

Defining Energy Medicine

Susan Drouilhet, M.S., L.M.T.



Susan Drouilhet has been studying the interface of consciousness and matter for over two decades. She is a Life Coach and a Massage Therapist. She also holds a Masters of Science degree in Energy Medicine (1999, Greenwich University) for which her mentor was C. Norman Shealy, M.D., Ph.D. She lives in the Ozark Mountains of Arkansas.

Energy Medicine. What is it? Formulating a description that is both articulate and precise yet adequately comprehensive may be as challenging as performing definitive research in this newly emerging field: it is at the least ambitious to quantify and qualify what at this point in our technological and philosophical development appears to be both non-quantifiable and non-qualifiable.

Without a firm foundation in scientific methodology, energy medicine lacks reliability and replicability, and consequently its credibility, broad application, and perhaps effectiveness may be hampered. Without a clear philosophy and understanding of purpose, energy medicine may overflow a practitioner's black bag with techniques as varied as laying-on-of-hands and the application of gigahertz frequencies. While impressive, these methods minus wisdom may become solely means to an end, magic energy bullets effectuating cures through superconscious superconductors, be they human or machine. The integration of science and spirit within a cohesive and holistic framework of healing is therefore not only optimal but necessary to establish the field of energy medicine as both an effective medical modality facilitating the palliation and cure of bodily symptoms as well as a potent force and authentic resource for supporting more comprehensive healings and transformation. According to the International Society for the Study of Subtle Energy and Energy Medicine (ISSSEEM):

Energy Medicine includes all energetic and informational interactions resulting from self-regulation or brought about through other energy linkages to mind and body. In addition to various therapeutic energies which we may use, there are also energy pulses from the environment which influence humans and animals in a variety of ways. For instance, low-level changes in magnetic, electric, electromagnetic, acoustic, and gravitational fields often have profound effects on both biology and psychology. In addition to energies originating in the environment, it has been documented that humans are capable of generating and controlling subtle, not-yet-measurable energies that seem to influence both physiological and physical mechanisms.¹

Presumably, "self-regulation" may include modalities such as biofeedback, various meditation practices, hypnosis, visualization, guided imagery, the relaxation response, Tai Chi, Qigong, yoga and other body awareness techniques; "other energy linkages to mind and body" may occur through practices such as acupuncture, homeopathy, bioelectromagnetics, various forms of bodywork, psychotherapy, prayer, laying-on-of-hands, remote diagnosis and distance healing.

Energy medicine involves much more than alternative or complementary therapeutics, however. "Energetic and informational interactions" occur continuously throughout our universe, and in the realm of healing and medicine, regardless of the therapeutic tool in use. Pharmaceuticals and surgery may have as hefty an "energetic"—and in the emerging language of a sub-field of mind-body medicine, psychoneuroimmunological²—component as do biofeedback and hypnosis. More research is needed to detect the force or forces which effectuate the cure, and to distinguish these forces from modality. (For instance, it may be that the faith in the healer's expertise and the quality of relationship between healer and heelee potentiate prescriptions and speed recuperations as much as or more than the actual remedies themselves).

Physician and author Larry Dossey delineates more carefully what others have lumped together under the energy medicine umbrella. Dossey divides medicine into three eras. Era I involves mechanical, material, or physical medicine, including almost all forms of modern medicine (drugs, surgery, irradiation, etc.) and therapies such as acupuncture, homeopathy, and herbs, where the concern is the effect of "things" upon the body, causation operating according to the laws and principles of classical (Newtonian) physics. Era II encompasses mind-body medicine, focusing on therapies which examine the effects of consciousness or mind upon the body within an individual; these approaches include hypnosis, biofeedback, relaxation techniques, imagery, counseling, and the discipline of psychoneuroimmunology. Mind has causal power and therefore challenges the classical matter-energy concepts associated with Era I. With Era III medicine, defined as nonlocal or transpersonal medicine, the emphasis is on the effects of consciousness both within and between persons. Intercessory prayer, diagnosis and healing at a distance, all telesomatic³ events, and non-contact body therapies such as therapeutic touch are examples of Era

III approaches. With the recognition of nonlocality, wherein mind and consciousness are not limited to a particular body but extend beyond it, Era III medicine challenges the classically conceived relationships between both space and time and matter and energy.⁴(p.39-44)

How are subtle energies and consciousness involved?

