



Selfobject Psychology for a Troubled World

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ABSTRACT

The role of self-psychology in establishing a transformational humanity and even in saving the continued existence of our world—is a very modest one, yet, at the same time, a uniquely crucial opportunity. We, as a community committed to psychoanalytic self-psychology, are being required to respond to the summons of a *servant leadership*. The task ahead of us all is not less than that of creating a *supra-contextual web of empathy* that will embrace the personal and the general, the similar and the different, the multiplicity and the oneness. Only such an ethical matrix of universalism will constitute a total solidarity. Such an immeasurable task calls upon us to uplift the Kohutian legacy to its final destination, to the shores of *selfobject psychology*. This proposal aims at refining self-psychology into a *psychology of transformation*, defining the humane narcissistic journey from self-cherishing attitude to other-cherishing attitude, and, perhaps even beyond, to a stance of all-embracing ethical commitment to the realization of awakened awareness. *Selfobject psychology* thus opens up for psychoanalysis a spiritual horizon that will buttress the unceasing quest for the tremendous goal of withstanding our troubled times and of securing a future for humankind and its cosmic habitat.

KEYWORDS

Psychoanalysis – republic of spirit; psychology of oneness; selfobject psychology; selfobjecting – psychoanalytic substitution; ultimate solidarity; servant leadership

Never before in human history have past and future been so tightly condensed together within a present, intensely bubbling to a boiling point. Are we now facing a breakthrough of an infinite potential for a dizzying development of humankind beyond any imaginable horizon? Or, are we on the threshold of a global catastrophe, the shattering of our blue planet into smithereens, the annihilation of all living creatures, and the total fragmentation of humanity's collective self? These two potential aspects of our future impose on us, humans, challenge that has probably never confronted humankind in its entire history.

The role of self-psychology in establishing a transformational humanity for securing the continued existence of our world is a very modest one; yet, at the same time, it offers a uniquely crucial opportunity. We, as a community committed to psychoanalytic self-psychology, are being required to respond to the summons of a *servant leadership*. The tremendous task facing all of us amounts to the creation of a *supra-contextual web of empathy* that will embrace the personal and the general, the similar and the different, the multiplicity and the oneness. Such a gigantic task calls upon us to raise the Kohutian legacy to its final lofty destination, to the shores of *self object psychology*.

In 1970, on the seventh of October, Heinz Kohut came to the Berlin Free University to give the 50th anniversary lecture in honor of the Berlin Psychoanalytic Institute. His programmatic lecture was entitled *Psychoanalysis in a Troubled World* (Kohut, 1978). The buds of Kohut's (1985) seminal paper *On Courage* (early 1970s) were already there for this historic occasion and, indeed, it required a great

deal of courage to stand with unbound faith at that German podium and proffer psychoanalysis as a torch of light for humanity.

My own lecture here today, forty-nine years later, is a heartfelt homage to the man who has long been for all of us an idealized selfobject, a lighthouse inspiring the courage to keep offering our jewel of psychoanalysis in the cause of maintaining human dignity and protecting the world.

Psychoanalysis—republic of spirit

In the history of human civilization, the second half of the 19th century signified one of the climaxes of human liberation, an era that witnessed the process of transforming singular individuals into *subjects*, entities possessing identity and natural rights which are not given to them by others, but to which they are entitled by the mere fact of their being living creatures, humans.

Three historical-philosophical movements, apparently embodying the organic continuation of the French and American Revolutions, instigated liberation from the church and from the crown, from the privilege of blood and the privilege of religious faith. Three manifestoes characterized this era—the *Communist Manifesto* promulgated in 1848, the *Existentialist Manifesto* formulated in 1852, and what I propose to call the *Psychoanalytic Manifesto*, constituted in 1897, thus symbolizing the end of the century.

These three foundation stones fortify modern thinking about human beings as entitled to the rights of *freedom, equality and fraternity*, to quote the French Revolution’s immortal slogan. Furthermore, they raise the human being, every human being, to a supreme height of psychic horizons, thus defining for the first time, outside philosophy and theology, a new discipline, entirely dedicated to the human psyche—*psychology*.

During that era of innovation of the human civilization, not only republics of society and government were constituted, but also republics of the spirit were generated, spaces of thought and creativity inviting everyone with heart and mind to give their all for the establishment of spiritual-cultural fraternity, destined to create an infinite platform of ideals and ideas, devoted for the welfare of all comers in the universe.

