

Reiki Practitioners' Experiences of Self-Healing and Transformation: An Intuitive Inquiry

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This research explored the experiences of healing and transformation within Reiki practitioners. Reiki practitioners are attuned to a traditional and ancient hands-on healing technique which involves the practitioner channelling life-force energy through their hands to heal themselves or others. The methodology of intuitive inquiry was used, and the interview transcripts of eight participants were analysed using Thematic Content Analysis. Eight themes were formed and included: Opening the Door, Shifting Beliefs, Lifestyle Changes, Healing Crisis, Moving Past Doubts, Spiritual Connection and Self-Empowerment. The results were presented through a compound narrative of the participants' experiences. The findings showed that Reiki practitioners experienced transformation on mental, emotional, physical and spiritual levels. Many of the participants experienced struggles that they learned to interpret as meaningful. They also shifted their beliefs and made lifestyle changes which led to greater self-empowerment.

Keywords: Reiki, life-force, spiritual, transpersonal, healing, healing crisis, transformation, self-healing

This research was inspired by my personal experiences of healing and self-healing that followed my attunements into the traditional system of Usui Reiki in 2018. These experiences included connecting with lights and colours within my mind's eye. These were usually accompanied by a sense of peace, relaxation, physical and mental lightness and often combined with an intuitive knowing of being connected with something beyond myself. As a result, these experiences felt transformative and deeply healing.

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Usui Reiki is an ancient hands-on healing system rediscovered by Dr Mikao Usui in Japan in the 1920s (Usui & Petter, 1999). Reiki is a Japanese word: *Rei* means life-force, and *Ki* means energy. Usui Reiki is a technique that involves channelling universal life-force energy through the hands of the practitioner, which are laid onto – or very close to – another person’s body for healing to take place. A recommended set of 12 hand positions are placed on the head or on the front and back of the torso (Usui & Petter, 1999). Reiki was originally taught as an oral tradition and its knowledge was passed down from teacher to student. Reiki is now taught through short weekend courses involving at least one attunement from teacher to student.

The Usui system of natural healing is based on the ontological assumption that a life-force energy permeates all living things (Usui & Petter, 1999). The existence of universal life-force energy is acknowledged in many spiritual traditions worldwide, and it is comparable to the Indian concept of *Prana* and Chinese *Chi* (Quest, 2012). The attunement, *Reiju* in Japan, is an initiation into the life-force energy and involves a set ritual that the teacher and student engage in to activate the flow of energy. The attunement provides the spiritual connection, the *Rei*, and connects the student to universal life-force energy for a lifetime (Usui & Petter, 1999). After the attunement, practitioners are believed to undergo a 21-day healing process that may include physical, mental and emotional symptoms such as tiredness, an upset stomach or emotional releases (Gilberti, 2004). During this healing process, it is believed that old wounds or blocked energies are released or re-balanced (Quest, 2012).

Healing can be understood as a transformative journey towards wholeness (Cowling, 2000), in which transcendence of suffering and new meaning is found (Warber et al., 2015). It is a holistic process that encompasses the physical, emotional, mental, social and spiritual components of oneself (Egnew, 2005). Transformation can be defined as “a profound internal shift that results in long-lasting changes in the way you experience and relate to yourself, others and the world” (Schlitz et al., 2008, p. 19). Washburn (1988) views transformation as a dialectical spiral between the ego and the dynamic ground, suggesting that transformation is not unidirectional and ascending, but includes “regression in the service of transcendence” (p. 242). Washburn states that if the energy of the ground emerges and the ego is overwhelmed by energies that cannot be readily assimilated, there is potential for a spiritual emergency to occur (Grof, 2000). Ruumet (2006) proposes a spiral model of psycho-spiritual development spanning seven centres that are analogous to the seven chakras. The spiral process suggests a return cycle in which an individual in the later stages of development may return to an earlier developmental stage. Both Washburn and Ruumet’s models propose that an embodied integration of the spiritual into the material is crucial for one to access higher levels of transformation. Spiritual emergency may become spiritual emergence (Grof, 2000) if one’s transformative experiences can be interpreted as meaningful and integrated in an embodied way.

