Reiki: A Christian Perspective

Dr. Michael Gleghorn offers an overview and critical Christian worldview evaluation of Reiki energy medicine, an alternative health therapy that has grown in popularity in recent years.

 *This article is also available in Spanish.*

What is Reiki?

In the past twenty-five years there has been a huge increase in both the general acceptance and public availability of various types of alternative health therapies. Although some of these therapies may be beneficial, others do little good, and some are downright harmful. Under the broad umbrella of alternative medicine there are a variety of therapies that might loosely be referred to as "energy medicine":

> Energy medicine is a broad field covering a variety of therapies from many parts of the world. While each is based on the existence of a nonphysical energy pervading the universe, the nature of the energy, the form of therapies, and how healing is believed to take place varies from culture to culture.{1}

This energy is variously referred to as *prana* in India, *chi* in China, and *ki* in Japan. One form of energy medicine that has been growing in popularity is called *Reiki*. According to some, *rei* means "universal," and *ki* means "life force energy." But the International Center for Reiki Training goes further, declaring that "Rei" is more accurately understood to mean "supernatural knowledge or spiritual consciousness . . . the wisdom that comes from God or the Higher Self." Thus, according to the Center, "it is the God-consciousness called Rei that guides the life force called Ki in the practice we

call Reiki."{2}

Reiki was discovered, or perhaps rediscovered, by Dr. Mikao Usui during a mystical experience at a mountain retreat in early twentieth century Japan. Some claim it is the same method of healing used by both the Buddha and Jesus, although the records of this have been lost.{3}

So how does Reiki work? To put it generally, and somewhat simply, Reiki claims to work by removing obstructions to the free flow of life force energy throughout the body. Such obstructions, which arise through negative thoughts, actions, and feelings, are believed to be the fundamental cause of illness and disease. But "Reiki clears, straightens and heals the energy pathways, thus allowing the life force to flow in a healthy and natural way."{4} In this way, Reiki is believed to enhance physical, mental and emotional health.

In order to tap into this power and learn to channel Reiki one must first receive four attunements from a Reiki Master during a First Degree Reiki training session. These attunements are alleged to open "subtle mental and physical energy systems" that prepare the recipient "to channel Universal Life Force Energy."{5} Supposedly, this creates a permanent connection with Reiki, thus allowing the recipient to channel this energy for life.

At this point, some may be wondering if there is any scientific evidence that corroborates the existence of this energy. Let's look at the evidence.

Is there Scientific Support for Reiki?

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, some proponents of life force energy claimed it was a form of electromagnetic radiation (of which light and heat are familiar examples).{6} Of course, electromagnetic radiation is a real, physical phenomenon of the world in which we live. But should it be

identified with life force energy? The answer is no, and today most of those who believe in such energy would say the same. After all, such energy is generally believed to be non-physical. But electromagnetic radiation is a form of physical energy.

Still, many Reiki practitioners believe that good evidence supports the existence of life force energy. For example, the aura is said to be "a field of subtle life-force energy that surrounds the body of every living being."{7} Those properly attuned to this energy often claim that they can feel a person's aura. A few even claim to see auras.

But it's one thing to make such a claim, quite another to demonstrate it under properly supervised conditions. In one study, ten people who claimed to see auras were tested against a control group of ten people who made no such claim. "Four identical screens were placed in a room with volunteers who took turns standing behind one or another of them."{8} Those who claimed to see auras believed that they could detect which screen the volunteer was standing behind. But out of 720 attempts, they only gave 185 correct answers – an accuracy rate consistent with guessing. The control group, however, gave 196 correct answers – eleven more than those who claimed to see auras! Apparently, not everyone who claims to see auras can actually demonstrate this claim.

But haven't auras been photographed? One author claims, "Kirlian photography . . . enables us to . . . photograph auras."{9} However, when such photographs are investigated by independent scientists, the images are seen to have a completely physical explanation. Also, Kirlian auras have been recorded for some things not usually believed to have a field of life force energy, like pennies and paper clips. Such evidence casts doubt on the claim that auras have been photographed.

Thus, if there is such a thing as life force energy, it has so

far eluded the detection of scientists. Such energy may still exist, and science may one day verify as much. But for now, scientific support is lacking. Still, some argue that "the proof of whether a therapeutic procedure is effective rests not on the gathering of data alone but on the client's actual experience."{10} In other words, if Reiki works, such life force energy must exist!