Psychoanalysis has been a phenomenal example of a republic of spirit. In spite of the persistent attempts of its founder to establish it as a scientific project according to conventional definitions of yesterday’s world (Freud, 1933 [1932]), it never succumbed to the restraining shackles of narrowing boundaries, and for all its lovers and devotees it has remained a welcoming freedom-space, wide open for every free spirit. Given this background, it is no wonder that psychoanalysis has been a “pillar of fire”, the torch illuminating the path for progress and enlightenment in all their forms and versions: The absolute acceptance of individual humans in their totality; The commitment to acknowledge and accompany individuals with all their tortuous humanity without judgment or recoil; The compassionate obligation to alleviate the pain and suffering of each and every one of us—these have been the main foundations of psychoanalysis’ immeasurable contribution as a republic of spirit to civilization.

Defining psychoanalysis as a “*republic of spirit*” involves positioning it within the decades-long process in philosophy resulting in a remarkable turnabout, by which ethics ceases being a marginal field, a sort of derivative annex in the hegemony of epistemology, and, instead, becomes the apex of the philosophizing pyramid. This paradigmatic shift expresses the ethical commitment of philosophy not to be a bystander in a world where individuals’ infinite vulnerability exposes them to permanent traumatization in the various contexts of their existence. The ethical recognition of the other’s need for my permanently offered helping-hand is the quality defining psychoanalysis as a spiritual deed, as a republic of spirit.

It is definitely no coincidence that the birth of self psychology emerged chronologically with the heartwarming transformation of philosophy’s structural pyramid. It is quite natural that psychoanalysis’ latest evolutionary development, the phase symbolized by Kohut’s emergence upon the stage of ideas, would maintain an internal dialogue of fraternal solidarity with a philosophy that grants exclusive priority to infinite ethical responsibility amongst humans of the world.

Self psychology's contribution to the spiritual dimension of psychoanalysis has, until now, been studied only in a very modest measure (Kulka, 2010, 2020). Embedded in the totality of Kohut's writing, one can identify innumerable inspiring pearls of reference revealing Kohut's spiritual-metaphysical conception, and his idea concerning the core linkage between an individual's narcissistic development and the individual's elevation to spiritual heights which position the human being as a harbinger of evolution for the whole human species, is probably his most inspiring legacy.

Abolishing the duality between human beings is an ethical decision that establishes psychoanalysis as a pioneer in the advancement of the spiritual dimension of existence. Liberation from the myth of private individuality, and the adoption of total responsibility committed to the psychological constitution of everyone, will elevate psychoanalysis to supreme heights as a world-view fostering realistic utopia—one that goes beyond the conventional humanism embodied in democratic forms of government, in its manifestation of “live and let live”, in the Hobbesian spirit of early liberalism. Liberty and equality of atomistic individuality may have been reasonably protected by philosophical-social-political liberalism, but a main pillar of the revolutionary promise, the commitment to *fraternity*, has been brutally crashed in our times and it is crumbling almost to extinction.

What can we say about contemporary liberalism, affected as it is by the libertarian trend that infects nowadays the whole expanse of human civilization? Not only does it fail to be a basis for fraternity and equality, but it also posits, arrogantly and shamelessly, an ideology that defines liberty as supreme egocentricity, absolutely devoid of equality and expressing infinite contempt for solidarity.

And here am I before you, coming from Israel, a place I profoundly love and cherish, a brave and wondrous place, a historical emergence almost touching a miracle. And now, in spite of all this, it is a country in the throes of an ever-worsening narcissistic disturbance, victim of a vertical split that fatally injures its group-self, and it is becoming a denier of freedom, hostile to equality, and a crusher of solidarity.

A republic infused with the spirit of self psychology is a human vow, a promise for loving goodness, for joyful and wise compassion, immersed continuously and ceaselessly in the Other, the very other that cannot live without me devoted to him, without my fully committed selfhood, without total fraternity.

In an inter-religious conference of scholars convened by the pope, Emmanuel Levinas was asked to explain the boundaries of his ideas about total responsibility for the other, culminating with the radical spiritual notion of *substitution* with the other. Quoting the Biblical commandment “Love thy neighbor as thyself”, Levinas defiantly inquired, is my love for the other no greater than my love for myself? Responding to the challenge, Levinas explained that the Old Testament commandment does not outline the *boundaries of love*, but defines the basic assumption concerning the *human's inner nature*. (Levinas, 1968) According to Levinas, the words “as thyself” do not mean “love your neighbor to the **exact extent** that you love yourself”, but love your neighbor as who you are, as what **your human nature** is, defined by the love of other.

