

# KRISHNAMURTI AND PSYCHOTHERAPY

by

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*The teachings of Krishnamurti are applied to different issues within the practice of psychotherapy. Krishnamurti's teachings reflect a deep understanding of human relationships and thus his contribution offers an invaluable perspective to the psychotherapist.*

Over the past 50 years Jiddu Krishnamurti has established himself as one of the most prolific twentieth century religious teachers. K.\* has a world wide following though he differs from other Bhudda-cum-guru like figures by strongly resisting the notion of guru and invites each person to be the authority in their own lives. Each person must be a light unto themselves. What follows is an application of aspects of K.'s teachings into everyday issues in the practice of psychotherapy whose remit is the heart of K.'s work viz. problems in human relationships.

Firstly, a brief outline of K.'s background. Mary Luytens (1,2) has plotted the much travelled life of K.. In his early years, K. remained with his parents until aged 10 when his mother died. Four years later his father moved to the International Headquarters of the Theosophical Society at Adyar, Madras, to work as Assistant Secretary. Here K. came

to the attention of Michael Leadbetter who was quick to recognize K.'s unique insight and personal qualities. Most Theosophists in the early twentieth century believed that the Lord Maitreya (the Christ) was soon to manifest in human form, as had occurred two thousand years ago when he manifested in the body of Jesus and before that in the body of Sri Krishna. Mrs. Annie Besant, the President of the Theosophical Society was notified by Leadbetter that a 'vehicle' had been found. From then, K. remained under the care and guidance of Annie Besant who groomed him for the proclaimed role of world leader. However, the dramatic turning point in his teachings was when he discovered the 'Order of the Star' in Omen, Holland, in 1929, where he disposed of the concept of 'gurism' in his philosophy of life. His departure from this role proved to be the turning point for future teachings and has important implications for

\* Following the guidelines used by Mary Luytens, Krishnamurti will be referred to as K

his solutions to the problems in human relationships.

The present paper highlights several similarities between issues in psychotherapy and K.'s teachings and assumes that all forms of psychotherapy are essentially about more effective ways of living (3) and consequently the writings of K. may create a new understanding of the problems of human existence and consequently psychopathology which can be interpreted as a manifestation of the problems in living. K.'s teachings offer a refreshing and non-mystical approach to the understanding of relationships.

### **1. Influence of the Past**

One of the central tenets of K.'s teachings is the influence of the past on human relationships and how this can interfere with healthy living. He adopts the concept of conditioning to clarify the important influence of past events which distort current perceptions of relationships.

*"We are conditioned - physically, nervously, mentally by the climate we live in and the food we eat, by the culture in which we live, by the whole social, religious and economic environment, by our experience, by education, and by family pressures and influences. All these are factors which condition us. Our conscious and unconscious responses are all the challenges of our environment - intellectual, emotional, outward and inward - all of these are the action*

*of conditioning. Language is conditioning; all thought is the action, the response of conditioning". K. (4) p142.*

This is a central issue in psychotherapy. Societal, cultural and family conditioning has been acknowledged as distorting our perception of relationships and it is the letting go of the past that can lead to more adaptive strategies for dealing with relationships. In particular, early conditioning from the all powerful parents tends to imprint a sense of what is right or wrong in relationships and it is the much cited 'corrective emotional experience' that seeks to incorporate new strategies of dealing with relationships. How do we escape the trap of conditioning?

*"The shedding of the past all the time when you see yourself is freedom from the past. Sorrow ends only when there is the light of understanding, and this light is not lit by one experience or by one flash of understanding; this understanding of yourself is the ending of sorrow". K. (4) p109.*

K. suggests a moment-by-moment, day-to-day awareness of the potential influence of the past; a form of meditation which asks for a constant acknowledgement of conscious and unconscious influences.

*"When you learn about yourself, watch the way you walk, how you eat, what you say, the gossip, the hate, the jealousy - if you are aware*

*of all that in yourself, without any choice, that is part of meditation". K. (5) p59.*

K. places great emphasis on living in the present and not in the past or future. Thought is seen as the result of the past as it is based upon the reaction of yesterday i.e. the response of a memory, of time. Consequently to perceive something new from day to day, the influence of the past and the projections of the future must cease; thus life becomes timeless.