Although Dossey's classification of the medicine of Eras I, II and III progresses from the apparently grosser physical world to the more subtle and refined etheric realms of mind and consciousness, and one might therefore be tempted with a cursory glance through his system to assume that Era III is the one encompassing "energy" medicine, on closer inspection one sees that each of Dossey's eras include what according to the ISSSEEM definition can be categorized as energy medicine. Certainly many would include both acupuncture and homeopathy (which in Dossey's model are components of the physicalist medicine of Era I) in the realm of medical therapies influencing the body through the manipulation of subtle energies. While stimulated by the insertion of steel needles, "chi"—the Chinese word for energy—and the meridians along which it travels have yet to be definitively articulated as material phenomena, though the therapeutic effects of acupuncture have been and continue to be documented. Similarly, the potentized remedies of homeopathy, while originally produced from a visible sample of a particular substance, are apparently so dilute as to contain no detectable amount of the original physic yet have been shown to effect a physical organism.

Are these examples of one *material* thing operating on another? How are subtle energies and consciousness involved? Era II medicine includes all the psychoneuroimmunological therapies currently the focus of discussion and research in energy medicine circles: biofeedback, hypnosis, relaxation, psychotherapy, etc. Perhaps with each modality, regardless of its classification as physical, mind-body, or nonlocal medicine, the pertinent questions to ask are whether this therapy is an example of mind or consciousness influencing matter, matter motivating consciousness, or whether this distinction can accurately or ultimately be made at all. Obviously there are effects. But just what are the operative factors in these processes?

Despite unanswered queries, Dossey's classification system helps to refine our understanding of the degrees and differences of energy medicine therapies, even within the field itself. Additionally, with his model Dossey depicts a fuller picture of true *psycho*-somatic (*psycho*—here indicating not only modern usage denoting mind or emotions, but also the original Greek *psukho*— meaning "soul") unity.

The groundbreaking collaborative work of neurosurgeon and researcher C. Norman Shealy and medical intuitive Caroline Myss regarding the impact of emotional, psychological and spiritual attitudes on physical health assumes a marriage of the scientific and philosophical aspects of energy medicine. While their theories are yet to be proven in the laboratory, Shealy and Myss present a credible and potentially viable model for achieving an integrated conception of energy medicine. The future of energy medicine may lie in the creation and implementation of programs that foster both the applicability and verifiability of hypotheses such as theirs within the clinical setting.

Unfortunately, the integral perspectives of Shealy, Myss, and Dossey are not the majority view, and few scientists seem willing to make such bold statements regarding the existence of unseen realities or their effects upon the manifested world. And while there are a host of other internationally known researchers and practitioners performing innovative work in energy medicine, some who have written extensively on their own theories and methodologies, few have taken the time to delineate an overarching model for the field. According to science writers Daniel Goleman and Joel Gurin, "[P]hysicians may be hesitant to use mind/body approaches for a fundamental reason: The new field of mind/body medicine [a subset of energy medicine] is still in search of a comprehensive, unifying theory."⁵ Why is it apparently so difficult or even risky for the scientific community, upon whose expertise the majority of the Western world relies to describe the workings of the world, to construct a definition integrating the science and philosophy of energy medicine? No doubt the hesitancy harks back to the Cartesian split of the soul, mind and emotions from the body; after a few hundred years of "successfully" operating under a dualistic worldview which separates the scientific realm and the mechanics of physiology from the intricacies of the psyche and the domain of the philosophers and clergy, the scientific community,

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with its devotion to classical training and faith in the scientific process, may feel it has good reasons as well as historical justification to warrant its reticence to once again “muddy” scientific waters with intangibility. Laws can’t be written based on anecdotes, nor entire paradigms shifted because of a few decades of challenging research. Thus it may take more than a few drops of the oil of modern psychoneuroimmunological research and findings to induce the slow but steady revolution of the reluctant wheel of body-mind-spirit re-integration. In the meantime, or for those of us who have less patience for the politics of grant approvals and journal publishing, there are other avenues to explore in our pursuit of a comprehensive definition for energy medicine.