Clinical moment

Selfobjecting—human substitution

Deep inside multiple-year analysis, faced by the revealing exposure of early childhood horrible acts of emotional and physical abandonment, the two of us, the patient and I, awestruck and astounded, viewed a phenomenon that we had considered a sheer impossibility. In the process of mobilizing an extremely archaic selfobject transference, the patient evinced a phenomenon that could have easily been interpreted as clear psychotic sliding in any theoretical context.

During all those bitter days, the patient totally avoided going out of the house, except to our analysis sessions. A fear of death was upon him any time he tried to leave his home. At the end of an analytic session, as he was tearfully parting from me, with a tormented question how he would manage to spend the next few days alone without me, whispered words emerged from me, words that surely originated from a profound faith in the space of *total contextual transference*:

“I will be there with you, and always, everywhere.”

Then it happened. The day after, as he was making another heroic effort to leave home, he faced a mirror next to the exit door, a man-size mirror in a decorated wooden frame, naturally expecting to see his own image. But, to his utter astonishment, he saw not his image but my own, reflected in his mirror. He spent several minutes in great horror, suspecting that he was losing his sanity, but then he experienced a great calm and a sense of merging into the mirror, and then walking out peacefully as if he had never before felt the agoraphobic terror. For two full weeks he had the same experience continuously. Every time he stood in front of the mirror he would see me as his reflected image, and then he would calmly walk out into the world. The dissolution of this bizarre phenomenon completed the recovery of that dear man. He regained his joyous existential cohesiveness.

During those days, I was accompanied by the image of Kohut, as it was reflected in my memory's mirror, recounting how he had ceased to worry about psychotic-like manifestations in the analyses of patients with severe narcissistic disturbances, realizing that those manifestations were connected to oscillations of empathy between him and his patients. In the same way, I and my patient calmed down considerably when it became clear that my mirror-reflected image was not clinical evidence of psychotic disintegration, but the wonderful creation of an empathic matrix of mirroring selfobject, constituting, reflecting and validating for the patient his very psychological existence. The patient, a man of profound intellectual curiosity, was highly intrigued by our joint study of the mental status of that amazing phenomenon. We both realized that it was not a hallucinatory fantasy, nor a depersonalization phenomenon. On the contrary, it was a constructive event, in which my actual image, as yet not transmutedly internalized, was necessary for him in order to organically absorb self-fragmenting traumatic experiences that had been split-off and disavowed. The patient still needed my actual presence, and it was constructed via transformational occurrence as a concrete experience, that was neither a result of faulty senses nor the product of imaginative fantasy.

Based on my ideas concerning a *Psychology of Oneness*, I am proposing this extraordinary phenomenon as an amazing example of the most revolutionary notion that Kohut had offered us in the philosophy of scientific ideas, that of defining empathy as *vicarious introspection*—an ultimate form of *psychoanalytic substitution*.

As a flash of lightning, the most mind-shattering realization of the whole Kohutian legacy is revealed by delving into the marvelous forking paths of the *Chicago Institute lectures* (Kohut, 1996): ***The self is its self objects***

Three conceptual revolutions are contained in this enlightened statement. (a) A proposal of spiritual principle as a basis for the link between the metaphysical and the phenomenological. (b) An ontological assumption that undermines the *essence* of reality that is revealed to the senses and the consciousness. (c) A primary commitment to total ethics. For me, this is Kohut's own epitaph expressing in bright simplicity the psychoanalytic statement of Levinas' *substitution* (1974).

I was born in Palestine in the last days of 1943. By the time I turned twelve months old, my parents had lost a huge part of their family—parents, siblings and many other family members who perished in Auschwitz-Birkenau. My parents, Frieda and Moshe, had immigrated to Palestine in 1933 before it became evident what the Nazi takeover of Germany would mean to the fate of the whole world. They came to Palestine as Socialists-Zionists to build an old-new homeland, to create a *nation*.

At home we read the daily newspaper published by the United Workers Party. The masthead of the paper declared “*For Zionism, Socialism and International Fraternity*”, and in the eyes of the boy that I then was, it seemed to be an oath of commitment which was branded into my soul as a conviction that *solidarity* was the foundation of existence, of life as it should be lived.

