the Japanese *Rei* (spirit) and *ki* (energy), and is usually translated as “universal life force.”⁸ There is much conflict in historical reporting—especially between Eastern and Western traditions. Supposedly, Tibetan Buddhist monks originally practiced Reiki over 2,000 years ago. This teaching was lost and rediscovered in the late 1800s by Japanese monk, Dr. Mikao Usui. Tibetan *sutras* (summaries of scripture or the sayings of Buddha) were thought to contain secrets of healing, able to activate universal life energy and enable one to channel this energy. Historical accounts seem to agree that after fasting on Mt. Kuriyama, Dr. Usui allegedly “had a metaphysical experience, and is purported to have received information about each of the Reiki symbols and how each was to be used.”⁹

According to William Lee Rand, founder of the International Center for Reiki Training, Usui “developed his healing system through experimentation and by using skills and information based on his previous study of religious practices, philosophy, and spiritual disciplines.”¹⁰ Usui entered a Buddhist school as a child, studied *Kiko* (a Japanese variation of *Tai Chi* martial arts), and sought an energy treatment that would not deplete one’s own spiritual energy. Visiting China, Europe, and America, he studied religion, medicine, psychology, and divination. He was also a member of a metaphysical group fascinated with psychic abilities.¹¹

The Western telling of Usui’s background liberally portrays him as a Christian minister but many accounts seem strikingly too fanciful and convenient.¹² Western exposure to the practice and philosophy of Reiki began with the teachings of Hawayo Takata in 1937. William Rand alleges, “Mrs. Takata took liberties with the history of its development . . . changing certain details and adding others to make it more appealing to Americans.”¹³ After World War II, the United States had temporary control of Japan and banned virtually all forms of Eastern healing. Reiki was practiced in secret and outsiders were not allowed to learn about it.

Practice, Ritual, and Worldview

Part of the difficulty in understanding Reiki lay within a potential equivocation of terms. For this reason, it is necessary to distinguish between: (1) the practical philosophy concerning the exchange between practitioner and client—hereafter referred to as the ‘practice’ of Reiki; (2) the private, individual-focused, philosophical practices of the practitioner—the ‘ritual’ of Reiki; and (3) the more deeply embedded philosophical syncretistic variables of Reiki—hereafter distinguished to as the Reiki ‘worldview.’ Each must be assessed individually.

Amidst the ‘practice’ of Reiki—i.e. during a treatment—Reiki is supposedly “channeled” into the patient via the practitioner’s hands. As palms are held near certain chakras or meridians, the patient experiences warmth generated by the body heat of the practitioner—believed to be the result of healing that flows through the hands of the practitioner.¹⁴ Some perceived healing effects may be explained scientifically as a result of the increase of blood flow via warmth and topical stimulation. Most practitioners, however, believe themselves to be part of a more personalized spiritual experience in which they are finely attuned to the universal life force. While this already smacks of influence from Buddhism and Wicca, the attunement process is even more troubling.

There are three levels, or degrees, of Reiki attunement—the ‘ritual.’¹⁵ Attunements are “initiations . . . an ancient process of tuning the healer’s body . . . to a higher vibration Once this channel is open it remains open for the rest of the healer’s life.”¹⁶ The first degree of Reiki teaches the essential philosophy and practice. This usually includes a basic history of Reiki, the method of procedure for giving a Reiki session, and the attuning of the practitioner to the universal life force. Amidst the second degree of training, the student is introduced to inner teachings and symbols that allegedly allow the Reiki practitioner to exert healing over a greater distance. In the third degree, the student becomes a Reiki master/teacher—thereby learning how to attune and train others in the art of Reiki via secret symbols and rituals.¹⁷

SCIENCE AND PHILOSOPHY

Concerning therapeutic benefits, studies have reported reduced anxiety, a significant lowering of systolic blood pressure, a notable, but not significant, increase in skin temperature and a decrease in electromyography measurements.¹⁸ Studies also report a reduction of pain in cancer patients, of both pain and medicine requirements in preoperative patients, improved sleeping and

eating habits in child sexual abuse victims, and a decrease in cases of depression. Such research has evoked strong skepticism from the scientific community, however, who complain that these studies are always controlled and never double-blinded.¹⁹ Concerning how Reiki sessions promote relaxation and what is *actually* taking place, one study concluded; “Practicing Reiki does not appear to routinely produce high-intensity electromagnetic fields from the heart or hands.”²⁰ As a mere touch therapy, Reiki may offer benefit. As a philosophical worldview, however, it is neither justifiable nor compatible with classical Christianity. Further, whether these alleged benefits are caused by placebo effect, psychological, physiological, or spiritual factors would be purely speculative. It should come as no surprise that, if human beings are designed for community then “safe”—caring, non-sexual—touch would be naturally beneficial; such requires no secrecy.

