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Reiki Simple and Profound

A Balancing Practice for Client and Therapist

By Shirley Vanderbilt



What is reiki, how does it work, and how can it benefit bodywork practitioners, both personally and professionally? The concept for this article began with a newly published book, written by reiki master Pamela Miles, simply titled *Reiki: A Comprehensive Guide*. I had collaborated with Miles a few years back when reporting on a reiki study for *Massage & Bodywork*'s Somatic Research column. Despite Miles' best efforts to guide my understanding of this spiritual healing practice, my mind remained in a muddle. On this go-round, it took a book, many conversations, and a personal reiki treatment to finally embrace the idea that reiki simply is, and it simply works, whether we understand it or not.



So what is reiki? We start with the word itself. Miles explains that reiki not only refers to the practice, but is also used to identify the vibrational activity inherent in the practice, as well as the source of those vibrations. A person trained in reiki can use it for self-treatment, or for treating others, to enhance the entire being—physically, emotionally, and spiritually. The practice most commonly involves placement of hands, with light touch, on the receiver to facilitate flow, but it can also be used as a distance healing practice. Touch can be applied through clothing, through the sheet on the bodywork table, or directly on the skin.

Reiki, the source, is defined as primordial consciousness—the oneness of all. And like all of life, is varied in its expression. And so the experience of reiki becomes an individualized story for each person receiving it or sharing it with others. As I listened to the stories, and reflected on my own, two basic themes emerged: reiki just is; and in the practice, just let reiki be. It's the "letting be" that allows reiki to express through the person at whatever level or quantity is needed. There is no intentioning, no directing. There is only that reiki connection that opens up expansion to the primordial consciousness and allows it to flow and settle, to create balance and relaxation.

Throughout the weaving of stories, there seemed to be one



more common thread—an unabashed acceptance of not knowing how or why it works. But then, despite our scientific endeavors and generations of investigation of the universe and its source, that oneness of life indeed remains a mystery. So we are left with the mystical essence of life—what is described as the essence of reiki—and the stories.

A Brief Reiki Story

For me, the most enjoyable reading about reiki is people telling their reiki stories,” says Claudia Callan, a Seattle reiki master and acupuncturist. “I love the stories.” My own story began with the incredible warmth of Callan’s hands as she placed them on my face during my first reiki session. Initially, I felt pulsations from her hands and as treatment progressed, I slipped in and out of a deep meditative state. That is, until Callan placed her hands at my arthritic hip and suddenly her hands felt cold.

“Sensations of heat and pulsation can be an experience of the vibrational energy of reiki,” Callan says. “But remember, the person receiving treatment and the person giving treatment may or may not have the same experience of sensations. What feels hot to me might feel cold to you.” The warmth eventually returned, and in profound relaxation I briefly drifted off to sleep.



Nearing the end of the session, with Callan’s hands still in place, I woke up alert but relaxed, with a sensation of being “done.” Callan says this is not uncommon. “The body, mind, and spirit may experience being complete with treatment,” she says, “a feeling of fullness. It’s great to have that awareness. As the person giving treatment, I may also have a feeling of ‘this treatment is finished.’ I will then take a few minutes to do an internal check-in before withdrawing my hands.”

These sensations and experiences—pulsation, warmth, rapid relaxation response, and meditative state—are typical for a reiki treatment. For some people, there may be other sensations or experiences because reiki expresses according to the individuals and their needs. But, Miles says, “As people are receiving reiki, what they are experiencing is only a piece of what is actually happening.”

Usui’s Beginnings, Takata’s Way

Many bodywork modalities, such as acupuncture, massage, and reflexology, share histories dating back to ancient cultures and indigenous healing practices. In contrast, the practice of reiki is less than a century old and has no roots in ancient history, despite some claims that it is a rediscovered Buddhist spiritual healing approach. However, the concept of primordial consciousness (which in this practice is also called reiki and is accessed by the practice) is a commonly shared foundation in many spiritual and energy healing traditions, including



Buddhism.

While some stories of reiki's birth may be more founded in myth than fact, accumulating through years of passage in teaching lineage, Miles tells us in her book that the undisputed originator is Mikao Usui, a Japanese man who lived from 1865 to 1926. A spiritual seeker with a lifetime of study and application of healing traditions, Usui had a profound experience while meditating at a sacred mountain site in Japan during the early 1920s. The subtle vibrations he sensed above his head awakened him to his own power to heal and empower others to do so as well. During the remaining years of his life, Usui developed and taught his spiritual healing practice, also incorporating what are called the precepts—his guidelines for daily living—which we will address later.