To date, most studies have investigated Reiki's healing effects on others and found them to include: lower levels of stress; reduction of pain; improved quality of sleep; and clearing of negative emotional patterns and blocks (Gilberti, 2004). This indicates that Reiki may influence patients' healing process; however, I found a lack of literature exploring Reiki practitioners' experiences of self-healing and transformation. Warber et al. (2015) supports this and points out that most of the research into the healer experiences focuses on nurses and "is situated in the nursing literature" (p. 72) and "suggest[s] that relatively little research has been undertaken with the specific aim of understanding practitioner perspectives of healing" (p. 75).

My research question was: to explore the self-healing and personal transformation of Reiki practitioners who channel Reiki to heal themselves or others.

Method

The research was carried out using the method of intuitive inquiry. This hermeneutical research method unites intuition and compassionate ways of knowing with the more traditional, empirical qualitative research process (Anderson & Braud, 2011). Qualitative research may include analysing interview transcripts, videos or pictures to reflect the participants' lived experiences. Intuitive inquiry takes this further by encouraging researchers to explore topics that claim their enthusiasm and invite the inquiry to transform both their understanding of the topic and their lives (Anderson, 1998).

Five cycles were carried out and included: 1) Clarifying the research topic, 2) Developing preliminary lenses and reviewing the literature, 3) Collecting data and preparing summary reports, 4) Transforming and refining lenses and, 5) Integrating findings with the literature review (Anderson, 1998).

Cycle 1 involved engaging in a meditative exercise to identify a text in which to clarify the research topic. The texts that claimed me were the experiences I had during my Reiki self-healing sessions. These experiences involved the presence of lights and colours within my mind's eye, accompanied by a sense of peace, relaxation, physical and mental lightness. They also coincided with warm energy encompassing part of or, sometimes, my entire body. I sensed that I was connecting with something beyond my physical and individual self. These experiences also correlated with a heightened awareness of synchronous experiences in my day-to-day life; a feeling of being more expansive and having frequent dreams of a numinous quality. However, these experiences were, at times, uncomfortable and included pain in the body, twitching and buzzing sensations. I became curious as to whether the act of channelling universal life-force energy may initiate healing and transformation within an individual. I was also interested in how the act of self-healing may be an important ritual for profound healing and transformation to take place. My Cycle 1 texts were combined with a review of the literature.

Cycle 2 involved sharing my personal values and assumptions, which emerged through the literature review and Cycle 1 text (Anderson, 2004). The prior assumptions formed the preliminary lenses, which were as follows:

Lens 1: A Reiki practitioner's healing and transformation occurs on a physical, emotional, mental, interpersonal and spiritual level.

Lens 2: Reiki practitioners undergo a transformation which may include a healing crisis or challenging experiences.

Lens 3: The healing process may follow a "spiral path" that involves regressive and transcendent experiences.

Lens 4: After an initial healing crisis, the practitioner may experience improved physical, mental and emotional health in addition to increased peace and clarity.

Lens 5: The ritual of self-healing is an important aspect of a practitioner's healing process.

Lens 6: The transformation and healing of a Reiki practitioner is a path that may continue throughout the practitioner's lifetime.

Lens 7: When a Reiki practitioner channels energy, it may shift their awareness and level of consciousness.

Lens 8: Attunement to Reiki enables a practitioner to have a greater connection to a spiritual energy.

Lens 9: A Reiki practitioner's sense of intuition may be enhanced after being attuned to Reiki.

Lens 10: Practitioners might be overwhelmed by increased sensitivity to themselves, others and the world.

Lens 11: There may be a greater awareness of synchronicities within one's life.

Cycle 3 involved choosing the best sources of data to answer the research questions, develop the criteria for collection, collect the data, analyse it, and present a summary report (Anderson & Braud, 2011). I recruited eight participants (Table 1) who were interviewed in-person, using semi-structured interviews, and included open-ended questions to allow for depth and flexibility with the questions (Creswell, 2012). Each interview lasted between 45-60 minutes and was recorded for later transcription.

