

An Act of



Some people speak of Reiki as prayer. But is it really? Barbara McDaniel investigates.

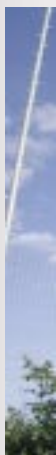
When my friend Luellen Garrett-Spencer shared her aspiration to become a Reiki Master, her mother didn't understand. It was the early 1980s, and while Reiki was generally unknown, the cult phenomenon was scarily famous. Luellen's mom was worried. "I explained it in a lot of different ways," Luellen recalls. "Finally I told her, 'You know Mom, Reiki is a lot like prayer.' And she totally got it. That made sense in her world, and it made sense to me too. She was always supportive after that."

I often make that same comparison when I teach First Degree. "Reiki is like an active prayer," I say, which sometimes morphs into, "Reiki is an act of prayer. No, it's not a religion," I add, "but it does open or strengthen your spiritual connection, whatever your beliefs."

But is Reiki really like prayer? How is it similar and how is it different? I decided to investigate prayer to understand this relationship more fully.

What is prayer?

People have prayed for thousands of years, so I was slightly amused to learn that research scientists are now studying prayer as a form of complementary medicine, measuring its effects on



Prayer

health and healing in the same way they are researching Reiki. Except that there are many more prayer studies than Reiki studies. And why not? A lot of people pray. A survey of 31,000 American adults, published in 2004 by the National Center for Health Statistics and the National Center for Complementary and Alternative

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Medicine (NCCAM), found that prayer was the most commonly used of all complementary therapies. Forty-five percent of respondents had used prayer for health reasons within the preceding twelve months. In contrast, 1.1% had used Reiki within the year.



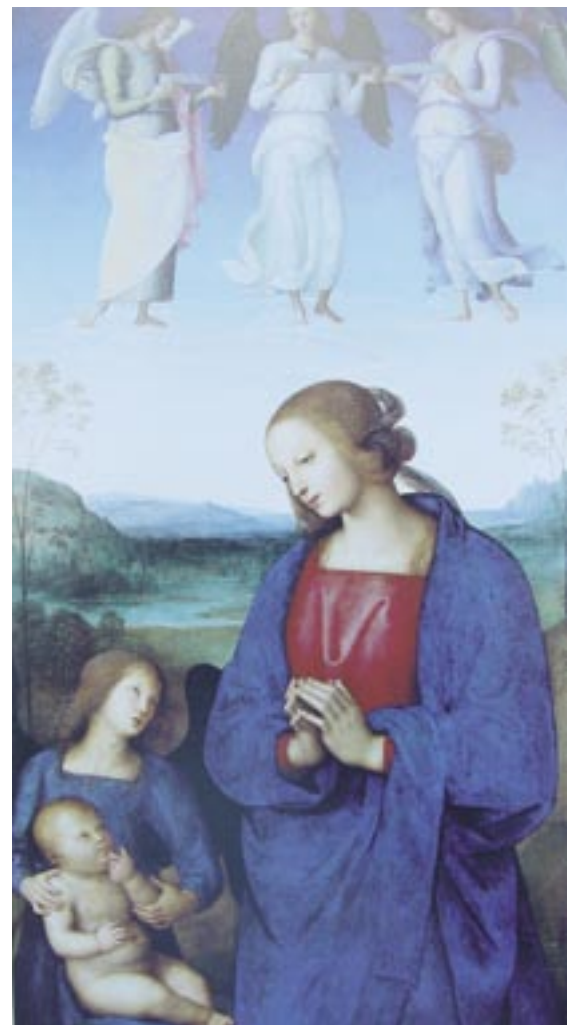
The survey distinguished prayer from other forms of spiritual healing including Reiki, yoga, and Qi Gong. But if you group these healing methods under the broader heading of “spiritual practice,” would the distinction be so clear? I turned to best-selling author Larry Dossey, M.D. for guidance.

In *Healing Beyond the Body*, Dr. Dossey writes, “. . . the most common image of prayer in our culture, if we were really honest with ourselves, is: ‘Prayer is talking, either out loud or silently, to a white, male, cosmic parent figure.’”

Dr. Dossey is an influential advocate for spirituality in medicine. He has studied prayer and healing extensively. For his own philosophical and research purposes, he suggests a more inclusive definition: “Prayer is communication with the Absolute.” For Dossey, this is deliberately ambiguous. “It invites people to define for themselves what ‘communication’ is and who or what ‘the Absolute’ may be.”

This definition gives leeway for comparison with Reiki.

Prayers take many forms, even in traditional Christian practices. They can be chanted, sung, whispered, said silently, or shouted from the rooftops. In other traditions, prayer becomes more physical. Native Americans dance. Sufis whirl. Orthodox Jews sway their bodies back and forth. Buddhists repeat mudras or hand



gestures. For that matter, Catholics make the sign of the cross. And the laying on of hands? Isn't that a gesture of prayer as well?

Luellen Garrett-Spencer has thought about these questions. “What is prayer? We tend to label it as Christian, but what is its essence? In the purest form, it's a thought that comes from your deepest being, out to something that's greater than you are. It doesn't matter what the religion or doctrine is. To me it all has the same feeling. Reiki has this certain form that makes it



unique, but there are different pathways to get to the same place.”

