

Life Medicine and ‘Energy Medicine’

“Science is the new religion.”

Martin Heidegger

What might be called ‘energeticism’ has long become the new ‘materialism’ – an insight that nicely equates with Einstein’s famous mathematical equation of energy and matter. Hence, in almost all ‘alternative’ or ‘New Age’ forms of healing that are offered in place of biological medicine, one word is religiously worshipped above all. This is the scientific-sounding word ‘energy’ – as used in the terms ‘energy medicine’ and ‘energy body’. Through the use of the term energy, deference is made to a central term in the “new religion” of modern science – yet without any attempt to define or question what exactly is meant by this term – what ‘energy’ as such essentially is.

Behind this lack of basic questioning lies ignorance of both the linguistic and historic roots of the word ‘energy’ – for example the fact that the term ‘energy’ was first promoted in the 19th century by a group of well-known scientists called ‘Energetists’ who wanted to place the term at the very top of the ladder of physical-scientific concepts.

“... the ‘Energeticist Movement’ associated with Wilhelm Ostwald around the turn of the 19th century advocated a World Government based on the use of ‘energy’ as the universal, unifying concept not only for all of physical science, but also for economics, psychology, sociology and the arts ... Not accidentally, the Kelvin-Helmholtz doctrine of ‘energy’ became a key feature of Anglo-American geopolitics, from the British launching of Middle East ‘oil politics’ at the beginning of the 20th century ... to a new Middle East war.” from *The Difference between Dynamis and Energia* by Jonathan Tennenbaum

The fact remains however that the modern scientific concept of ‘energy’ bears little relation either to its roots in the Greek language or to the vocabulary of any ancient ‘spiritual’ or ‘healing’ tradition whatsoever, Eastern or Western.

For if we look at the original meaning of those Greek words from which the term ‘energy’ is derived, it makes no sense to speak, for example of ‘energy imbalances’, or of working in any way ‘on’ or with our own or someone else’s ‘energy’. That is because one of the most basic root meanings of the Greek word *energeia* is purely and simply ‘to be engaged in work’ or ‘to be engaged in a work’ and consequently also ‘to actualise something’. So to speak of working ‘with’ or ‘on’ energy is tautological – meaning nothing more, in Greek terms, than ‘working’ with or on a ‘work’ one is engaged in.

Given its Western and Greek roots, the term ‘energy’ is least of all appropriate in translating Oriental terms such as Chi/Qi or Ki that are so central to Chinese and Japanese forms of healing such as Chi Gong or Reiki. To speak of Chi/Qi or Ki as some sort of ‘energy’ flowing through the body (for example through so-called ‘meridian’ lines) also makes no linguistic sense, since the Oriental ideograms for words such as Chi/Qi and Ki, do not refer to any form or flow of ‘energy’ but rather, like the Sanskrit prana or the Greek psyche – to breath (‘the breath of life’). What in Oriental or Orientally-derived healing traditions is translated as ‘energy’ can instead best be understood instead as essentially a breath or air-like flow of awareness – for example to a particular point or points in the body where pressure is applied or acupuncture needles are inserted.

Today however, no one even thinks of questioning the use of the now taken-for-granted and sacrosanct term ‘energy’, the many varieties of ‘energy medicine’ in which it has become so central, or the way in which it is used to mistranslate terms derived from ancient healing traditions. In this way however, the misuse and overuse of the modern term ‘energy’ not only blocks all fresh exploration of the root meanings of terms derived from these traditions, but also prevents a deeper exploration of the root experiences from which they first arose. So even today’s highly trained and qualified practitioners or ‘Masters’ of these traditions do not think of asking themselves from what sort of direct, inwardly felt experiences of the human body such traditions arose in the first place, i.e. before they were systematised into unquestioned bodies of knowledge and structured into fixed or ritualised healing procedures and practices. They do not ask themselves, for example, how and in what manner Indian and Chinese sages first came to subjectively and inwardly sense what later came to be called ‘nadis’, ‘meridians’ or ‘acupuncture points’? Nor do they recognise the vast historic, linguistic, experiential and cultural gulf that separates the intellectual abstraction of different

'energies' from traditional Greek, Galenic and Islamic medicine : with its emphasis on four essential fluids or 'humors' (yellow and black bile, blood and phlegm), four fundamental qualities (wet, dry, warm and cold) and four basic moods or 'temperaments' – choleric, melancholic, sanguine and phlegmatic – all of which were inwardly felt as central in shaping human bodily self-experience.

"It is the great error of Western philosophers that they always regard the human body intellectually, from the outside, as though it were not indissolubly a part of the active self."

Sato Tsuji

The Western tendency to confuse our subjective and inwardly felt body with intellectual concepts of an objective, quasi-physical body persists through the modern concepts of an 'energy body'. As a result, the use of terms like 'energy medicine' continues to substitute for a new type of 'phenomenological' research – inner feeling research – into the real experiential roots and essence of many traditional forms of healing and their languages. Instead the term 'energy' is used to offer a seemingly authoritative, scientific-sounding and 'objective' account of what is essentially an inner, subjective body – our 'lived body' or 'body of feeling awareness'. The result is that no progress is made towards a radical rethinking of traditional healing systems and practices; 'radical' because it truly returns to the roots of those traditions – bodily, experiential, historical and linguistic.