Table 1*Participant Information*

Pseudonym of participant	Age	Gender	Nationality	Reiki level/ Experience
Mike	40	Male	American	Usui Reiki Master/ Teacher
Anna	34	Female	Russian	Usui Reiki Master/ Teacher
Jane	42	Female	American/ Chinese	Usui Reiki Master/ Teacher
Juan	36	Male	Colombian	Usui Reiki Master
Jenny	34	Female	British	Usui Reiki Master/ Teacher
Gabriela	29	Female	Colombian	Usui Reiki Master
George	42	Male	American	Level 1
Lucy	39	Female	American	Usui Reiki Master

The interviews took place in person between February and August 2018. I recruited five of the participants after meeting them at a Reiki share in Shanghai. I connected with two more participants when I advertised the research through social media. I met the final participant at a retreat centre in Boulder, Colorado. I chose the participants using purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2012) using the following inclusion criteria:

1. Participants are attuned to either level 1, 2, 3 or teacher level of the traditional Usui lineage of Reiki in which attunements are given directly from the teacher.
2. Participants engage in the process of channelling Reiki for self-healing or healing others at least once per week.
3. Participants must have experienced some form of self-defined self-healing and or self-defined transformation.

Cycle 3 involved sharing a descriptive analysis of the collected data (Anderson, 2004). I conducted a Thematic Content Analysis (Anderson, 2004) that included reading the transcripts, highlighting meaning units and making notes related to the emerging themes.

Cycle 4 involved sharing transformed lenses that highlight new understandings that have emerged since Cycle 2. The development of the lenses took place after engagement with the data collected in cycle 3 (Anderson, 2004). According to Anderson (1998), the

changes between the lenses of Cycles 2 and 4 reflect the researcher's willingness to be transformed by the research process. I presented my Cycle 4 lenses as seed lenses, changed lenses and new lenses (Esbjorn, 2003).

Cycle 5 required the researcher to stand back from the research as a whole and engage in a forward and return arc to determine what can now be said regarding the research topic (Anderson & Braud, 2011). Using the literature, an analysis of the data and the new lenses, a summary was made surrounding the emergence of new meaning.

Validity

I determined validity through resonance and efficacy validity (Anderson & Braud, 2011). I established resonance validity through the sympathetic resonance that was felt by the participants and audience of the study (Anderson, 2004). I checked participant resonance by sending summary reports back to the participants and asking them to provide feedback on the reports (Anderson & Braud, 2011). Efficacy validity relates to whether there is transformation within the participants, the researcher and the readers due to the research (Anderson, 2004).

Results

I present a compound narrative to demonstrate how the themes were shared by the other participants. I titled my final themes using the participants' words: Planting the Seed, Opening the Door, Shifting Beliefs, Lifestyle Changes, Healing Crisis, Moving Past Doubts, Spiritual Connection and Self-Empowerment.

Planting the Seed

The theme was relevant for seven of the participants as they stated that their Reiki attunements initiated a significant shift for them. Gabriela shared that her attunement enabled her to start seeing things differently. She became attuned to Reiki and started to notice the change. She stated that she could see things differently and move forward with her life. Gabriela shared the following example:

I had trouble with a girl one day in University. And I could see it from a different perspective. I reacted wisely. I calmed down and I peacefully reacted to the situation. So, I was like, oh this is good; something changed in me.

Opening the Door

Following the attunement process, six of the participants shared the analogy of Opening the Door. George shared that "it was the opening of the door to understanding the transference of energy". The practitioners stated that Reiki provided a path to follow or a "container" in which they were able to grow their spiritual practice. Jenny explained, "the meditation was more because of the Reiki. That was why I started doing

meditation”. Jane also told me that after her attunement she became involved in other healing and spiritual practices, which she described as “special stuff”. I asked Jane what some of these things involved for her. She shared the following examples:

I do think that everything is brought to you. I started to learn other types of Reiki. I wrote to many Reiki teachers asking them to teach me. I went to Laos and learnt Tarot. Then later I met my Earth healing teacher. I learned so many things. I learned self-hypnosis.