That daily newspaper was accompanied by a children's weekly. My brother and I used to solve crossword puzzles and riddles in that weekly, and as prizes we received books printed by the publishing house affiliated with the Workers Party. Not necessarily books for children. Thus, at age eleven, I had the chance to pore over the first Hebrew translation of Freud's *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, to read about psychoanalytical principles guiding communal education in the *kibbutz*, and become acquainted with several other texts that combined psychoanalysis with solidarity ideals of

communal socialism. I was particularly fascinated by a small volume on my father's bookshelf, a book I absorbed deeply in my heart. It was Erich Fromm's *Psychoanalysis and the Historical Materialism* (1932).



Erich Fromm
Psychoanalysis and the Historical Materialism

Many years later, when I showed that special book to the legendary chief editor of the publishing house, she told me an amazingly unique anecdote. In the early years of Israeli independence, shortly after the end of the 1948 war, the publisher planned to print chosen texts for manual laborers. In collaboration with the textile factory that manufactured workers clothing, they designed the small size of Fromm's book, and other texts in the series, so that they would fit inside the left-hand breast-pocket of work-shirts, and thus rest against the reader's heart.

Erich Fromm, a Jew, a psychoanalyst, Marxist and Buddhist, was destined to become my life's lighthouse. Fromm, joined by Sigmund Freud and Martin Buber, came to be the idealized selfobjects illuminating my mundane and spiritual life. And later, when Kohut and Levinas emerged upon my life's horizon, the ensemble of my mentors would be nearly completed.

Clinical moment

Letter to an orphan child

I was not yet thirty when the Yom Kippur War of 1973 disrupted my life. Having experienced two former wars, in 1967 and 1969–70, I was now serving in the military reserves for six months. Like everyone else, I was terribly dismayed and tormented. During the three weeks of fighting, and the tense yet hope-filled months that followed, I used to write letters to my young patients. At the time, I worked at a public clinic for children and adolescents in Jerusalem, and I was treating seven children. During my lengthy absence I wrote a letter once a week to each one of them, and whenever

circumstances permitted, I tried to write at the exact day and hour of our appointed session. All in all, I wrote some 170 letters during those evil days. My army colleagues would watch my strange activity, first with a sort of uncomprehending mild contempt, then with astonished curiosity, and finally with profound compassion for me and for the children to whom I wrote, the children of all of us whom we left behind.

Returning from that war to my life and my therapeutic work at the clinic, I encountered various reactions to my letters. The parents' responses ranged from cautious politeness to deep gratitude. As for the children, some regarded my letters in a matter-of-fact way, as the expected manner in which an adult should maintain the child's continuous presence in his mind, while others manifested defensive or authentic indifference.

I want to tell you about one child. He was seven years old, an orphan whose father had been killed in the shelling of Jerusalem during the 1967 war, when the child was less than one year old. Member of an ultra-orthodox family, he existed a huge distance far away from my real person, yet very close to my heart therapeutically. Back at the clinic, his mother, tearful at the memory of her fallen spouse, told me that the child was treasuring my letters, at night taking them with him to bed, tucked inside his pajama shirt, next to his heart.

Thus, he seemed to be keeping a heart's connection with his own father, lost forever in that other war, and returned to him transferentially via his heart and mine. Perhaps in this manner, thanks to my letters placed next to the heart of an orphaned child, and thanks to my own coming home safely from the war, a *selfobjecting substitution* was created between my living body and the persona of a missing father restituted for his son.

Psychoanalysis where are you heading?

Tracing the history of psychoanalysis has always been a heartwarming attempt to reach the core of the riddle of human existence, and the key to its solution. When Heinz Kohut emerged on the stage of psychoanalytical thinking, these yearnings were doubly evoked, because the ideas formulated by him, and offered to psychoanalysis as well as to the whole culture, strive to penetrate beneath the schism separating humans, summoning us with a great promise to aspire for a healing wholeness.

