

# **Reiki**

## **The Transmigration of a Japanese Spiritual Healing Practice**

This text is a summary of the dissertation belonging to the doctoral study performed by Jojan L. Jonker in the period 2011-2015, and supervised on behalf of Radboud University Nijmegen, the Netherlands by supervisor Prof. Dr. P.J.C.L van der Velde and co-supervisor Dr. F.P.M. Jespers within the Faculty of Philosophy, Theology and Religious Studies. The thesis was defended in public on February 12, 2016 in Nijmegen.

### **Reiki in the Netherlands**

In the Netherlands, Reiki is known within the health care system as an alternative or complementary healing method and among Reiki practitioners as a Japanese (spiritual) healing practice. The author identifies Reiki as holistic spirituality and sees it as a possible part of mainstream spirituality for persons who consider themselves 'spiritual but not religious'. The four most recognizable and salient features are [1] the energetic initiation ritual that provides access to and use of a presumed healing universal life energy, [2] the technique of laying on of hands by which this energy is transferred or administered to oneself or another, [3] the use of symbols with accompanying mantras, and [4] five precepts that provide a guideline for a moral and ethical path of life. The desired goal of Reiki is healing in the broad sense of the word. This can vary from relief and healing of physical complaints, to stress reduction, and through personal development to more balanced and spiritual growth.

### **Brief History**

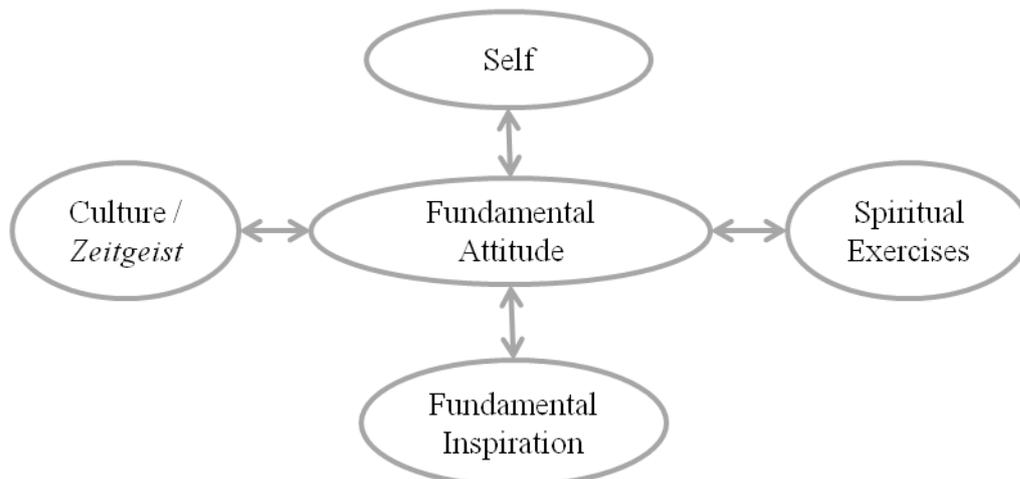
In 1922, a Japanese man, Mikao Usui (1865-1926), ascends Mount Kurama near Kyoto, Japan, for a multi-day meditation and fasting retreat. After 21 days, he is touched by a transcendent reality, ends his retreat and realizes that he can perform healing with the laying on of hands. He calls this healing method *Usui Reiki Ryōhō* (Reiki for short), treats people and teaches people to practice it themselves. He died in 1926 and at that time around 2,000 people had received a Reiki course and he had trained around twenty people to be Reiki teachers (Reiki Masters). In the transmigration of Reiki, one of Usui's most important students and Reiki Masters, Chujiro Hayashi (1880-1940) plays a leading role, because in the 1930s a Japanese woman, Hawayo Takata (1900-1980) born and living in Hawaii, visits Japan and comes into contact with Hayashi and Reiki there. They bring it to Hawaii and Takata starts giving treatments and courses. In the late 1940s, her activities expanded to the continental United States and Canada. By the end of her life, she has trained 22 (or more) Reiki Masters and taught countless people Reiki. In the 1980s, the spread gained momentum and one can speak of a globalization where in 1984, Reiki was introduced in the Netherlands.