The Catholic *Simple Catechism* lists four kinds of prayer: adoration and praise, contrition, thanksgiving, and supplication, which is “when we ask God to help us in all our needs” (prayers of petition), and “the needs of those we love and our neighbours” (prayers of intercession). Intercessory prayer—interceding on behalf of others—is also “healing prayer” and the subject of medical research.

Intent to heal

Agnes Sanford was a Christian healer, a master of intercessory prayer, who became well known about the same time Hawayo Takata was teaching Reiki in the United States. Mrs. Sanford taught that the principles of prayer and healing are universal, included in all religions, yet transcending all religions. In her best-selling book, *The Healing Light*, she emphasized the power of intention as a key to effective healing. “People who prayed had to expect miracles. That required

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them to pray down the voice of doubt within them,” she wrote.

In Mrs. Sanford’s method, the pray-er, “in harmony with God,” expected—even commanded—explicit, miraculous healing, leaving the implementation to God. On the other hand, Dr. Dossey’s research indicates that non-specific prayer is more effective than prayers for a specific result. That’s closer to the “open to outcome but not attached to outcome” attitude with which we approach a Reiki treatment.

What is our intention when we offer Reiki? Consciously or not, when we

sit in a chair, place our feet flat on the floor and our hands together, and close our eyes to receive a Reiki initiation, we assume a posture of prayer. The request we make—a prayer of petition—is enormous: “Universal Life Energy, please enter me, enter my life, for the purpose of healing.” And boom! In relationship with a Reiki Master qualified to confer initiation, our prayerful request is answered. We literally have Universal Life Energy at and in our fingertips.

When we lay our hands on ourselves or others, do we have the innate intention to offer healing? Is this a form of intercessory prayer?

No difference

For Elaine Andres, there’s no question. “I’ve always seen Reiki as prayer,” she said. “I don’t see them as separate at all.”

Since being initiated as a Reiki Master in 1984, Elaine has continued her spiritual education. She has a Masters in Religious Education from the Central Baptist Theological Seminary and a graduate diploma in the Art of Spiritual Direction from the San Francisco Theological Seminary. Reverend Elaine is an ordained minister in the Christian Church, Disciples of Christ, and works as a spiritual director in Eugene, Oregon. She is presently completing a three-year training in Healing Prayer. I couldn’t have called on a better resource.

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“There are as many forms of prayer as a person can think of,” Elaine told me. “We have an Interfaith Service once a month and a variety of faith traditions plan the service, come together, and share as an act of prayer. We have Buddhists, Muslims, Sufis, Mormons, Catholics . . . I once counted thirty-nine participating faith traditions. There’s body prayer, prayer through art, through walking in nature, through sitting in silence, with music . . . anything can be seen as a form for

prayer. And it can also be *not* prayer. It depends on your intention.”

“I don’t distinguish anymore between prayer and daily living,” Elaine went on. “As I’m more conscious of the Divine presence, I experience that prayer can be anything. It can be setting up the room, if it’s done with a prayerful attitude. Everything that is done in an intentional way to connect with the Divine, to me, that’s prayer.”

Writing about prayer in a class paper, Elaine said, “My deepest experience of God-prayer continues to be in the healing presence and energy of Reiki. It is in the touch of my hands that I have the experience, a real physical expression, of God-prayer. My hands also bring a gift of spiritual direction, and I trust and celebrate the prayer of my hands.”

Elaine, of course, is well trained in a formal Christian tradition. What about non-theistic or pantheistic or non-specific spiritual forms? “I have a friend who’s a Reiki student and a Buddhist,” she said. “When I say ‘God,’ my friend translates that into ‘loving kindness,’ which I’ve adopted. I also use ‘loving compassion.’”