Shifting Beliefs

All of the participants described shifts that occurred gradually and this included changes in their mindset and beliefs. Mike shared that he began to change his mindset in relation to his self-healing abilities:

I think that very few people will find that Reiki gives a dramatic shift right away e.g. my pain is gone now or whatever chronic issue I’m dealing with is fixed within a week or two weeks... Reiki is one of those things that generally works better over time, and my beliefs around my ability to heal myself and others gradually began to change.

Mike described how he began to see more meaning and symbolism within his life:

I began noticing more of the symbolism in life and began to read more and to talk to people about the animal spirits or plant spirits, and just more taking a kind of a symbolic approach.

Lifestyle Changes

George, Juan, Jenny and Jane all described how their journey with Reiki was self-healing as it resulted in them making significant changes to their lifestyle. This included diet, alcohol consumption, exercise and the way that they approached healing their illnesses.

My self-healing practice became more serious and, as I said, my awareness of my body and who I was spending time with and where I was putting my energy and the food I was eating and drinking less alcohol and engaging in activities that pushed me (Jenny).

Healing Crisis

All of the participants described a certain type of healing crisis or significant event that occurred either during or after their attunement to Reiki. They perceived this crisis as instrumental in their transformation and self-healing. Anna articulated that she was already going through a “rough patch” when Reiki found her and that her struggles and pain were catalysts for her healing:

I do feel like things were erupting, but I don't know if that was so bad because sometimes the teachers say, "You know, you're really going to go through a really rough patch because everything is cleansing out of you". I felt like I was in such a bad place emotionally and mentally, that it couldn't have gotten worse...sometimes, it's the people who have the most struggle and pain that are the most profound healers and channellers.

Gabriela described a "breaking point" that was challenging for her. Yet, as a result, she learnt the importance of practising self-healing every day:

I think I got to another breakpoint in my life. I could not practice because when I opened it was too much that nobody could explain to me. I closed myself... so I learnt you need to protect your energy field. My teacher gave me some exercises to do. I do it every morning since that time, since that day I started to practice Reiki on myself every day.

Once Gabriela started practising her self-healing, she shared how it enabled her to feel more peace and balance: "It changed my life. When I started doing Reiki, I could feel more peace, more like joy and happiness in my life."

Moving Past Doubts

Six of the participants shared a process of moving past struggles and doubts. For many, their journey of self-healing gave them the ability to surrender to their experiences and the not-knowing. As Lucy described:

And I think that part of it is that you do not understand how it works. Rather, it is just a matter of trusting and having this faith that you are a conduit for something far larger than you are.

Juan shared the following in his interview:

I accepted a life where Spirit was guiding me through intuition and I kept saying yes. We can always say yes if we follow it. It's hard because you have to let go and surrender all of these realities we think are real. But if you follow it and trust, it's available for all of us.

Spiritual Connection

The participants all described a greater sense of Spiritual Connection as a result of their Reiki attunements and their rituals of self-healing and healing others. Jenny described her experiences when she connects with Reiki:

When I connect, I see these lights; not lights exactly, but like stars, with different colours. Some of them are very, very small, like pinpricks. Some of them are

bigger, and for me those are guides or spiritual energies that are there to support me. I feel this kind of expansion, like this wave of energy opening up and flowing from the centre of my crown outwards and it's kind of this continual outward flow.

Jenny went on to describe how her experiences relate to a sense of universal connection:

Sometimes I see myself connecting to every single star, every single galaxy, everything that exists out there in the universe, and sometimes I just feel this vibration that is surrounding me and that is what I connect with.

Anna described how Reiki enabled her to have this direct experience of connection that she had read about:

You definitely feel like you're part of a bigger picture. Another thing that you feel really profoundly is the connection. It's written in every single book of meditation yoga that we're all connected, and yet it's really hard to treat an annoying neighbour with kindness, right? But then I emerged out of it feeling like there really is that web of universal consciousness and universal knowledge that people can tap into and download.

Self-Empowerment

Juan, Lucy, Jenny, Mike, Anna and Jane shared that their Reiki practice encouraged them to feel empowered because of an awareness of their self-healing abilities. Mike pointed out how he perceived this as going against the mindset of mainstream society:

I think it has a large part to do with the fact that we're not in society; we don't have this mindset of that we are our own healers. We always outsource, our healing and our power, to other people and that, this Reiki, is a tool that one can use for themselves and you don't need an outside authority to tell you when to use it.