What About Reiki's Success?

For many people, the most powerful evidence of Reiki's effectiveness as an alternative health therapy are the testimonials of those who claim to have been personally helped by it. Consider what happened to Alex. He was in chronic pain due to a motorcycle accident that resulted in three crushed vertebrae. He attended a Reiki class, and after his first initiation was free of persistent pain!{11}

How does one explain such a story? Does it prove that Reiki really works? While it cannot be denied that there is abundant anecdotal evidence of Reiki's healing power, we must be very careful before we credit Reiki with relieving Alex's pain. "With the exception of unsubstantiated opinion, anecdotal evidence is the least useful…evidence available to judge medical therapies."{12}

This isn't just the opinion of conventional Western medicine. The National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine acknowledges that there is a "hierarchy in the different types of evidence for therapies, with anecdotal at the bottom."{13} Thus, anecdotal evidence counts for something, but it hardly *proves* that Reiki is an effective method of healing.

So how might we explain Alex's pain relief? Although there are various possibilities, for the sake of time we will only mention two. First, we must honestly acknowledge that maybe Reiki *was* responsible for the elimination of Alex's pain. After all, it was immediately after receiving Reiki that Alex

felt relief. However, it's crucial to recognize that there is another very sensible and well-documented explanation. Quite simply, Alex's pain relief may have been due to the "placebo effect."

"The placebo effect is the combination of factors that give therapies beneficial effects, but which are not caused by any direct physiological action."{14} A classic example is the sugar pill. In itself it can neither cure illness nor relieve pain. However, when given to a patient by a trusted, confident physician, who says it's just what the patient needs to recover from his or her ailments, it can be incredibly effective in relieving a wide variety of psychosomatic disorders. Since such disorders have a psychological or emotional (rather than physiological) cause, they can be relieved without directly treating the patient's body.

Many studies indicate that the placebo effect can account for a full third (or more) "of the improvements found with any therapy."{15} But can it explain Alex's sudden relief from pain? Indeed it can. Pain can be treated very effectively with placebos.

Of course, some may argue that the really important thing is not so much *why* Alex was healed, but simply *that* he was healed! To some degree, I can sympathize with this argument. But it does have problems.

Should Christians Be Concerned About Reiki?

Most people, myself included, consider physical health to be good and valuable. All things being equal, it's better to be healthy than sick. But if this is so, then does it really matter *how*, or *why,* the sick are healed? Isn't the only important thing simply *that* they're healed? And how can anyone object to Reiki if it helps accomplish this?

These are important questions and they deserve a sympathetic response. But first, let's consider an important question: Is physical health *always* preferable to sickness? After all, most people consider such qualities as compassion, patience, courage, and love to be great and noble virtues. But what if there were people who could only acquire such virtues through the pain and suffering brought on by physical illness? So long as they're healthy, they will lack these virtues. But if they're sick, they will acquire them. Let me suggest that if you truly value these virtues, you might decide that it's better to be morally and spiritually healthy (though physically sick), than physically healthy alone.

Let's now return to our initial question. Does it really matter *if, how,* and *why* Reiki works? I think it does. Suppose there is no genuine power in Reiki. Suppose it "works" merely as a placebo. In that case, would you want to send a loved one to a Reiki practitioner to be treated for strep throat? Without proper treatment this would likely result in rheumatic fever, permanent heart disease, and maybe even death. Real antibiotics are needed; a placebo cannot cure this kind of infection.{16} Under circumstances such as these, I suspect that no one would want their loved ones treated by Reiki alone.

But now suppose that there *is* genuine power in Reiki. Is it not important to know *where* this power comes from and *what* it is? What if Reiki offers physical health only at the expense of spiritual health? Should Christians be concerned about this?

The International Center for Reiki Training describes Reiki as "spiritually guided life force energy."{17} After receiving the necessary attunements, a Reiki practitioner can channel this energy for life. The Center describes the attunement process as "a powerful spiritual experience" that "is guided by the Rei or God-consciousness." What's more, this experience "is also attended by Reiki guides and other spiritual beings

who help implement the process."{18}

What are Christians to make of this? Should we be concerned about the nature of this attunement process? Exactly who, or what, are these Reiki spirit guides? Should we be cautious about becoming involved with these spirits? Or should we simply trust that they're doing God's work? After all, doesn't *all* healing come from God?

Does All Healing Come From God?