To quote Charles Strozier (2001), who proposed a definition of Kohut's historical contribution to psychoanalysis, Kohut not only "saved psychoanalysis from itself" (p. xiv), and succeeded in "healing the epistemic wound" (p. 141) caused by its rupture from its original foundations: Kohut introduced the future of psychoanalysis, aspiring within if for the *Grand Unity*, a unity embodied in the monistic principle of total, holistic being, manifested within the individual, between individuals, and beyond them, in the whole universe: The unity of the fragmented individual yearning for cohesion; The unity of human togetherness striving to transcend the phenomenological rupture between people; The unity of the entire human civilization which, having experienced Auschwitz and Hiroshima, has come to realize the imperative of saving itself from the final holocaust caused by the disaster of separateness; The unity of psychoanalysis as a paradigmatic discipline yearning to achieve a breakthrough toward "cosmic ripening", to use Martin Buber's inspiring definition (1957), toward a new era that will complementing the realms of the *personal* and the *inter-personal*, by laying the foundations of a new dimension, that of the *supra-personal*.

Self psychology has come a long way since the inception of its virtual self in 1959, and its expanding influence has undergone many meta-theoretical, cultural and socio-political changes and vicissitudes. At this point a clarifying remark concerning the reflective nature of this paper is required: evidently, this work does not follow the familiar linear story of self-psychology's development, starting with its classical origins, through its phase of inspiring impulse of inter-subjectivity, and its rich ramifications toward varied perspectives of relationality. The contemplative quest of this endeavor is an attempt to portray an alternative trajectory of development, via which historical self psychology invites us toward an unfolding that has not yet occurred: an advance toward a *Psychology of Oneness* that strives to

transcend ontological duality, by way of a spiritual path grounded in mind-transformation of selfobjecting.

I believe it would be productive to suggest, that within the field-theory of *total contextuality*, to which we all adhere beyond our ideological pluralism, two poles are portraying the whole domain of self psychology through the generations—one dealing with the *self*, the other dealing with the *self-object*: namely, psychoanalytical theory of the human *psyche* of the treated person, and psychoanalytical theory of the human *spirit* of the treating person. Considering self psychology from this philosophical-historical perspective, I would propose to view the past trajectory of its *self*, and the future fate of its *selfhood*, through the inspiring prism of evolutionary transcending from *self psychology* to *selfobject psychology*.

Something very astonishing has occurred in the realm of psychoanalysis. Since the emergence of self psychology on the stage of ideas, sixty years ago, almost half the lifetime of the psychoanalytical discipline—no novel scientific revolution has occurred yet, no breakthrough that may lead psychoanalysis to its future. How can it be, that in a discipline so young, a discipline still in its primordial stages, no novel school of thought has yet emerged as its next evolutionary phase?

The position of self psychology within psychoanalysis is a target of turbulent, unceasing, controversy. Initially, Kohut's pioneering ideas aroused great enthusiasm, which later turned into increasing ambivalence that finally solidified into massive opposition, culminating in attempts to wholly disqualify self psychology as not deserving legitimacy within psychoanalysis. This is a surprising turn of events, a riddle that needs deciphering: *Is it possible that the resistance to the complete absorption of self psychology into psychoanalysis is the cause that impedes the discipline's growth toward its future, the future outlined by self psychology, and beyond?*

This is the tentative hypothesis that I propose for joint examination by analysts, by historians of psychoanalysis, and by biographers of its future.

Two powerful factors block the organic absorption of self psychology as a paradigmatic trajectory for the whole domain of psychoanalysis. One can be found in Kohut's peaceful recognition that opposition to his ideas springs from the fact that they are "*mystical [and] non western*" (1959, p. 212). Kohut evidently knew that a profound element in his thinking exceeds Western thought and transcends conventional rationality, and although secure in his belief that he was just taking psychoanalysis back to its abandoned roots, he knew perfectly well that he was performing a gigantic deed in summoning a whole collective of people to launch upon a journey that uprooted them from the soil of the comfort zones of their culture, a journey that possibly constituted a revolution ahead of its time.

The second powerful factor of opposition to the acceptance of self psychology as a central source of inspiration for the whole psychoanalytical movement is embedded in self psychology's determined insistence on narcissistic transformation as the foundation of the therapeutic stance. The narcissistic grip with which each and every one of us is holding onto our grandiose self is so powerful and dominant experience of being a living, existing entity, that any deliberate process requiring retreat from this egocentric attitude which is anchored in our individual 'I', provokes extremely strong ontological resistance. Placing empathy as the core of the therapeutic stance in psychoanalysis, demands from the treating person to retreat from his private self—a call that naturally arouses a reaction of self-cherishing attachment.