Quiet state

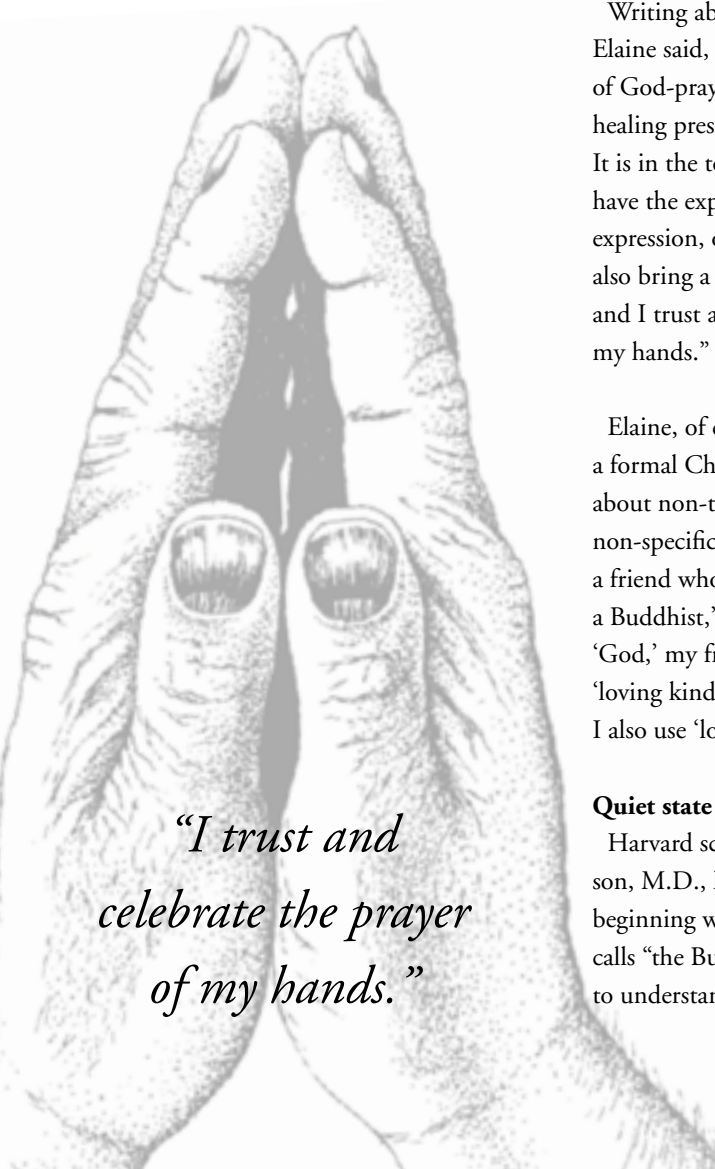
Harvard scientist Herbert Benson, M.D., has also studied prayer, beginning with meditation, what he calls “the Buddhist form of prayer,” to understand how the mind affects



the body. According to Dr. Benson, all forms of prayer bring a “relaxation response,” a state of being that soothes stress, quiets the body, and promotes healing.

Benson has been studying the effects of “quietude” on health for over thirty years. Using MRI scans to track physical changes in the body, he found that prayer or meditation lead to a heightened state of emotional significance, that the body becomes more relaxed, and physiological activity becomes more evenly regulated. Similar, I would add, to the experience of giving or receiving Reiki.

Tibetan Buddhist master Thubten Zopa Rinpoche also teaches about healing through meditation and loving compassion. In *Ultimate Healing* he writes, “In meditation, our own positive attitudes become the inner medicine that heals our mind and cures the cause of all our problems. Disease



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and all the other problems in our lives are caused by unhealthy minds. Meditation not only heals disease but brings peace to the mind . . . The best positive thoughts for healing are loving kindness and compassion.”

While a Reiki treatment can induce the quiet mental and physiological changes Dr. Benson describes, the Reiki Principles come closer to addressing that change in attitude advocated by Zopa Rinpoche.

Health and happiness

There was another Reiki Master I wanted to consult on this topic. Hawayo Takata, who brought Reiki to the West from Japan and nourished its practice for forty-five years, did not write about Reiki. Most of her teachings have come through the oral transmission of the students who knew and studied with her. But she did write a paper, published in the little booklet, *The Usui System of Natural Healing (The Blue Book)*, in which she describes this energy and practice.

“I believe there exists One Supreme Being—the Absolute Infinite—a Dynamic Force that governs the world and universe. It is an unseen spiritual power that vibrates and all other powers fade into insignificance beside it . . . I shall

call it ‘Reiki’ because I studied under that expression.

“It should be applied and used daily as a prevention . . . We were put into this world for some purpose, therefore, we should have health and happiness.

“It was God’s plan, so he provides us with everything. He gave us hands to use them to apply and heal, to retain physical health and mental balance, to free ourselves from ignorance and live in an enlightened world, to live in harmony with yourself and others, to love all beings.

“When these rules are applied daily, the body shall respond and everything we wish and desire to attain in this world is within our reach. Health, happiness, and the road to longevity, which we all seek—I call this Perfection.”

And I call *this* prayer.



It sounds to me like Mrs. Takata is describing Larry Dossey’s communication with the Absolute. Whether we see the Absolute as God, Allah, Great Spirit, loving kindness, Reiki . . . whether we call that communication prayer, meditation, blessing, song, treatment . . . these actions take us to Luellen’s “thought that comes from your deepest being, out to something that’s greater than you are.” And scientific studies or no, students of Reiki know it’s true: whatever you call it, this communication with the Absolute has and is a great power for healing.

by Barbara McDaniel

Sources: CAM at the NIH (newsletter), Winter 2005; *Healing Beyond the Body*, Larry Dossey, M.D., Shambhala, 2001; *The Healing Light*, Agnes Sanford, 1947, reprinted Ballantine Books, 1983; *The Relaxation Response*, Herbert Benson, M.D., Avon Books, 1975; *The Usui System of Natural Healing*, Paul David Mitchell (ed.), The Reiki Alliance, 1985; *Ultimate Healing*, Thubten Zopa Rinpoche, Wisdom Publications, 2001; Prayer, Wikipedia.org, www.agnessanford.com, www.catholic.org.uk, www.dukespiritualityandhealing.org, www.nccam.nih.gov, www.schoolofpastoralcare.net, www.webMD.com.