The ideologies of Reiki are replete with issues of concern, including: distance healing; connection to said higher energy; the pantheistic notion of a universal consciousness; and the need for secrecy, symbols, rituals, etc. Further, by what authority should one believe that such ideas and/or requirements are true? Assertions are not arguments, and advocates of Reiki are presumptuous concerning what is unknowable without ‘awakening.’ Such secrecy is suspect at best. Moreover, divination is antithetical to biblical teaching. Additional areas of apprehension include misunderstandings concerning what is meant by meditation. One might also misconstrue what “hearing” from God means. Christians who misunderstand the notion of “gifts,” “healing,” and “God’s will” may wrongly conclude that these are hidden things that they may only truly discover by learning to “hear correctly.” This error could easily make them vulnerable to the dangerous allure of mysticism in Gnostic teachings.

Another question should be addressed: If this universal source of energy is a being, as it has a sense of consciousness, then on what grounds has this been justified? If it is not a being, then what justifies believing that a source of energy has consciousness? Such presumptions bring with them too many spiritual assertions and no justifications. Rand insists, “Rei *can* be defined as the Higher Intelligence *Rei is also called God* and has many other names depending on the culture” [emphasis added].²¹ But this suffers from two striking flaws: first of all, it is simply unsubstantiated speculation; secondly, this is a clear example of relativism.

There are additional areas of concern. If Reiki involves spiritually guided life force energy, how can one discern that such guidance does not come via a demonic spirit? Additionally, illnesses are attributed to “a disruption in the flow of Ki.”²² But this is neither justifiable nor biblical. Of equal concern is the observation that Reiki—involving notions of distance healing and attunement to a universal life force—is reportedly an “ancient therapy favored by witches.” It has even been said; “Where Magick thrives, there lives Reiki.”²³ Further, having learned how to allegedly self-treat, ‘send’ healing, and sense energy, many practitioners report a sense of empowerment.²⁴ But is the pursuit of such power far removed from the notion of original sin (Gen. 3)? Rand describes Reiki as a God-consciousness that guides the energy of the universe according to its wisdom. He also teaches that the ability to channel Reiki cannot be learned; rather it must be transferred via the process of attunement.²⁵ This is reminiscent of first-century Gnosticism’s transference of secret knowledge. Trying to hold both Christian and Reiki ideologies could result in syncretistic heresies.

While some have reinterpreted scriptures, reading into them a purpose of guiding one into meditation and enlightenment,²⁶ Rand has gone as far as asserting that Jesus used Reiki and promised that His followers could do the same. Rand tries to support his case by associating Reiki with early Gnosticism through a direct appeal to the Gnostic Gospels.²⁷ Rand implies that the Gnostics were some of Jesus’ earliest followers and he accuses the “organized” church of covering up the teachings of “good works” and “inner guidance.”²⁸ Some liberal Christians have even suggested that Reiki can appease the concerns of conservative Christians if, “You just call it the spirit.”²⁹ Note that these assertions challenge the core of scriptural authority in the same way that original sin involved the tactful challenge (Gen. 3); “Did God really say?” One cannot hold two conflicting views without compromising reason or making truth relative.

CHRISTIAN RESPONSE

Christians considering Reiki should be fully informed, practice a purposeful discernment, and employ a tactful inquiry to foster productive dialogue. It could be argued that the Reiki ‘practice’ causes no direct physical harm to the patient and the warmth of a safe touch in itself—whether physiological or psychological—can be relaxing and therefore beneficial. When weighing these potential benefits, Christians should remain very aware of the underlying presumptions that usually accompany the ‘practice’ of Reiki. Can Christians, then, successfully separate the practice of Reiki from its philosophy? If not, the philosophical/theological underpinnings and the subjective

individual or interpersonal experiences associated with Reiki are exceedingly problematic if not insurmountable. Some Christians will conclude that the practice of Reiki—specifically, the therapeutic sessions—need not be problematic. It seems reasonable they conclude, that touch therapies (philosophical intentions withheld) may be psychologically, and concomitantly physiologically, therapeutic for the recipient.

One who claims to be Christian yet embraces the philosophical implications of the Reiki worldview, however, is seriously misguided. As far as practicing Reiki, a Christian would be wise to remember the weight of responsibility (Eph 5:8, Rom 12: 2, 1 Pt 2:12). As the only potential “Bible” that another may ever read, it would be extremely problematic for the Christian to leave others with the impression that Christianity offers teachings complimentary to or compatible with Reiki. A theologically grounded Christian should see Reiki philosophy as a syncretistic practice of Buddhist and pagan ideologies that seeks secret insight and abilities in a manner reminiscent to early Gnosticism. A final point to ponder: as Satan is called the “father of lies” (John 8:44), might not spiritual warfare be largely a war of false ideologies?