*"Life is not to be approached through the past, nor through the mirage of the future. Life cannot be approached through intermediaries, not conquered for another.*

*That discovery can only be made in the immediate present - by the individual himself and not for others - by the individual who has become the eternal 'I'. That eternal 'I' is created by the perfection of the self-perfection in which all things are contained, even human imperfections. Man, not yet having achieved that condition of life in the present, lives in the past which he regrets, lives in the future where he hopes, never in the present which he ignores. This is the case with all men.*

*Balanced between the past and the future, the 'I' is poised as a tiger ready to spring, as an eagle ready to fly, as the bow at the moment of releasing the arrow.*

*This movement of equilibrium, this high tension, is "creation". It is the fullness of all life, it is immortality.*

*The wind of the desert sweeps away all trace of the traveller.*

*The sole imprint is the footprint of the present. The past, the future ... sands blown by the wind". K. (6) pxii.*

## **2. Self-Knowledge**

Self-knowledge is the heart of K.'s teachings. He suggests that the reader embarks on a deep and meaningful self-exploration to discover the motives behind his behaviour.

*"Thought must be free from that narrowness of tradition*

*The narrowness of thy desires, ambitions and purpose, . . .*

*The narrowness of thy struggles and victories,*

*The narrowness of thine ignorance and knowledge". K. (6) p40.*

In particular, K. highlights the motive of power in human relationships and how this influences the balance of relationships. The balance of power in the helping relationship is inevitably tipped in favour of the therapist who is in a unique position to influence the distressed patient. It is the abuse and misuse of power in relationships which K. identifies.

*"To examine afresh the whole issue of existence, the mind must be stripped clear of any personal*

*motive, of any sense of frustration, of any seeking of power, whether for oneself or for one's group". K. (7) p43.*

This is indeed an awesome task as one of the common unconscious motives for becoming a helping professional/therapist is rooted in the need to be valued and thus powerful with others. These fantasies of omnipotence have little mileage in a caring, effective relationship though their potential interference cannot be ignored. K. has focused our attention on an area of the therapeutic relationship that up to now, has been left unexplored. The concept of counter transference does not tackle this issue directly.

### 3. Authority

*"You don't have to believe what I say - far from it. If you believe what I say, then it is your misery not mine; then you will use me as another authority, and therefore take shelter and comfort . . . To have a Master in India, or in some mountain far away from your daily life, is very convenient, very encouraging because then you can say, 'well, I'll like him in my next life. It will take me a long time to be free of greed' - and that you will call evolution. Surely, greed is not a thing to be postponed; either you are free from greed or you will never be free. To say you will be free of greed some day, is the continuation of greed". K. (5) p73.*

It seems a feature of the human condition that there is a need for an

authority to define what is 'right'. Schools of psychotherapy often quote with much loyalty the original works of Freud, Berne, Skinner, Klein and others, as representing the therapeutic truths. Each school of psychotherapy lays claim to a multitude of psychotherapeutic truths. Also, by relying on the instructions of authority it tends to deprive the searcher of the opportunities to seek out the truth for himself according to his own unique personality. K. explores this in greater detail.

*"Surely, Sir, any act based on the authority of a book, however sacred, or on the authority of a person, however noble and saintly, is a thoughtless act which must inevitably bring confusion and sorrow. In this and other countries the leader derives his authority from the interpretation of the so-called sacred books, which he liberally quotes, or from his own experiences, which are conditioned by the past, or from his austere life, which again is based on the pattern of saintly records. So the leader's life is bound by authority as the life of the follower; both are slaves to the book, and to the experience or knowledge of the other . . . Why do you accept authority, in the deeper sense of that word? You accept authority, as the guru also does, in order to be safe, to be certain, in order to be comforted, to succeed, to reach the other shore. You and the guru are worshippers of success; you are both driven by ambition. Where there is ambition, there is no love; and action without love has no meaning". K. (7) p16.*

When K. dissolved the Order of the Star in 1929, he created within his organization a tremendous anxiety - who do we follow now? By returning the authority to his followers, K. awakened a potential for autonomous existence which had previously been alien to his followers. Each person must become the authority in his or her own life, the alternative seems an illogical proposition viz. one person knowing what is best for the other. This assumption deserves careful examination in the psychotherapies. Imgard Schloegel in 'The Wisdom of the Zen Masters (8) underlines this point.

*"For nobody has the right to manipulate anybody or to impress anybody with his stronger personality, not even for the other's imagined good, for nobody can know what that good is. This is courtesy rather than callousness, for the other's dignity is thus acknowledged, or dignity of his grief respected. If and when he is ready, the other will of himself reach out for consolidation and feel free for a hand to point out the way". S. (8) p56.*

#### **4. Dependence**

Dependent relationships characterize the maladaptive functioning of distressed patients. The patient depends on another for care, love and affection and a sense of worthwhileness. The psychological umbilical cord creates a relationship of dominance whereby the person

who is relied upon can control the emotional feeding of the others. Therapists have compared this to the symbiotic relationship in childhood. This theme is prominent in K.'s writings.