One of Usui's students, Chujiro Hayashi, is credited with continuing Usui's work and passing it on to Hawayo Takata. Born in Hawaii, Takata was trained in Japan, and on returning to her homeland became the first fully accredited reiki master outside of Japan. By the 1970s, she had expanded her teaching to students in the United States and Canada, creating a continued lineage that eventually spread throughout the world. Thus, Miles points out, there are now three main branches representing the reiki lineage: Usui and Usui/Hayashi, which are still taught in Japan, and Usui/Hayashi/Takata, which has spread to worldwide practice and may vary in style. The twists and turns in reiki history are fascinating, and in her guidebook, Miles lays it all out in finer detail, including the influences of these lineages on reiki practice today.

At the Core

Reiki is generally lumped in with the energy healing modalities, but Miles points out it is a spiritual practice based not on moving energy around, but rather connecting to and experiencing the oneness of primordial consciousness. "If you think of reality as a continuum from the ineffable to the most solid substance," she says, "primordial consciousness is the most subtle, profound level, that which becomes all the other levels. It's all-pervasive; it's everywhere. In order to be everywhere, it has to be formless, because once it manifests as form, the form is here and not there.

"As primordial consciousness begins to move toward manifesting, it expresses two qualities, light and vibration, which are not seen as separate from primordial consciousness," Miles says. "It's a very subtle pulsation. Physics also recognizes vibration as the underpinning of reality as we know it." The primordial consciousness, the pulsation expressed from that source, and the practice used to connect to the pulsation and source are all reiki.

"The biofield is our subtle body, our vibrational or spiritual

body, which carries the blueprint for our physical, mental, and emotional realities," Miles says. "Consciousness is more subtle than the biofield, so as we receive reiki treatment over time, there is the potential for the blueprint itself to reorganize, to come to greater harmony, slowly." In practice, one can move beyond focus on form, the crystallized consciousness, to an expanded awareness of consciousness, "while simultaneously being responsible for our individual lives," she says. "This process begins with letting go of stress, but the process is actually transformational. The cumulative effect of practicing reiki self-treatment over time is that instead of living at the surface of ourselves, we start living from deeper within ourselves, experiencing the profound continuity of being."

In a sense, reiki has more in common with meditation than with energy techniques. There's no intentional moving around of chi, visualizing colors of light, or tuning into frequencies. Just a placing of hands. "With reiki, all we do is make a connection to primordial consciousness, which is the state that is touched in deep meditation," Miles says. "Once that connection is made, if there is any imbalance, pulsating consciousness will begin to flow, much like water to its own level."

Miles has dedicated more than 40 years of her life to spiritual practice, having begun meditation and yoga as a child. She added reiki to her professional mind-body healing work more than 20 years ago and now as a reiki master, she practices, teaches, writes about, and virtually breathes reiki. But that early spiritual grounding is what provided a framework for her reiki practice. "It doesn't take long to learn to practice reiki," she says, "but it does take time to become grounded in the practice. If we are reiki professionals, offering either reiki treatment or training others to practice, we owe it to our clients and students to be grounded.

"The training only teaches us how to practice reiki. It doesn't teach us reiki. It is through the actual practice of reiki over time that our understanding of reiki develops, and it is a kind of learning that never ends, that continually deepens. So when it comes to teaching or to sharing reiki professionally, it's important that the practitioner have not only adequate training over time, but also that she has considerable practice."

Reiki by Degrees, or Not

There are three levels of training in reiki—first degree, second degree, and reiki master—but you don't necessarily need all three. First degree teaches hand placements for treating self and others. It involves a series of initiations, in which the reiki master empowers the student to be a spontaneous conduit for the flow of reiki pulsations. Students also learn the precepts—Usui's guides for daily contemplation. Second degree empowers the student to apply reiki from a distance, using symbols to make reiki connection in the mind. Reiki master

training is for those who have not only committed to a reiki lifestyle, but also want to teach others the practice. Traditionally, it involves an apprenticeship-type relationship with the reiki master over time, as well as the initiation and mastery skills. Miles says there are abbreviated training formats available, such as weekend or even Internet courses. But one might question how mastery can be achieved on the fast track. The continued supervision and guidance of one's mentor, and the experience of grounded practice—not for a weekend but for months or even years—better lends itself to true mastery.

