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## The Emerging Science of Subtle Energy

BY SCOTT ANDERSON, MD

IN MY NEARLY TWO DECADES AS A MEMBER OF ISSSEEM (International Society for the Study of Subtle Energies and Energy Medicine), I've learned that when people use the phrase "science of subtle energy" (SSE), they are generally referring to one or more of the following lines of evidence:

- direct personal experiences of healing, out-of-body experiences (OBEs), auras, premonitions, meditative experiences, and so on—also described in a huge body of popular literature and shared in many forums (like this one)
- the teachings of such non-Western healing and spiritual practices as acupuncture, qigong, and yoga, as well as shamanism and alchemy
- the frequent use of the terms "science" and "subtle energy" (or related terms) in the many materials "channeled" over the past several hundred years from various not-in-the-body sources
- a growing number of studies that appear to show the effects of energies not otherwise measurable—overviews of such studies have been published by NCCAM (National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine) and others (e.g., *The Scientific Basis of Integrative Medicine* by Leonard Wisneski and Lucy Anderson)
- a large array of devices (e.g., electrodermal screening, bioresonance therapies, electro-photonic imaging) used in alternative health practices around the world, some of which were used in the studies cited above and all of which remain controversial
- a variety of "New Physics" theories that feature subtle energy and are widely regarded as plausible, including the work of Stanford scientist William Tiller, biophysicist Beverly Rubik, and former Princeton University physicist Claude Swanson.

Given the above, why does mainstream science seem so dead set against even the notion of subtle energy? Four reasons readily come to mind:

- There is *no agreed-upon scientific definition* of subtle energy, and hence *no reliable methodology* for detecting or measuring the energies so defined.
- There is *no broadly accepted scientific theory* of such energies.
- The very notion of subtle energy *originates in pre-scientific esoteric traditions*, which have been systematically marginalized by the scientific enterprise for more than a century.
- The notion is thus considered far *too subjective*, or worse, *a point of religious belief*, or worse yet, *a mere superstition*. ➔

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**“Given the crisis of our time, it seems we must develop a collaborative approach to critical scientific inquiry—which may require scientists themselves to grow and develop personally as well.”**

#### STAFF

##### EDITOR

Matthew Gilbert

##### DESIGNER

Michael Zipkin

##### PRODUCTION COORDINATOR

Tiffany Mitchell

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Taken as a whole, these objections are neither trivial nor merely ideological. In order for the science of subtle energy to emerge further, I believe we will need to approach these criticisms with great intelligence, a good heart, and in a non-confrontational spirit. We must be aware, however, that there are very powerful and increasingly globalized vested interests—deeply entrenched in governments, industries, and civil society—that are working to maintain precisely this status quo, the “Church Scientific” as T. H. Huxley dubbed it well over a century ago. An integral part of these interests is a sprawling scientific research establishment that both disparages virtually all research done outside its purview and maintains tight control over funding and access to publication.

Still, a deep appreciation for healing and spiritual teachings and practices of various kinds persists—whatever branch or brand we’ve been involved in and come to know personally.

As the world continues to shrink, all approaches and traditions are coming into closer contact, and epochal developments are taking place as a result. For example, hints of a global comparative philosophy are emerging (*The Sociology of Philosophies: A Global Theory of Intellectual Change* by Randall Collins; Harvard Press, 1998), as well as an academic field of Western Esotericism (*New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Western Thought* by Wouter J. Hanegraaff; SUNY Press, 1996). These developments complement the better known non-academic work of such independent scholars as Ken Wilber, and taken together, they shed new light on the long history and changing fortunes of materialism over the centuries and the likelihood of philosophic (or paradigm) shifts in the future.

In recent decades, His Holiness the Dalai Lama has spearheaded a deep dialogue with mainstream science. He has impressed many with his keen intellectual acuity, careful listening, and valuable questions. After nearly twenty-five years of meetings with leading scientists across many fields, his impact is increasingly felt. For example, findings from the most sophisticated scientific study of meditation ever conducted, the Shamatha Project—led by B. Alan Wallace, longtime student of His Holiness—are just now being published in leading journals of psychology and neuroscience.

Of more direct significance to the study of subtle energy, the mainstream New York Academy of Sciences has recently published a volume of its annals (vol. 1172) containing the proceedings of a 2006 conference held with His Holiness that focused specifically on longevity and health. Included in that volume are several papers that nicely summarize and contribute to the SSE. One by Paul Rosch, “Bioelectromagnetic and Subtle Energy Medicine: The Interface between Mind and Matter,” offers an overview of the field. Another, “The Energy Body and Its Functions: Immunosurveillance, Longevity and Regeneration,” by Harvard Medical School faculty member Daniel P. Brown (well known in Buddhist circles for his book on meditation, *Pointing Out the Great Way*), includes a bold hypothesis regarding the role of “energy-information relay systems,” potentially under conscious control, impacting stem cells throughout the body.

How might we contribute to or participate in such deep dialogue? One key factor will be attitude—to paraphrase His Holiness, “If science proves some notion or belief of mine wrong, then it will have to change.” At the same time, we cannot accept that mainstream science is somehow a final arbiter of truth (as it now tends to promote itself). We need to be crystal clear that science is a method, not itself a philosophy. We need to seek out those within the scientific mainstream, however few they may be, who are genuinely open

to respectful dialogue. We also need to be aware of how deeply *scientism* has tarnished our own appreciation of science and technology, which have brought countless gifts to humanity that we have come to rely upon every day.

We would do well to establish new conference series, online resources, and publications devoted to critical debate between those who are seriously attempting to develop rigorous scientific theories of subtle energy and those who are attempting to discover reliable ways to detect and measure them. Such efforts will require that we press beyond our instinct to accept everyone’s position uncritically. This need not mean, however, that we must revert to the egoic and confrontational style common in mainstream science. Given the crisis of our time, it seems we must develop a collaborative approach to critical scientific inquiry—which may require scientists themselves to grow and develop personally as well.

In closing, there is a science of subtle energy emerging, and it has much more emerging yet to do. From all quarters, we see signs that personal and spiritual healing, growth, and development across the life cycle will be key determinants of the kind of world we leave to future generations. It seems obvious that our sciences must be turned toward serving these human imperatives. To accomplish such a turning, the totality of what it is to be human must be fully accounted for and allowed. The emergence of a genuine science of subtle energy will be a giant step in that direction. ●



**SCOTT ANDERSON, MD**, has lived for four decades in the worlds of science and the esoteric yogas. His *YogaScience* project and *Theoretical Frameworks Group* (under the auspices of *ISSSEEM*), featured at his website (<http://www.svamd.com>), are both designed to provide a bridge between these two worlds.

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