

# Energy

David A. Palmer

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Concepts of vital or cosmic energy can be found in many cultures and religious traditions, including *pneuma* or *spirit* in the Graeco-Roman world, *prana* in India, and *qi* in China. These concepts are all etymologically derived from native terms for “breath”, and imply a connection between the rhythms of breathing and the mystery of life. In the Book of Genesis, God breathes the breath of life into clay to make Adam as a living soul; the Hebrew Bible also describes death as the breath’s return to God. In stoic philosophy, *pneuma* is the soul of God (Zeus) and the vehicle through which the divine logos organizes inert matter. *Pneuma* is thus the structuring force of the universe, which, in differentiated expressions, accounts for the variation among beings: the *pneuma* of state or tension, which gives cohesion to inanimate objects; the vegetative *pneuma*, which gives growth and life; the animal *pneuma*, which endows animals with powers of perception and reproduction; and the rational *pneuma*, which gives humans the power of judgement. In Vedantic philosophy, *prana* is the life-force and creative power of the universe. It which exists primordially as an unmanifest, transcendental energy of pure consciousness, from which emanates a manifest force of creation through which the entire universe comes into being. In Chinese philosophy, *qi* is typically described as the pervasive life-force that circulates throughout the universe and all beings. Daoist and Neo-Confucian thought postulate the emanation of formless *qi* from the Dao, which then differentiates between pure, ethereal yang *qi*, which rises to form heaven, and heavy, turbid yin *qi*, which descends to form the earth. *Qi* continues to circulate between yin and yang, heaven and earth, generating the five phases or elements (wood, fire, earth, metal, and water), and the myriad beings.

These concepts are associated with the vitalistic healing systems of Galenic, Ayurvedic and Chinese medicine, in which therapies attempt to modify the circulation of vital energies in order to restore the body’s energetic harmony. In the Chinese and Indian case, they are also associated with meditation systems (*pranayoga* and *qigong*) which aim, through the disciplining of the breath, to control the circulation of *qi* or *prana* with one’s own consciousness, and to nurture its development and transformations.

Energy-based cosmologies and healing systems have played an important role in the development of alternative spiritualities in late modernity. Although, from the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards, established scientific disciplines such as medicine and chemistry have purged all traces of “vitalism” from their theories and descriptions, energy-based therapies and spiritual techniques have become increasingly widespread in the popular realm. In an increasingly secularized culture in which many people reject the authoritarian monotheism of the established churches, energy therapies and cosmologies can easily be formulated using scientific terminologies such as “rays”, “fields”, “vibrations” or “biomagnetism” which can be manipulated by anyone through technical

operations of the body. This opens a space for spiritualities which can be practiced outside the realm of “religion”. The language of energies is shared by a broad array of contemporary therapies and spiritual practices, ranging from kundalini yoga and anthroposophy to fengshui, Chinese martial arts, reiki, rebirthing-bodywork, Integrative Body Psychotherapy, dowsing, shiatsu, homeopathy, ayurveda, therapeutic touch, etc.

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