A series of eight or nine hand placements are used for reiki self-treatment, basically covering areas of the head, neck, and front torso. These, plus an additional four placements on the back, can be used for treating others. Positions are held for several minutes or longer, and can be applied while reclining or sitting. Although daily practice with the complete protocol is recommended, if time or space only allows for one or two hand placements, the receiver will still benefit. Miles notes there are variations encountered in style, both in teaching and in practice, but it's all reiki. Some reiki masters offer weekend trainings for first and second degree students, while others space classes over a full week to allow more time for integration and home practice between sessions. It's a matter of choice for students, but the more extended process gives them an opportunity to bring their experiences back into the classroom for contemplation and feedback.

Whether for personal or business practice, Miles says first-degree training is all that is needed for most people, even those in healthcare professions. "We develop reiki through practice, not through more training," she says. "The training plants the seeds—we receive the initiations and learn how to practice—then our practice nourishes those seeds, and they sprout and bear fruit, again and again."

Callan agrees: "What you get in first degree is plenty. You can practice a lifetime with just that, and really it is through the practice of reiki that one learns." She also suggests auditing an additional first-degree class at some point, just to join in the group energy and receive encouragement for commitment to practice.

Callan says reiki changed her life. Unhappy and angry, she was willing to try anything when she took her first reiki class in 1988. "It was enough to whet my appetite and I've never turned back from the path it set me on," she says. She eventually left a business career to pursue her reiki practice and become a licensed acupuncturist.

That change in Callan's perspective seems to vividly reflect the basic essence of Usui's precepts. Daily reiki practice is enhanced by engaging in awareness and contemplation of

these guidelines for life-affirming choice. Translations of the precepts from the Japanese language vary and after delving into much research and consultation with experts, Miles presents this version in her book: "Just for today, do not be angry and do not worry. Value your life and make the effort necessary to actualize your life's purpose. Be kind."

"The precepts are simple statements that can be contemplated endlessly," Miles says. "They are particularly useful for people who don't have the support of a spiritual code. For me, the precepts were like spotlights on a spiritual practice I already had. If you don't have a foundation like that, you can think of them as a kind of mental reiki. It takes no effort to hold them in your awareness and they blossom naturally over time.

"What I love about the precepts is they don't really tell us what to do and not to do, but rather, they open the possibility of choice." As in "just for today, do not be angry," one can decide how to be with one's anger. Rather than suppressing it, one can step back to study and witness it.

Reiki techniques are simple and easy to learn, the precepts are straight forward, but it's the daily practice that counts. "Traditionally, the advanced practitioner is not one who has fancy practices," Miles says. "Rather, an advanced practitioner is one who has had a committed practice of daily self-treatment over time. In this way, we develop from the inside out, instead of being burdened by a lot of ornaments."

Deepening your practice provides the foundation, and from there you can explore further. "I encourage people new to reiki to just practice and have experiences for some period of time before they start reading about what others have experienced," Callan says. After first-degree training, she practiced on herself, with friends, and in reiki circles. One of her teachers, she says, gave her this sage advice: "To have a complete reiki practice you need three things: you need to treat yourself, you need to treat others, and you need to receive treatment yourself." So she did, noting, "There wasn't a lot of discussion. And what do you say anyway? I sit there with my hands on someone's abdomen for half an hour and they fall asleep? What is there to discuss in that?"

Reiki Hands in Healthcare

Whether in bodywork or other areas of healthcare, reiki can benefit both client and practitioner. It's safe and can be applied as a whole treatment or in brief intervals to relax the client and enhance healing. "Massage therapists who are reiki students often use reiki to jump-start their session, perhaps with a few moments of reiki at the head or solar plexus beginning the massage," Miles says. "Reiki is often used at the end, or during the session they might come across a part of the body that's tight or whatever. You just rest your hands until you feel a difference in the tissue or the vibrational flow in the body."

Bodyworkers and physicians alike mention the ease of establishing rapport through reiki. "People often describe reiki as soothing or comforting," Miles says. "If you start massage from that place, if you take a moment and you give the client that experience of connection, then the client will open more deeply to what you have to offer." It establishes trust, relaxing both therapist and client, and opens the flow of the moment.

The same holds true in medical practice. Michael Gnat, MD, who trained in first and second degree with Miles, says reiki is helpful in exams, and especially in treating patients whose conditions cause anxiety or pain. "They're so at wit's end with what they're dealing with, they can't just talk about it and receive some understanding. If you can use reiki, it sort of just shifts communication to a different level. They stop obsessing and deeply relax." With one particular patient, easily agitated because his Parkinson's disease made communicating difficult, Gnat would start the exam with reiki. "It changed the whole interaction between us. He would totally relax; he would move better and speak better. It's helpful in all different kinds of situations."