To begin, within the variegated field of energy medicine, there are several principles shared by the multifarious healing systems. These include theories that: body, mind (and some add, soul or spirit) are inextricably interconnected; subtle healing energies exist which, although their frequencies and origins are as yet unexplained, may nevertheless be utilized to eradicate degeneration and disease and re-balance an organism; healing effects can be transmitted either locally or non-locally; healing necessitates both the willingness to change on the part of the patient as well as his or her active participation in the process; health is more than physiological functioning; healing is a process distinct though not necessarily divorced from curing; and spiritual health is of equal if not greater importance than physical health in the overall human scheme. Proponents of energy medicine, with their generally holistic orientation, often assume the above principles as “ground rules,” despite the fact that science is only beginning to understand subtle energy fields and forces and has yet to definitively “prove” the existence of spirit or any unity of the body-mind-spirit triad.

Elucidation of a few of these concepts may help to concretize our philosophical foundation for energy medicine. First is the principle that healing is a process distinct though not necessarily divorced from curing. The differences between these two processes are now a current topic in energy medicine circles, discussed in the literature as well as in conferences. According to nursing professor and researcher Janet Quinn, curing is about eliminating symptoms or signs of disease. Healing is to be or become whole. Curing follows a predictable path, while healing is creative and unpredictable in both process and outcome. Curing and healing may occur independently of one another. Curing may or may not be possible; healing is always possible, and death, in some traditions, is the ultimate healing (whereas in our medical culture, death is often looked at as the ultimate failure). In fact the

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inability to cure is often the gateway to healing.⁶ Were energy medicine to adopt the predominant attitudes of conventional medicine by associating cures with success and symptomatic chronicity or death with defeat, then the emerging field would be setting itself up for certain failure—at this point, regardless of the types of medicine imbibed, it appears that every body eventually dies—by merely substituting new tools for old ones without significantly contributing to the expansion of human consciousness beyond the dichotomous matter-spirit split. Curing is concerned with eliminating symptoms from the body; the focus in healing is upon internal attitudinal shifts and psychospiritual awakening, transformations which may or may not (hence the research of energy medicine) have profound effects upon the physiology of the transformed.

The principle that spiritual health is of equal if not greater importance than physical health likewise jostles our attention from an exclusive focus on bodily well-being towards a more encompassing, holistic perspective. To support this view, various healing modalities are seen as tools to maximize physical, emotional, and mental health, not as ends in and of themselves, but rather as means to facilitate service to a greater purpose. In the words of Rachel Naomi Remen, cofounder and medical director of the Commonweal Cancer Help Program in Bolinas, California,

“... Health is not an end. Health is a means. Health enables us to serve purpose in life, but health in and of itself is not the purpose in life. One can serve purpose with impaired health. One might even regain health through serving purpose.”⁷ The search for this purpose, often the result of an existential crisis precipitated by the onset of illness or calamity, eventually leads beyond the preliminary focus on ill health and its origins to a more comprehensive consideration of how personal vision and life purpose interweave with and affect one’s overall well-being.

At the individual level, then, the search for meaning and purpose in energy medicine follows two paths. First, there is the attempt at uncovering the root of illness and its corresponding import. This exploration leads into the second, more expanded inquiry: the reevaluation of life’s meaning and one’s own position and significance in the cosmos. These may seem rather heady

contemplations to include as part of a medical protocol, but if health and life mean more than the maintenance of systolic and diastolic synchronicity, then those in pursuit of healing and wholeness might vivisection the metaphysical heart of being and perhaps there discover a balm in the source of pulsation.