So it is that what today is misleadingly called 'Energy Medicine' has become the pseudo-scientific New Age substitute for 'Existential Medicine' or 'Life Medicine'. Yet only the latter can be said to be truly 'holistic' and also in resonance with the different root meanings of the term 'energy'. That is because Life Medicine is based on the recognition that 'to heal' means to address the actually experienced life of the human being as a whole – and the way it does or does not work to actualise and fulfil the latent capacities or potentials of the individual – work or action which effectively actualises specific potentials or capacities being the essential meaning of the Greek verb *energein*. 'Life Medicine' therefore, most certainly does not constitute yet another of the countless forms of 'Energy Medicine' currently promoted on the ever-expanding marketplace of traditional or New Age medical practices. Similarly, a 'Life Doctor' is not simply some sort of practitioner of alternative medicine who has been indoctrinated through training in an alternative body of medical 'knowledge' but rather someone with a carefully cultivated capacity to directly sense and resonate with the lived body and life of the patient as a whole – and in this way come to understand the inner connections between their illness and their life.

As for those who claim that evidence for an 'energy body' exists by virtue of the ability of some people to perceive a colourful 'aura' around the 'physical body' – or even to photograph it through exotic equipment – this only goes to show their ignorance of the true nature of the inwardly felt or lived body as what I call a 'body of feeling awareness'. For those who only see what they think of as a multi-coloured 'energetic' aura show only their inability to directly sense and feel the many and varied colourations of awareness or 'mood colours' that make up our lived body – even though these can be sensed by any human being and not just by trained 'clairvoyants' or practitioners of 'colour healing'. And for a practitioner of 'colour healing' to have to rely on colour charts that 'explain' how seeing a particular colour such as red in someone's 'aura' might, for example, 'mean' that this person has 'anger' in them, only goes to show how little capacity that practitioner has to directly sense that anger – rather than interpreting it "intellectually" and "from the outside" as some type of negative 'energy'.

All well and good, some might say, but surely the term 'energy' has long since passed, not just into New Age language but into ordinary, everyday language too – and that in a way which we all understand from experience – as when we speak of 'lacking energy' or feeling 'energetic'. That precisely is the danger however – namely that as soon as a word such as 'energy' passes into common everyday usage, we assume there is some 'thing' it refers to, and do not stop to ask ourselves what exactly it is we understand by the word or what sort of experience it is that we use it to name.

If we would ask ourselves these questions however, we would find ourselves coming closer to the root Greek meaning of the word 'energy' – and cease to think of it as any sort of 'thing' at all. After all, what is a state of having more or less 'energy' than an awareness of a greater or lesser potential (Greek *dynamis*) to engage in 'action' or 'work' (*ergon*), in particular action or work of a sort which can bring something to actualisation (*energein*)?

What we call 'energy' then, is itself and essentially a dimension of awareness – a feeling awareness of a greater or lesser potentiality to be engaged in action or work (*energeia*) and not an awareness of any objective 'thing' or entity, scientific or spiritual.

Illness is often accompanied by a state of what we call fatigue or 'low energy', i.e. the feeling awareness of a reduced potentiality for action and work. This state may prompt or force us to suspend some or all action or work or bring to a halt a period of overactivity or overwork – instead bringing us to rest for a shorter or longer time in awareness as such – a meditative awareness from which in turn new and different potentialities for action may germinate within us. By limiting our potentiality for action or work therefore, 'low' energy may actually be doing us good – not only forcing us to rest but in this way giving ourselves time to meditate on our lives – something more healing than any form of treatment or 'energy medicine' designed simply and purely to quickly 'boost' or 'restore' our energy – our capacity for action – but without any healing process or insights having occurred or arisen in our awareness.

Rather than explaining it as something to do with 'energies' in either a modern-scientific or New Age sense, Life Medicine helps us to understand illness itself as 'energy' – but in the essential and root sense of this word: namely as a feeling awareness, experienced through a sense of 'dis-ease', of a potentiality for change that is seeking self-actualisation (energein) whether through clinical disease or through a new relation to action and work (ergon).

Etymological note 2

– on the Greek roots of the term 'energy'

What unites all the following Greek roots of the word 'energy' are meanings to do with action or work, potentialities for action and the actualisation of potentials through work or action.

The Greek ergon was used to refer to any type of work.

Energein meant action or work which results in actual or effective result.

Energeia refers to a state of 'being-in-action' or 'being engaged in work'. So again, to speak of working 'on' or 'with' a person's 'energy' amounts to saying you are acting or working on action or work. Aristotle also used the term energēia to refer to specific states of consciousness or qualities of awareness associated with 'being in action' or 'being engaged in effective work' – happiness for example. However he denied the possibility of self-actualising potentiality and reduced the meaning of energēia to 'actuality'.

The words energies/energos meant 'powerful' and were used to describe powerful siege weapons for example.

Energema refers to activity which is an expression or embodiment of a potential, 'capacity' or 'capability'. It also means simply a working 'operation' or 'procedure' such as those carried out in surgery – or acupuncture – so again it makes no sense of that procedure working with or 'on' 'energy'.

Energeitai refers in the New Testament to the working of divine or supernatural powers (energemata) through human action (New Testament).

Energoumene refers to action (such as prayer) set in operation and empowered by the divine (New Testament).

Energesen to things worked or 'wrought' by God (Old Testament).

Peter Wilberg

<https://existentialmedicine.wordpress.com/life-medicine-and-energy-medicine/>