Does all healing come from God? The International Center for Reiki Training declares that "Reiki comes from God."{19} But if we read the material on their Web site, we see that the Center advocates an Eastern or New Age view of "God." This view is radically different from that of the Bible. For example, the Center equates "God" with man's Higher Self, thus blurring the distinction between God and humanity that is taught in the Bible. Practically speaking, this difference between the God of the Bible and the "God" of Eastern or New Age philosophy means that adherents of these two systems are asserting something very different when they claim to have been healed by God.

The God of the Bible is a personal being, capable of miraculously healing people according to His will (Exodus 15:26). Nevertheless, the Bible does not teach that *all* signs and wonders come from God. On the contrary, Jesus warned His disciples that in the last days there would be false Christs and false prophets who would show great signs and wonders (Matt. 24:24). In his second letter to the Thessalonians, the Apostle Paul linked such events to the power of Satan (2 Thess. 2:9).

But does Satan have the power to perform marvelous healings? Indeed, it appears that he might. In Revelation 13 we learn that after receiving power from Satan, the beast is healed of

a near-fatal head wound (vv. 2-3). The context seems to imply that this amazing healing is the work of Satan. From a biblical perspective, this raises an important question about the healing power of Reiki. Exactly where does this healing energy come from?

We've already seen that there is not convincing evidence to regard this energy as a physical phenomenon. Biblically, this seems to leave only two main options. Either the energy comes from God, or it does not. Although the International Center for Reiki Training declares that "Reiki comes from God," we've already seen that this cannot be the God of the Bible. Is it possible, then, that the source of this energy is demonic?

As I mentioned previously, the ability to channel life force energy involves first going through an attunement process. The Center claims that these attunements are attended "by Reiki guides and other spiritual beings who help implement the process."{20} Is it possible that by involving themselves with spirit guides, Reiki practitioners may unwittingly be opening themselves, as well as their patients, to demonic influences? Although it may not be possible to categorically affirm that the source of Reiki energy medicine is demonic, the Bible, in condemning all forms of spiritism, does seem to at least allow for this possibility (see Lev. 19:31; 20:6; Deut. 18:9-14; Acts 16:16-18). Therefore, it seems to me that Christians should take the wiser, safer, and probably even healthier course of action, and carefully avoid all involvement with Reiki energy medicine.

Notes

1. Donald O'Mathuna & Walt Larimore, *Alternative Medicine: The Christian Handbook* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2001), 193.
2. "Reiki FAQ: What is Reiki?" at www.reiki.org/FAQ/WhatIsReiki.html. 3. Gary P. Stewart, et al. *Basic Questions on Alternative Medicine: What is Good and What*

is Not? (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Kregel Publications, 1998), 61.
4. "Reiki FAQ: How Does Reiki Work?" at www.reiki.org/FAQ/HowDoesReikiWork.html.
5. David F. Vennells, *Reiki for Beginners: Mastering Natural Healing Techniques* (St. Paul, Minn.: Llewellyn Publications, 2000), 41-42.
6. Mathuna & Larimore, *Alternative Medicine*, 195. I have relied heavily on the chapter on "Energy Medicine," pp. 193-99, in this section.
7. Vennells, *Reiki for Beginners*, 106.
8. Mathuna & Larimore, *Alternative Medicine*, 197.
9. Vennells, *Reiki for Beginners,* 106.
10. Libby Barnett, Maggie Chambers and Susan Davidson, *Reiki Energy Medicine* (Rochester, Vt.: Healing Arts Press, 1996), 15.
11. Ibid., 29.
12. Mathuna & Larimore, *Alternative Medicine,* 115. I have relied heavily on chapter 10, "How Science Tests Therapies and Remedies," in this section.
13. Ibid., 116.
14. Ibid., 118.
15. Ibid., 124.
16. John Ankerberg and John Weldon, *Encyclopedia of New Age Beliefs* (Eugene, Ore.: Harvest House Publishers, 1996), 487.
17. "Reiki FAQ: What is Reiki?" at www.reiki.org/FAQ/WhatIsReiki.html.
18. "Reiki FAQ: Learning Reiki" at www.reiki.org/FAQ/LearningReiki.html.
19. "Reiki FAQ: What is Reiki?" at www.reiki.org/FAQ/WhatIsReiki.html.
20. "Reiki FAQ: Learning Reiki" at www.reiki.org/FAQ/LearningReiki.html.

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