*"The more one is attached, the greater the dependence. The attachment is not only to persons but to ideas and to things. One is attached to a particular environment, to a particular country and so on. And from this springs dependence and thus resistance". K. (4) p119.*

The emotionally wounded patient believes that he is worthless and perceives the only escape from misery as depending on someone who is strong and able to provide this parenting. In effective therapeutic work this constitutes the first stage of the therapist-patient alliance; the healthy alliance being characterized by the therapist respecting the autonomy and integrity of each patient.

*"Being nothing, being a desert in oneself, one hopes through another to find water. Being empty, poor, wretched, insufficient, devoid of interest or importance, one hopes through another to be enriched. Through the love of another one hopes to forget oneself . . . Through the family, through the nation, through the lover, through some fantastic belief, one hopes to cover this desert with flowers . . . So one puts hooks into all these things. In this is pain and uncertainty, and the*

desert seems more arid than even before". K. (4) p122.

Freedom is found not in the opposite viz. detachment, but rather is a constant awareness of the meaning of relationships and the potential hazards of possessive attachment. It is a form of 'independent dependence' where one accepts the presence of others though one respects the condition of aloneness in life.

*"The mind knows this fear (of loneliness) when for a moment it realizes that it can rely on nothing, that no distraction can take away the sense of self-enclosing emptiness. That is loneliness. But aloneness is something entirely different; it is a state of freedom which comes into being when you have gone through loneliness and understand it. In that state of aloneness you don't rely on anyone psychologically because you are no longer seeking pleasure, comfort, gratification. It is only then that the mind is completely alone, and only such a mind is creative". K. (9) p215.*

*"Do you know what it means to love a tree, or a bird, or a pet animal, so that you take care of it, feed it, cherish it, though it may give you nothing in return, though it may not offer you shade, or follow you, or depend on you? Most of us don't love in that way, we don't know what that means at all because our love is always hedged about with anxiety, jealousy, fear - which implies that we depend inwardly on another, we want to be loved. We don't just love*

*and leave it there, but we ask something in return; and in that very asking we become dependent". K. (9) p28.*

K. links fear to dependence. For the patient it is often the fear of further emotional injury which causes their withdrawal from relationships. The patient is caught in a suffocating dependence and there becomes the fear of losing this relationship which has long been the cornerstone of their existence. The emotional feeding has been a controlling one rooted in fear, the fear of the other person losing control of the relationship.

*"What is is not the fear; it is the flight which is the fear, and this will drive you mad, not the emptiness itself. So what is this emptiness, this loneliness? How does it come about? Surely it comes through comparison and measurement, doesn't it? I compare myself with the saint, the master, the great musician, the man who knows, the man who has arrived. In this comparison I find myself wanting and insufficient. I have no talent, I am inferior, I have not 'realised'; I am not, and that man is. So out of measurement and comparison comes the enormous cavity of emptiness and nothingness. And the fight from this activity is fear, and the fear stops us from understanding this bottomless pit. It is a neurosis which feeds upon itself. And again, this measurement, this comparison, is the very essence of dependence". K. (4) p25.*

The neurotic, psychotic, anorexic, alcoholic, borderline all have a common dynamic viz. they all live in fear. The agoraphobic lives in fear of open spaces, the borderline in the fear of being alone, the anorexic in the fear of being abandoned; most fear the dominant, real or transferenceal, parent. Their self-esteem depends on the injury-inflicting significant other and it is when this dependence is examined that the fears lessen and the patient begins the repair work necessary for change. The negation of fear marks the beginning of change and the turning point to a new way of dealing with relationships.

The approach adopted in dealing with the fears of the patient depend on the theoretical orientation of the therapist. Often, therapists focus on the tip of the emotional iceberg to the neglect of the underlying motives behind the behaviour. K. addresses this issue by exploring the process of fragmentation in human relationships and proposes a more holistic approach to understanding human behaviour.

*"Does one see the total process of life or is one concentrated on the particular, thus missing the whole field of life? To be aware of the whole field is to see also the particular, but, at the same time, to understand the relationship to the*

*whole. If you are angry and are concerned with ending that anger, then you focus your attention on the anger and the whole escapes you and the anger is strengthened. But anger is inter-related to the whole. So when we separate the particular from the whole, the particular breeds its own problems'. K.(4) p59.*

## Conclusion

K.'s writings address many other issues in human relationships. The current paper has reviewed several of K's major themes and demonstrated their potential application to psychotherapy practice. K. is one of the few writers who not only relinquishes the throne and invested power of guruism or authority, but allows and invites the reader to find his own path to the truth. K. creates no dependency; his respect for the emotional geography, integrity and autonomy of others is the hallmark of his teachings.

*"Truth is a pathless land. Man cannot come to it through any organization, through any creed, through any dogma, priest or ritual, not through any philosophical knowledge or psychological technique. He has to find it through the mirror of relationship, through the understanding of the contents of his own mind, through observation . . ."*

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