Of the numerous theories proffering explanations for the derivation of disease and dysfunction, many are psychophysiological hypotheses claiming that psychological patterns and spiritual attitudes lay the energetic groundwork which precedes manifestation in the material realm.⁸ Postulations range from the fairly elaborate chakra delineation system of consciousness researcher Caroline Myss to the quick-and-easy affirmations of metaphysical counselor Louise Hay. In these frameworks, ill health signals a not necessarily conscious refusal to change, when “healing and change are one and the same thing.”^{9(p.47)} For,

‘Changelessness is death.’ The healing journey is surrender to the process of change. Sometimes the things that go wrong in our lives, including physical illness, may happen when we have refused change at the point it was most called for: when we continue to perform a killing job, ignore the pain of a toxic relationship, perpetuate a self-harming habit; when we refuse to stop what we’re doing even when we do not feel well doing it; when we neglect to ask ourselves, “What’s the matter?” or turn a sympathetic ear to the reply.^{10(p.76)}

Hearing the cues and responding to them, however, may not be as simple as memorizing and reciting positive visualizations three times a day. Comprehending our “innate intelligence”¹¹ and its bio-psycho-spiritual suggestions is neither easy nor routine, especially when confronted with a malfunctioning physiology. Acknowledging that “Divine intelligence works in ways that we cannot understand”^{9(p.177)} upsets our mentally constructed human logic. We want to believe that illness has a recognizable beginning, middle, and end and that with a diet adjustment here or a few Rolfing sessions there, all will be restored. Regarding illness as spiritual opportunity, a chance to heal regardless of material outcome, or even the answer to a prayer, may require an existential frame-shift that seems a large pill to swallow.

According to psychologist James Hillman, “. . . it is hard to get it through our hard heads that there can be messages from elsewhere more important to the conduct of our lives than what comes through Centel and Internet, meanings that don’t slide in fast, free, and easy, but are encoded particularly in the painful pathologized events that perhaps are the only ways the gods can wake us up.”¹² Unless the pain is intolerable, it’s easier to slumber, and many hope to bypass the discipline and perseverance necessary for genuine spiritual growth and understanding. Often it is not until hammered with a six-month prognosis that we reluctantly realize, “Disease and healing are not just physiological processes. They are spiritual detonations.”^{10(p.48)} This reluctance is natural; most of us would rather do anything but witness the exploding of our lives.

Nevertheless, if healing, as shamans have traditionally maintained, is the business of soul-retrieval and in the search for the origins of illness, “we are led directly to the core of a person’s soul,”¹³ then energy medicine, as facilitator of more-than-molecular phase change, must incorporate a sense of these psychospiritual foundations of health into its definition to best serve the population which seeks its help. Perhaps because of their inherent ability to expose human ignorance and hubris, sickness and catastrophe, although not the consciously chosen methods, still offer excellent

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opportunities to heal not only bodies but minds and souls as well. It is important not to glamorize these sometimes gruesome struggles for recovery, however. In the words of cancer war veteran Marc Ian Barasch: “I do not wish to romanticize illness as some True Path to Enlightenment. There are other ways to unearth our inner treasure than to excavate it from the flesh with a backhoe.”^{10(p.16)}

It is also important to recognize in this search for meaning and purpose the confusion and potential harm that results from the “misdiagnosis” and misappropriation of meaning. Unfortunately, in the quest to attach a philosophy to the science, many energy medicine devotees have unwittingly substituted realistic and reasonable definitions with hope-full dogma. For these individuals, it is almost as if the conceptions of energy medicine and the associated New Age ideas (though many serious investigators deplore the association) have become a new religion, one whose purpose is to provide some sense of order and control in a world increasingly confusing and chaotic. These explorations can take the seekers on thrilling journeys chasing the Grail of personal karma through the peaks and valleys of existence, yet will usually return the travelers to the monotony of base camp, frequently with the same symptoms. While it may eventually be proven that attitudes such as forgiveness affect

liver enzymes or that honesty mediates blood pressure, currently so many complexities and compounding factors exist in standard research (how does one separate out influences one has no instrumentation to detect?) that it would be premature to definitively delineate psychospiritual causation as readily as one would trace the journey of an ingested poison through the anatomical network. The danger with these types of explanations which reduce complex, multi-modal events to linear cause and effect lies in the potential for oversimplification and justification of very complicated disease processes which may have something or nothing at all to do with the rationalizations posited to describe them.