He emphasised how the connection that is experienced through the act of healing yourself and others resulted in this sense of empowerment:

Knowing that there's something else out there that is a higher power, that it is strong, that it's intelligent and it works without me having to know what to do with it is really empowering in giving a broad, broader view of the world than what mainstream society says is available

Changed lenses are those that have altered from the ones I presented in Cycle 2 (see Method). Seed lenses were present and indicated in Cycle 2 but have been greatly transformed throughout the research process. Lenses 1, 3, 7 and 10 were left unchanged. Five new lenses - lenses 12-16 emerged after the research.

Seed Lenses

Lens 2: Reiki practitioners may experience challenging experiences during or after their attunement to Reiki, and which they learn to interpret as meaningful.

Lens 4: After an initial healing crisis, the practitioner may experience better physical, mental and emotional health in addition to increased peace and clarity as they learn to move past doubts and struggles.

Lens 6: The transformation and healing of a Reiki practitioner is a path that may continue throughout the practitioner's lifetime, and it involves gradual shifts in mindset, beliefs and levels of awareness.

Lens 5: The ritual of self-healing is an important aspect of a practitioner's healing. However, the ritual of healing others may also be essential to one's experience of self-healing.

Changed Lenses

Lens 8: The attunement process and the practice of healing that follow may cause Reiki practitioners to experience expanded states of consciousness combined with the experience of spiritual connection.

Lens 9: The attunement process and the rituals of self-healing and healing others empower the practitioner to connect with their intuitive and healing abilities.

New Lenses

Lens 12: Usui Reiki may provide a framework to guide practitioners on their spiritual path. They may create their own path of meaning from a sense of autonomy and freedom within the system of Reiki.

Lens 13: Reiki practitioners' transformation and healing may arise through a combination of their attunement and the process of healing oneself and others.

Lens 14: An attunement to Reiki may be a catalyst for Reiki practitioners to change their lifestyle, which results in a more conscious and self-aware way of life. This often stems from a developed sense of responsibility regarding their attunement in guiding others or a greater sense of connection to others and the universe.

Lens 15: Practitioners experience greater self-empowerment as they perceive that they are responsible for their self-healing and transformation.

Lens 16: Reiki practitioners are often drawn to other forms of healing and spiritual practices in an attempt to work towards greater levels of healing and wholeness.

Discussion

The findings showed that Reiki practitioners underwent a journey of self-healing and transformation after their attunement into Reiki. The following themes emphasise how their transformation occurred on mental, emotional, physical and spiritual levels. For many, the process of healing and transformation included shifting beliefs, lifestyle changes and a deeper spiritual connection. Participants described the experiences of struggles and doubts. Some participants also experienced a crisis that included the emergence of previous trauma or wounds that felt necessary to integrate on their healing journey. For some, their self-healing practice also resulted in greater self-empowerment. These findings are discussed in more detail under the following themes.

Themes

Planting the Seed

The participants described their attunement into Reiki as the start of a transformative process. This theme aligns with changed Lens 8. I described it as a journey in which there was ‘no turning back’ and this theme appears to align with the given definition of transformation in which there is “a profound internal shift that results in long-lasting changes in the way you experience and relate to yourself, others and the world” (Schlitz et al., 2008, p. 19).

Opening the Door

Lens 12 is a new lens that emerged after Cycle 3. The participants described being able to adapt their practice and eventually integrate it with other spiritual or transformative practices. Moreover, this theme may relate to what Ruumet (2006) shared within her model of psycho-spiritual transformation, that when one reaches centre five, a process of “finding your own true voice” (p. 85) occurs. One begins to find sacred meaning behind their vocation and is drawn towards their own unique path.

Shifting Beliefs

The practitioners gradually shifted beliefs surrounding their ability to heal themselves and others. The participants’ belief in their ability to heal, as shared in Lens 9, appeared to be strengthened through their rituals of self-healing and healing others. The importance of ritual relates to Walsh (2007) and Kandel (1998) who have found that healing rituals can alter experience, expectation and encourage a connection with the sacred.

