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A century of Reiki practice: from one Holy Place to many versions of Sacred Space

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Introduction & Overview: This presentation and forthcoming paper is the result of both a multidisciplinary and international cooperation. Horowitz (Israel) has a background in East Asian Studies, Jonker (the Netherlands) in Religious Studies and Beeler (US/UK) in Medical Anthropology. In recent years, we have studied Reiki independently and discovered interesting threads running throughout all three studies. Here, we present one of these threads as it concerns holy places and sacred spaces in Reiki.

Western contemporary Reiki practice (henceforth referred to as Reiki) is recognized to be a Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM) modality. It is commonly known by the practice of laying hands on the body for holistic healing in which *reiki* energy (universal life energy) is believed to be the working agent. Reiki is a lineage based system that is passed on from teacher to student by means of a necessary energetic initiation ritual, which confers the ability to practice the system. The phrase 'Reiki' is not copyrighted or trademarked.

Sheet 1: In Japan, sacred spaces are often situated in natural landscapes, among which mountains bear special status. Mountains were regarded as the space whose nature did not belong to everyday, profane categories of experience. This brought Esoteric Buddhist practitioners to choose mountains as their practice grounds, granting mountains further special status as the place where Buddhahood is attained, and divine cosmic order is reflected. These ascetics set out on pilgrimages and austerities deep in the mountains, bearing back the sacred space's powers into everyday life, and were regarded with awe and reverence by the population.

It is in this context that Reiki originated in 1922 by its founder USUI Mikao following a period of fasting and meditation on Mount Kurama (Kyoto area). USUI's pilgrimage led to a moment of revelation, after which he started teaching his system. USUI suddenly passed in 1926, and yet the practice continued to flourish under the work of his students. In the 1930s, Reiki spread to the West and has become a global phenomenon since 1980.

Sheet 2: Today, in addition to being recognized as a CAM modality, Reiki is increasingly recognized by scholars as an instance of 'new spirituality'. In Western contemporary Reiki, self-treatment is the cornerstone of Reiki practice. This is based on the belief that in order to be a clear channel for *reiki* energy, one should be in some state of healing and purity. Furthermore, Reiki treatments are offered to the public in private Reiki practices as well as in the more public medical setting of hospitals.

Sheet 3: The gateway to Reiki practice, both in Japan and the West, is the energetic ritual called *reiju* (Japan) or initiation/attunement (West). According to Reiki narrative, USUI had received such an attunement spontaneously following his austerities on Mt. Kurama, and as a result received the ability to practice Reiki. Analysis of the Reiki initiation protocols indicates many distinct esoteric Buddhist fingerprints descended from the esoteric Buddhist initiation

(*kanjō*). Among these are the hallmark usage of *mudra*, *mantra* and *mandala* and the ritual identifying of the practitioner with the ritual's main deity.

The results of our studies, when combined, indicate that USUI created a very specific 'sacred space' that connects and combines one's inner sacred space with one's outer sacred space, or cosmos, into one. The notion of and access to this 'sacred space' is transmitted from Reiki teacher onto Reiki student through the *reiju*/initiation ritual. During the initiation, the initiate is ritually surrounded by the contents of USUI's enlightenment on Mt. Kurama. By the aforementioned esoteric Buddhist means, USUI's moment of enlightenment is recreated, and thus his attainment duplicated. This results in a phenomenon where 'sacred space' can be re-created and re-visited by every Reiki practitioner both in Japan and in the West, and it is in this 'sacred space' that Reiki practitioners operate and aim in order to achieve and experience healing. One should note that although every new student of Reiki learns about Mt. Kurama's high status in Reiki history, very few ever postulate pilgrimage to the actual place.

Sheet 4: By means of a questionnaire specific for this presentation, we collected ethnographic data from Israeli, American, British and Dutch Reiki teachers about this sacred space as well as holy place. The results indicate that practitioners have much more of an affinity with sacred space than with holy place. In most cases, one's own Reiki room, set up for the explicit purpose of conducting Reiki (like a meditation room), is mentioned as a holy place where one can enter at will. But much more words are given to the desire for and experience of entering a sacred space and, therefore, this presentation and paper focusses on sacred space in Reiki practice.

The answers given by respondents indicate that practitioners *get* to their sacred space through an altered state of consciousness by i.e. meditation or practicing Reiki. Reiki practitioners can access this sacred space without other persons needed, nor are artefacts needed or generally used.

What they *do* there has almost always something to do with divine or transcendent reality. People testify that when in this space activities and experiences consist of aligning, attuning and interacting with transcendence.

In half of the cases, they state that there *is* something else present besides themselves. In some cases, it is an impersonal other while in other cases they encounter spirits of deceased people such as relatives. Also, quite often people feel the presence of the spirit of USUI or other preceding teachers – from USUI to the present – who have passed.

In or through this sacred space they *feel* connected to transcendent realms where sacredness is experienced.

Sheet Conclusions: In contemporary, Western Reiki, practitioners experience and in more instances, mention the notion of 'sacred space' rather than 'holy place'. Access to this realm is reported as a subjective and personal endeavor that is made possible through the very specific energetic *reiju*/initiation ritual and consequent experience of Reiki. Here, one's personal inner-cosmos gets connected to one's universal macro-cosmos, thus re-creating 'sacred space' creating an instance where Reiki takes place. An interesting observation is that

although the founder of the ritual, thus the ritual itself as well as the created sacred space, are rooted in Japanese esoteric Buddhism and Shintō, every practitioner, regardless of origin or cultural derivation, can use this ritual and Reiki practice to re-create and re-access this sacred space at will. This is achieved regardless of whether practitioners have a notion of the historical Japanese context. All in all, this serves as an example of how a (in this case: Japanese) religious notion can convert into a (in this case: Western) secular spiritual notion.