How is it possible that in a relatively short period of time a typical Japanese New Religious Movement, a new religious movement or spiritual practice, found its way from Japan to Hawaii and mainland North America, then spread to dozens of countries in the world including the Netherlands and (within the academic field of Religious Studies) is characterized as holistic spirituality? This question was not easily answered in 2011 because at that time, there is no scholarly literature describing the transmigration of specific Japanese healing methods to the Netherlands from the chosen perspective of spirituality. The research question thus became:

*How and why did characteristic elements (CEs) of Reiki's spirituality change during the transmigration from Japan to Hawaii, to North America, and during a globalization eventually to the Netherlands?*

### **Research Method**

The method chosen for this research requires a model of spirituality which leaves room for specific culture and spirit of the age (*Zeitgeist*) elements and can express spirituality for both practices and individuals. The finally chosen analytical model includes five components: *fundamental attitude* which is central and is influenced and nourished by four components: *self*, *culture and Zeitgeist*, *fundamental inspiration* and *spiritual exercises*. The choice of this model guarantees that there is room for topics that have already attracted attention in advance, such as the Japanese animistic worldview, Western individualism and the previously recognized echo of Western esoteric traditions in contemporary Reiki. Furthermore, the complexity of the topic, the transmigration of (the spirituality of) Reiki, justifies the choice of using a unique combination of methods and techniques from the field of religious studies, although always from the perspective of spirituality. The research material was obtained from various sources.



The author is a Reiki practitioner since 1994 and Reiki Master since 1998. He has participated in two Reiki courses taught by a Japanese Reiki Master, he has attended several meetings of Reiki practitioners, he has organized a study trip to Japan in 2012, visiting Reiki related places and has also talked with Japanese Reiki practitioners there, he has had many contacts and consultations with three other PhD candidates (Japan, Canada, UK/US, also on the topic of Reiki), and he has done extensive literature research. Because he is both-sider, Reiki practitioner and scholar, he makes no claims about any alleged efficacy of Reiki treatments.

### **Results**

Three fairly sharply defined periods can be identified in the transmigration of Reiki: Japan in the 1920s to 1945, Hawaii and mainland North America in the late 1930s to 1980, and a period of globalization since about 1980.

On the basis of the outlined working method, this study describes the development of Reiki per period (1) by means of biographies of historical key figures and analyses the socio-cultural context in which they are inextricably embedded. Critical use has been made of elements from the narrative as told by Reiki practitioners and of elements from factual history. Also, for each period, the specific occurrences of

Reiki's spirituality are expressed in *characteristic elements* (CEs). (2) A theory is introduced that contributes to an understanding of why Reiki can break out of a sociocultural context and transmigrate to other places and cultures. Finally, (3) the relationship between Reiki and Western esoteric traditions is made visible.

(1) The results of the study show that the chosen analytical model is an adequate means of representing and comparing spirituality in an analytical way for both individuals and practices.

The analysis of the socio-cultural context addresses some issues that are for the first time illuminated in literature on Reiki. For example, almost all literature on Reiki mentions Hayashi as being little more than a naval officer. For the first time there is an academic treatise that dwells extensively on the relationship between the Imperial Navy, (rising) nationalism and Japanese Reiki in the 1920s to 1945. This research shows that several high-ranking officers were involved with Reiki and that the intentions were not only aimed at physical healing of naval personnel on their ships, but that Reiki was probably also used to promote and achieve political, nationalistic interests and goals.

The spirituality of Reiki in the Japanese period can be reflected in about 60 CEs. The most important ones are the concept of *kokoro* (head-heart) and the purification of it, a training for mind control, and an energetic ritual called *reiju* for a connection with the *reiki* energy, which is based on or inspired by the Buddhist *kanjo* ritual and the Shintō *chinkon kishin* ritual. These CEs support the search for one's purpose in life, expressed with the state of consciousness *anshin ritsumei*, as well as in the afterlife. Achieving redemption or enlightenment in the form of *satori* (albeit related to Zen) through self-development and development is also considered among the possibilities. The set of 60 CEs is followed in the process of transmigration to the West, and for the second and third periods, again about 60 CEs are also described in which it is made clear why certain CEs disappear or change and new ones arise.

The transmigration from Japan to Hawaii and North America has brought about the most changes and shows a "westernization". It is made clear that many concepts belonging to the Japanese sociocultural context have been replaced by Western concepts or have not come along at all. One example is the supposed subtle energy that is the basis of Reiki practice. Possibly Usui called this *reiki* energy and the results indicate that Usui was inspired by *ki*, *prana* (Theosophy) and Mesmer's idea of animal magnetism. In the West, *reiki* energy has been interpreted almost unnoticed as *universal life energy*, a concept derived from *The American Metaphysical Movement* (from which New Age later emerged). Typical Japanese cultural influences that have led to specific CEs have not transmigrated, such as the influence of *The Emperor System* which led to Usui's choice to incorporate some poems of the Meiji Emperor into the Reiki doctrine. Thus, the poems are also no longer found in contemporary Western Reiki. The original purpose of Reiki also included the attainment of an altered state of consciousness, *anshin ritsumei* and *satori*, and were more or less replaced by the concept of metaphysical healing, something reflected in Takata's involvement in some Metaphysical Churches. The importance of the "self" in the West and Western individualism lead to self-treatment becoming the cornerstone of Western Reiki styles, where in Japanese Reiki the treatment of the other is paramount together with the Reiki precepts. In Japanese culture, the well-being of the other leads to the better well-being of society and state and thus also for the practitioner.