Lifestyle Changes

Lens 14 was a new lens that emerged after the research. Practitioners described a greater sense of responsibility in needing to guide others, because they felt more connected to others and the universe as a whole. For example, Juan shared that his decision to stop eating meat was an ethical decision he made based on an awareness of being connected to this ‘wholeness’.

Spiritual Connection

My research enabled me to expand upon Lens 8. For some of the practitioners I interviewed, their experiences appeared comparable to awakening experiences (Taylor, 2011). My findings are also similar to Cooperstein (1992, 1996) who suggested that healers may experience a sense of transcendence from a body-bound self to one of expansion. For instance, Jenny stated that she experienced, “expansion but like [a] wave of energy opening up and flowing” from the centre of her crown.

Healing Crisis

Lens 3 was left unchanged. Many Reiki practitioners experienced struggles along their healing journey, such as uncovering previous wounds or trauma. This may be related to what Grof (2000) defined as a spiritual emergency. This was demonstrated within Lucy’s story, who expressed the unfolding of childhood trauma and Juan, who stated an awareness of moving beyond the “masks” of his upbringing. However, as highlighted in the following theme, many of the participants learnt to move past doubts and struggles. They were often able to interpret moments of crisis as meaningful - so that positive transformation occurred.

Moving Past Doubts

After my research, I expanded upon Lens 4. As Gabriela described, the importance of surrendering and “letting go” was highlighted as a central theme for many of the participants, “small deaths along the journey”. This correlates strongly with Ruumet (2006) who proposed The Sophia Task, which involves a return from the sixth centre to all previous centres to establish a crucial, embodied union. Ruumet (2006) states that “we have to learn to die before we actually die physically, and to maintain a centred equanimity through all the losses and changes of life’s ‘little deaths’ as well as its blissful highs.”

Self-Empowerment

Lens 15 was a new lens that emerged through my research. The practitioners indicated that their attunement and practice of self-healing resulted in more self-empowerment. Their practice of healing enabled them to believe in their intuitive and healing abilities. Juan stated that Reiki taught him, “the responsibility (to heal) is on you...you are the one that can heal your body.”

Implications for Future Research

The research highlights the significance of connecting with and channelling life-force energy for one’s healing and transformation. Further research may explore how a connection with life-force energy, through other practices – which aren’t necessarily Reiki – may have a similar impact on one’s healing process. In addition, the practitioners’ ability to heal appeared to be associated with their beliefs in their ability. Therefore, researching the role of practitioners’ beliefs in their ability to heal may be an important area for future research. In addition, I propose that qualitative and quantitative research needs to be carried out to investigate how a Reiki practitioner’s journey of

transformation may correspond with, and be mapped out across transpersonal models of transformation.

Limitations

There are some limitations inherent to the methodology of intuitive inquiry - such as its subjectivity. However, intuitive inquiry involves the researcher being aware of their subjectivity and ability to honour the data, especially if it contradicts one's initial assumptions (Anderson, 2011). I have attempted to remain as transparent and truthful as possible, regarding the data and the research process. Within qualitative research there is also the possibility of bias within the self-reports of participants. For example, the participants knew that I am a Reiki Practitioner, and when taking part in the interview, they may have altered their experiences to fit in with what they perceived to be my expectations. The sample is not representative of the whole population and the results cannot be generalised to all Reiki practitioners.

Conclusion

The research has contributed to gaps in the academic literature by sharing the transformative journey and self-healing of Reiki practitioners situated outside of the nursing literature. My research proposes that Reiki Practitioners may develop a greater spiritual connection in which there is a movement toward the sacred. This connection may also result in greater self-empowerment and enable practitioners to interpret moments of crisis as meaningful, so that positive transformation may occur. Reiki is interpreted within this study as providing a supportive structure, that is flexible enough to enable one to engage in healing and transformation gradually. The ritual of self-healing was highlighted as being crucial in shifting the practitioners' beliefs in their self-healing abilities. The Reiki practitioners that I interviewed integrated Reiki with other spiritual practices and this sense of "spiritual flexibility" within the Reiki system appears to be supportive of the practitioner's journey.

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