Obviously, finding (or creating) meaning can be a tricky venture. Without thoughtful examination of the meanings we construct, at the least we may divert valuable time and energy from more essential healing needs; we also run the risk of heaping excessive responsibility and perhaps guilt for a history-gone-awry onto an already weakened individual who in the moment of crisis needs nothing more than to muster up strength and courage to face the battle at hand.

Apparently the debate around indiscriminately associating present dysfunction with past karma is not new. One of the more convincing reality checks countering the New Age “create-your-own” doctrine comes from Larry Dossey. To dislodge the blinders of excessively anthropomorphic psychologizing, Dossey takes his argument back to the Bible.

‘Master, who did sin, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind?’ This question comes in a variety of “New Age” contexts today. Who is at fault? Why did I “choose” this illness? For what current or previous shortcomings am I suffering? Who’s to blame? Jesus’ answer is illuminating, and should be emblazoned in every New Age book dealing with consciousness and healing: “*Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents: but that the works of God should be made manifest in him*” (John 9:1-3, King James Version [KJV], emphasis added). How could Jesus’ message be clearer? This is a striking example of a profound physical problem in the total *absence* of spiritual imperfection. No one fell short, nobody was being punished for sin, nobody chose to be sick. Jesus implies also that there may be a higher purpose to the illness that we simply cannot grasp because we do not know the ways of the Absolute. This means that the meaning of a particular disease may be *cosmic*—that is, it may be opaque and hidden to us mortals, known only to the Divine. On balance, this case warns against equating spiritual and physical health, and cautions us against attributing shallow, superficial meaning to illness.^{4(p.14-15)}

How does one then access a sense of purpose and meaning and apply that knowledge to energy medicine? We have learned that the stories we create and the meanings we give to and glean from our life circumstances, while sustaining on some level, can also sap tremendous amounts of life energy, energy needed in the present moment to heal the body and soothe the psyche. This is not to say that our histories are unimportant. The paths we have trod are laden with clues, lifestyle’s yellow flags which, were we to heed them, might save us a few penalties and time-outs on the bench. But one does not prevail in the second half by dwelling on the fumbles and scores of the first. If our histories are our purpose, then our Purpose may be history. In other words, psychic mining in the pluperfect will not unearth gems found more readily in the present.

If it is possible, as Dr. Remen suggests, that “one might regain health through serving purpose,”⁷ and this sense of purpose and the power to fulfill it manifest less from dredging our pasts than from being situated in the current moment, then to be most effective, energy medicine must focus its philosophies and methodologies in the present tense. While the creation of a system that fosters the development of awareness and present-time attention is not new, these attributes being the goal (and result) of many ancient meditative disciplines, combining these states of mindful presence and self-awareness with spiritual vision and life purpose and applying the resulting amalgam to the worlds of healing and medicine may be revolutionary. Portions of this work are already being done in mind-body clinics around the country; as stress accounts for an estimated 60-90% of all complaints brought to doctors’ offices,¹⁴ any system— whether the element of focus is a blip from a biofeedback monitor or the silent repetition of a sacred verse—that teaches its practitioners and patients to achieve a balanced and calm mind-body state would surely enhance overall well-being. In addition, when sufficiently cultivated and concentrated in either healer or healee, these resulting states of presence may not only produce peace of mind but possibly repair and regenerate cellular structure as well. The initial research suggests this may be true.