Notes

- ¹ Gnosticism, from the Greek word *gnosis* (“knowledge”), is a belief system teaching that salvation or enlightenment comes through receiving secret or hidden knowledge. Ancient Gnosticism, which flourished in the second and third centuries, was one of the earliest heresies that challenged Christianity. See: Walter K. Elwell, ed., “Gnosticism,” *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), 444.
- ² “The Reiki practitioner can hold her hands just off the body if needed (for example, in the presence of an open wound or burn), and some practitioners always offer Reiki in this way.” Pamela Miles, “What Can I Expect in a Typical Reiki Session?” The Center for Spirituality and Healing, <http://www.takingcharge.csh.umn.edu/explore-healing-practices/reiki/what-can-i-expect-typical-reiki-session> (accessed August 8, 2013).
- ³ Diane Wind Wardell and Joan Engebreston, “Biological Correlates of Reiki Touch healing,” *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 33(4) 2001:439-445.
- ⁴ Anthony Dalessandro, “Stepping Stones to Reiki,” *Conscious Energy Healing* <http://consciousenergyhealing.com/pages/reiki.html> (accessed Oct. 11, 2013).
- ⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁶ A separate 4-page Profile has been published on this subject: Jason Barker, “Zen Buddhism,” *Profile Notebook* (Arlington, Texas: Watchman Fellowship, Inc. 1994-2013). A complete Profile Notebook (over 400 pages) is available at www.watchman.org/notebook.
- ⁷ A separate 4-page Profile has been published on this subject: Rick Branch, “Witchcraft/Wicca,” *Profile Notebook* (Arlington, Texas: Watchman Fellowship, Inc. 1994-2013). A complete Profile Notebook (over 400 pages) is available at www.watchman.org/notebook.
- ⁸ Eleanor McKenzie et al., *Healing Reiki (Hamlyn Health & Well Being)* (Hamlyn, 1998), 18.
- ⁹ Kathleen M. Whelan and Gracie Wishnia, “Reiki Therapy: The Benefits to a Nurse/Reiki Practitioner,” *Holistic Nursing Practice*, 4(17) 2003, 209.
- ¹⁰ William Lee Rand, “What is the History of Reiki?” <http://www.reiki.org/faq/historyofreiki.html> (accessed Aug. 8, 2013).
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹² For an example of such a story, see “The History and Origin of Reiki” at <http://hallsofreiki.com/reikihistory.html> (accessed Oct. 11, 2013).
- ¹³ “What is the History of Reiki?”
- ¹⁴ Lynda Bourne, “The Art of Reiki and its Use in General,” *Practical Nursing*, 20(1) 2009, 11-14; “Reiki Therapy: The Benefits to a Nurse/Reiki Practitioner,” 210.
- ¹⁵ “Reiki Therapy: The Benefits to a Nurse/Reiki Practitioner,” 210.
- ¹⁶ “The Art of Reiki and its Use in General,” 13.
- ¹⁷ McKenzie et al., 54; 56; 58; John & Esther Vetheim, *Reiki: the Science, Metaphysics and Philosophy*, (PaRama. 1995), 118; 119; 120-24. For more on “inner teachings,” see James Deacon (2002), “Okuden,” *Reiki Glossary: M – R*, http://www.aetw.org/reiki_glossary_m.html#o (accessed Aug. 1, 2013).
- ¹⁸ “Biological Correlates of Reiki Touch healing,” 439-40.
- ¹⁹ “The Art of Reiki and its Use in General,” 13-14.
- ²⁰ Ann Linda Baldwin, William Lee Rand, and Gary E. Schwartz, “Practicing Reiki Does Not Appear to Routinely Produce High-Intensity Electromagnetic Fields from the Heart or Hands of Reiki Practitioners,” *Journal of Alternative & Complementary Medicine*, 19(6) 2013, 518-526.
- ²¹ William Lee Rand, “Reiki Energy What is it? How does it heal?” <http://www.reiki.org/reikinews/whatislg.html> (accessed Aug. 1, 2013).
- ²² *Ibid.*
- ²³ Gerald Weissmann, “Witchcraft and Reiki: Voodoo Economics and Voodoo Healing,” *The FASEB Journal*, vol. 23, 2009: 619.
- ²⁴ Helen Gibson, Andrew Long, Cath Jackson, and Jill Edwards, “Exploring the effects of Reiki self-use on health literacy,” *Complementary Therapies in Medicine*, 18(6) 2010: 275.
- ²⁵ William Lee Rand, *Reiki: The Healing Touch - First and Second Degree Manual*, (Southfield, MI: Vision Publications) 2000.
- ²⁶ <http://www.powerattunements.com/psalmsangelicrenderings.htm>.
- ²⁷ The Gnostic Gospels are “A collection of ancient documents dating from the second to the fourth centuries that promoted Gnosticism, a rival to orthodox Christianity. The majority of the Gnostic texts were discovered in 1945 near Nag Hammadi, Egypt, in leather bound codices (books) written in Coptic (Egyptian) on papyrus.... Considered apocryphal, these Gnostic writings were never accepted into the New Testament canon... Because of their late date (second to fourth centuries), they could not have been written by eyewitnesses, Apostles, or the direct disciples of the Apostles. Much of the Gnostic writings also contradict accepted New Testament teachings denying the full humanity and physical death of Jesus Christ...” James K. Walker, *The Concise Guide to Today’s Religions and Spirituality*, (Eugene: Harvest House Publishers, 2007), 160.
- ²⁸ <http://www.reiki.org/reikinews/reikin16.html>.
- ²⁹ Pamela E. Klassen, “Ritual Appropriation and Appropriate Ritual: Christian Healing and Adaptations of Asian Religions,” *History and Anthropology*, 16(3) 2005: 382.



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