(2) Spiritual practices and doctrines do not always explicitly name all CEs in those cases where they belong to the natural habitat of the practitioner and hence, further explanation is unnecessary. In the case of Reiki, for Japanese, the concepts of *ki* and *kami* may come to mind. Such CEs reside in the domain of "the obviousness" and remain hidden leading to a conceptual vacuum in a given spirituality. It can be said that new styles of a spirituality emerge when that vacuum is filled by new practitioners with other concepts that are familiar to them and similar for them (*ki - universal life energy*). When a practitioner embodies two cultures, one where he or she learned Reiki and another where Reiki is introduced, transmigration can take place and "obvious" invisible CEs from one culture are replaced by similar ones from the other culture. Such a person is called a transmigrator by the author, and Takata is one in Reiki's transmigration from Japan to the West.

The author introduces a theory in which he recognizes three phases in a transmigration process in which the aforementioned replacement of CEs by a transmigrator belongs to the first phase. The transmigrator has made Reiki his or her own in one culture and carries it out in another. The second stage involves Reiki having to assimilate into society. It must find its place in every society in the relationship between science, religious and spiritual concepts and beliefs, regular health care, and alternative health care. The outcome of this phase will lead to whether, and if so to what extent, Reiki can be characterized as a complementary or alternative health care (CAM) modality. The third phase is that Reiki must be able to fill a gap in the market and attract clients. These new practitioners will, of course, have their own personalized collection of CEs. Reiki's spirituality must match someone's personal spirituality in such a way that the interest in Reiki can be generated and willingness to undergo treatments or to learn Reiki oneself.

A striking finding of this study is that during the transmigration from Japan, to North America, to the Netherlands clientele and practitioners are found almost exclusively in the population layer with Judeo-Christian cultural background ("whites"). During this initial transmigration, the set of CEs changed considerably and those related to treatment and practice became the most important. The goal became holistic healing where self-development is still seen as the main path. Many CEs did not transmigrate and disappeared such as the concept of *kokoro* and the influence of the Imperial Navy and The Emperor System. On the other hand, new CEs were added such as some secret 'mantras'. Also new is the Master initiation, a specialization of the original initiation ritual *reiju*. The original ritual (*reiju*) was (and still is) performed in Japan during regular and periodic (e.g. monthly) meetings. In the West, this ritual has degenerated into a one-time *rite de passage* and is now linked to the three courses, the three levels of the Reiki practitioner: Reiki 1, Reiki 2 and Reiki Master. In this way it has also become a control mechanism for who gets access to the advanced Reiki levels (2 and Master). It is also noticeable that especially the Master initiation is gaining more and more autonomy and is becoming an institute in itself. Another outcome of this research is that self-treatment has become more important and is now the cornerstone of practice.

In summary, only a handful of CEs have come through transmigration unchanged and can be considered the essence of Reiki. This seems to reflect a kind of ancient wisdom, summarized by the author as:

*There is a subtle energy that is accessible to humans for healing purposes by the laying on of hands.*

Almost everything around it has changed, disappeared or been added to in the course of time. Yet, this is not seen as a problem. Reiki is coming out of a formative phase, developing whereby more and more descriptions of Reiki are becoming available in

literature and on websites. In this process, dogmas become visible as well as the need for reformation or schisms. As a result, there are now hundreds of Reiki styles, all of which interpret Reiki in their own way and have filled in the conceptual vacuum in their own way.

(3) The results of this study indicate that Reiki has a strong affinity with Western esoteric traditions, including New Age and its successor new spiritualities. In other words, the spirituality of Reiki and Reiki practitioners contains many CEs derived from or related to Western esoteric traditions. This relationship is visible throughout the transmigration from Japan to the Netherlands and has already been expressed in the text given above (Mesmer, Metaphysical Churches, metaphysical healing, *prana*, universal life energy). A final example is that Usui included five precepts in his teachings that were almost identically adopted from another Japanese (Bizan Suzuki) who in turn was inspired by the *American New Thought*, also a product of *The American Metaphysical Movement*.

Following Reiki in the process of transmigration shows, finally, that self-development is increasingly equated with a development of self-determination and self-actualization or self-empowerment and is deployed as a tool in the personal quest for holistic healing.

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