James N. Dillard, MD, is associate clinical professor at Columbia University Medical Center in New York City and author of *The Chronic Pain Solution*. He trained in both first and second degree with Miles and has been practicing reiki five years. Reiki, he says, has been the final fine-tuning of his three decades of energy work, which also includes qigong, Jin Shin Do, and acupuncture.

"As someone who's formally trained in three professions—as an acupuncturist, chiropractor, and physician—my experience of reiki is that it can be a wonderful, deepening enhancement for anyone, but particularly for people in healthcare professions," Dillard says. "And it can broaden and deepen the practice one already has in ways you will only discover once you embark on that journey."

"Since I was trained in reiki by Pamela, I feel some kind of energetic connection to the patient. I think on some level I offer reiki—open a channel for reiki—with all my patients, whether consciously or unconsciously." Even when doing purely medical procedures, Dillard says, he's aware of a reiki connection. "It seems to happen, whether I want it to or not, which is fine with me. It just flows, and I can feel it flow. I don't know what all the benefits can be," Dillard says, suggesting emotional comfort could be one, "but there are things involved in the therapeutic interaction between practitioners and patients we don't fully understand."

Reiki can also provide emotional comfort for the therapist, nurturing her while she nurtures others. "The therapist is supported by reiki as it flows through her, so she doesn't feel like it's hers alone to do—she's not carrying the weight of the

results," Miles says. Having done the work within that shared healing space, the therapist ends the session refreshed, not depleted or burned out. Connecting through the field of consciousness can also enhance the therapist's intuition, as well as help her stay present in the moment with her client.

A veteran of more than twenty years of energy healing and bodywork, reiki practitioner Rohma Kellert has considerable experience with subtle energy techniques. "All of it comes from the same place and you can get there many different ways," she says. "This is just an efficient and safe way to get there. It's easier to integrate." The therapist is not forcing movement within a resistant system by frequency-tuning or visualizing a specific light or sound. That type of movement can seem less fluid and homogenous, she says, as though coming from a place of imbalance.

With reiki, Kellert says, "It's letting that primordial essence arise from the core of a person simultaneously with letting it flow from the heart of the universe. There's a real wisdom in that. You're allowing what's there to be there at the level and intensity that is exactly right, not trying to force it to be stronger or weaker based on an external desire or judgement." When the system has what it needs, the flow stops. "Nothing bad would happen if you leave your hands there, just nothing more would move."

The safe, simple practice of placing reiki hands fits well into hospital settings, where space and access to the patient may be limited. Through funding from her nonprofit Institute for Advancement of Complementary Therapies, Miles has developed complementary treatment programs for major New York City hospitals, with five reiki programs now in place. Grazia Della-Terza, a massage therapist and Asian bodywork instructor, provides reiki to cancer patients in one of those programs. "I often observe a kind of change in consciousness, where their energy is low or they seem tired or distracted or troubled when I start the session," she says. "Then, at the end, they're so refreshed and smiling, whereas before they were very down. It's like a lightness in the body."

As a part of integrative medicine, reiki complements the healing process in a variety of conditions and diseases. "Placing a reiki hand floods the area with grace, with healing, because reiki is the intelligence of healing," Miles says. When there's obstruction, that intelligence is recognized by the body. She calls it remembered wellness. And even when there may be no physical cure, reiki can provide profound comfort and inner balance for the patient and family.

"Occasionally I hear unnecessary precautions and assumed contraindications regarding reiki, which really come from a lack of understanding regarding what reiki is and how it works," Miles says. "These assumptions come out of the medical model

where in order to help, an intervention also has the capacity to cause harm. So this isn't understanding the way reiki works, which is not to impose an action, but rather to support the system moving to better integration or balance. There is no real 'do.' Reiki doesn't override the system the way a pharmaceutical does. Reiki is a spiritual practice."

The Mystical Essence

To embrace reiki, one need not understand the how or why. Reiki simply is and therein lies a certain beauty and grace, as expressed by those with reiki hands.

"I like that I feel at some level I'm embracing a mystery that's larger than I am," Dillard says. "It's appealing for all of us. It's the reason people are interested in spirituality and religion and taking a walk to watch the sunrise. We want to embrace things outside of ourselves. I can't say I know what goes on. I think it's larger than just the treatment. It's a mystery which makes it feel like you are opening yourself up to things that are greater than yourself."

And as Callan says, "If you let reiki stand alone, there is this amazing simplicity—nourishing, profound, effective. No need to embellish."

For more information on reiki research and application in bodywork and healthcare, visit www.reikiinmedicine.org.

Resource

Miles, Pamela. 2006. *Reiki: A Comprehensive Guide*. New York: Tarcher/Penguin.

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