So energy medicine is a science, and energy medicine is a philosophy. As a science, its purpose is to heal; as a philosophy, it teaches that to heal, one must know purpose. An integral definition for this emerging field demands a breadth of scope and depth of understanding that befits a Renaissance mind. Yet this is only appropriate for a discipline which purports to champion the complex, multifaceted human organism. If we can put aside the arrogance of the traditional scientific mindset, we might begin to recognize that “the true . . . reality of our condition is invisible to us.”¹⁵ As a science in service to the healing of humanity, energy medicine must recognize and utilize all therapeutic possibilities, both seen and unseen, to support its mission. Then truly will it fulfill its integral definition.

I propose the following definition for energy medicine: Energy medicine is the recognition and utilization of subtle energies and energy fields to facilitate therapeutic processes. As such, it is not merely a prescription promoting certain “alternative” modalities of treatment nor a proscription against other, more conventional practices, but rather a field of medical research and healing practices which acknowledges the energetic “communication” inherent in all interactions and supports the enhancement of this exchange to maximally benefit the course of healing. Energy medicine includes the awareness of the holistic composition of an organism and the inextricable interplay of its constituent physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual aspects. Its therapeutic tools are employed not so that the patient or practitioner comes to rely upon their application for the necessary adjustments to the bio-psycho-spiritual organism, but as temporary adjuncts in the healing process to facilitate the reawakening and re-empowerment of the individual. In addition, while energy medicine as an emerging field in the health sciences continues to explore with scientific rigor the existence and effects of subtle energies and their therapeutic potencies, it does so while maintaining an attitude of openness and appreciation toward the unnameable, the numinous, and the mystery of existence.

Science, philosophy and spirituality can coexist. Each informs the other. The field of energy medicine offers an unparalleled opportunity to integrate these disciplines into a powerful unalloyed force for healing. In the words of Claude Bernard, the founder of modern physiology, “I have the conviction that when Physiology will be far enough advanced, the poet, the philosopher, and the physiologist will all understand each other.”¹⁶ To reach this stage, the poet must appreciate the precision and art of the scientific endeavor, while the scientist must acknowledge that mystery, faith, and the quality of unknowing do not block and may even unlock the secrets of the universe. For who knows? It may be that one day we will finally realize what the sages have been telling us all along: that Spirit informs Matter, and that the most elusive and invisible of forces, ethereal attributes such as compassion, forgiveness and love, are really the most potent healing energies of all.

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Susan Drouilhet may be contacted by writing to her at: 236 FS 5142 Rd., Oark, AR 72852 • Email: suedrou@juno.com

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2. *Psychoneuroimmunology* is a term coined by experimental psychologist Robert Ader to depict the science of how the mind and emotions (*psycho*), the brain and central nervous system (*neuro*), and the immune system (*immunology*) all interface and influence one another. For more information on psychoneuroimmunological research, please see Ader's *Psychoneuroimmunology* (Academic Press, New York, NY, 1981).
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4. Larry Dossey, *Healing Words: The Power of Prayer and the Practice of Medicine* (HarperCollins, New York, NY, 1993), pp. 39-44, 14-15.
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7. Quoted in Kenneth Pelletier, *Sound Mind, Sound Body: A New Model for Lifelong Health* (Simon and Schuster, New York, NY, 1994), p. 112.
8. The perspective that subtle energy precedes form, while popularized in the current energy medicine literature, has roots running through Theosophical studies of the twentieth century back to core teachings of many of the great religious traditions of the world (e.g., the concept of the originating *Logos* in the Judeo-Christian tradition and *Aum* in the Hindu Upanishadic tradition). For related studies please see A. E. Powell's works (based on the teachings of C. W. Leadbeater and Annie Besant) *The Etheric Double and Allied Phenomena*, *The Astral Body and Other Astral Phenomena*, *The Mental Body*, and *The Causal Body and the Ego*, published by the Theosophical Publishing House, London, England and Wheaton, IL.
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Editorial and Business Offices:
11005 Ralston Road, Suite 100D
Arvada, CO 80004

Telephone: (303) 425-4625
Business FAX: (303) 425-4685
Email: issseem@compuserve.com
Website: www.issseem.org