

Reiki: Spiritual Practice or Energy Medicine?

When reviewing the [Reiki Backgrounder for the NIH/NCCAM website](#), I suggested to my NCCAM colleagues that Reiki is more accurately grouped with meditation as a spiritual practice, rather than placed in the energy medicine category.

The point may seem moot, another round of academic hair-splitting, but what a difference this shift could make in today's health care. Let's take a look.

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Today's medicine is reactive by definition (otherwise it's called Preventive Medicine). Practice, however, is proactive. We reach for medicine when we feel ill; we practice as part of our regular hygiene, cognizant of the damaging effects of accumulated stress, and of our need to settle into home base at least once a day. We practice because our common sense tells us it is necessary, even when our hearts don't register the longing to phone home.

Conventional medicine groups spiritual practice under lifestyle modification. You make a deliberate choice, a commitment to self-care that becomes part of your daily routine, like tooth-brushing (and for some, more like flossing).

Quite distinct from spiritual practice, today's medicine is a body of knowledge and interventions. Medical techniques—energy or otherwise—are deliberate interventions designed to fix symptoms while minimizing risk. The process follows the medical model of diagnosis, treatment plan, treatment implementation, evaluation, and recommendations for future care. Whether the intervention is surgery

to rearrange the body or energy techniques to reorganize the biofield, they are done to us/received by us. Even when giving ourselves an energy medicine treatment, we apply the techniques from outside, as if our bodies were someone else's.

That's true of hands-on Reiki self-treatment as well. We apply our hands to the outside of our bodies. But what happens then?

As a spiritual practice, a Reiki treatment doesn't rearrange the biofield as much as it reminds the system of its capacity to self-heal. A Reiki hand sounds the metaphorical wellness chord, the "sound" of which calls the human system to reorganize around its inherent wellness, thereby increasing consonance in the system, and reducing dissonance from within, rather than sweeping it away from outside, as is done by an energy medicine treatment. The Reiki hand may be the soft mallet that sounds the gong, but the resonance, reorganization, and healing come from within. Yes, the practitioner plays a role, but Reiki healing remains essentially self-healing.

In energy medicine, the therapist does the housecleaning, whereas through spiritual practice, we alter our state from within. Reiki is a spiritual practice that has therapeutic applications. That doesn't make it energy medicine, but it means it can look like energy medicine.

It's up to us to know the difference. If Reiki practitioners aren't mindful of the distinction, the essential understanding of Reiki practice could get lost.

And the difference this means in health care? Physicians need research evidence to recommend treatments. They cannot tell patients to spend time and money on treatments without data to support safety and efficacy.

Lifestyle modifications do not require the same level of evidence.

Splitting Reiki hairs can be useful. Regardless the conclusions we come to, thinking the questions through deepens our understanding. The clarity that arises from a contemplated practice helps us build credibility, while resisting the medicalization of Reiki practice. By doing so, we just might be ensuring its survival.