Scientific revolutions can neither be expected nor be predicted. The work of Kuhn (1962), still serving us all as a roadmap, teaches us the way via which disciplines develop not through linear accumulation but as a serial continuum of revolutions. Thus, Kuhn's theory leaves us wondering when and how the next revolution in psychoanalysis will erupt in our horizon.

History of the future toward ultimate solidarity

In the absence of the next supra-theory on the event-horizon of psychoanalysis, our duty seems to be paving the way toward it, so that the present will become a womb for the birth of the next scientific revolution. How to proceed and how shall we find the way?

The Israeli Association for Self Psychology and the Study of Subjectivity constitutes a unique history that deserves to be fully told one day. During the Association's twenty years of existence we have become steadfastly convinced that *selfobject psychology* is the depth-channel that will lead self psychology to achieve its full potential, and also might open the way for the next scientific revolution waiting in the future of psychoanalysis.

Our unyielding commitment to the basic idea of mind-transformation as the core of *selfobject psychology*, led us to the realization that we must gratefully approach the great cultural treasure of Buddhism. For twenty six centuries the legacy of Buddhism committedly developed a sophisticated psychology of transformation, and is generously offering us an abundance of training methods to achieve the spiritual goal of mind transformation—*Lo Jong* in Tibetan.

For twelve years we had woven the dream of establishing a *psychoanalytic-Buddhist training program*. This bold vision became a reality in March 2015 with the official opening of *Human Spirit (Ru'akh Adam* in Hebrew) in the *Adam Campus* in the town of Lod. The cornerstone had been laid jointly in your presence at our 37th International Conference in Jerusalem, celebrated with planting of three cypress trees and a workshop on *psychoanalysis in weakened populations*.

And today, 30 *Human Spirit* students of the first two classes are already treating 60 town residents, 45 of them in formal analyses of four sessions per week spread over three years at least, given free of charge to the community. This, as a result of generous altruism of us all, the outcome of a deep conviction that we participate jointly in the creation of a psychoanalytical model, which, we hope, will be used in the future for the treatment of weakened populations worldwide.



The World Peace Bell
***Human Spirit*—Adam Campus, Lod 2017**
Israel Association for Self Psychology and the Study of Subjectivity
Bonsho Bells

Bonshō bells have been the recognizable symbols of Buddhist temples in Japan for fifteen hundred years. During the Second World War huge numbers of Bonshō bells had been taken away from the temples and the monasteries and melted down into raw metal for the production of weapons.

The special Japanese association founded for the purpose of propagating the ideal of world peace, called upon all the world's nations to contribute national coins and war medals and these were melted down to provide the metal for the manufacture of the bells that were then distributed across Japan and throughout the globe.

In 1954 the first World Peace Bell outside Japan was donated by the Japanese Association to the United Nation Headquarters in New York. Not many people know the amazing fact that the stones which formed the pedestal on which this U.N. bell was located had been specially donated by the State of Israel.

It is a modest pride for us that the last World Peace bell, the 24th, was chosen to be donated to Human Spirit in order to posit it at the entrance square of Adam Campus in the city of Lod.



The World Peace Bell
Human Spirit—Adam Campus, Lod 2017
Venerable Sangye Khadro



Human Spirit's Congregation at the Gompa
A Teaching by Ven. Geshe Kelsang Wangmo, 2018

Thus, to the original intellectual ensemble of my psychoanalytical-philosophical guides, were added several great figures who fortify with compassion and wisdom what I had begun on my own during boyhood, and who now accompany me in my third age: His Holiness, the 14th Dalai Lama, Lama Zopa Rinpoche, the spiritual guide of *Human Spirit*, Khensur Rinpoche Geshe Tashi Tsering, the guru of our program's Buddhist teachers, and the late Geshe Jampa Gyatso, Head of Lama Tzong Khapa Institute in Pomaia, Italy, who was our ally and partner in realizing the *Human Spirit* vision.



Lama Zopa Rinpoche
Singapore 2011



Kenshur Rinpoche Geshe Tashi Tsering
Ven. Yönten, Ven. Chödrön
Human Spirit Leading Committee
McLeod Ganj, Dharamsala, India 2018

Standing up in Berlin with great courage, neither passing judgment on history nor preaching about human nature, Heinz Kohut made one of the most chilling statements in psychoanalysis:

Yes, man is in danger. He may be on the verge of destroying himself. He cannot control his cruelty toward his fellow-man . . . **The mere otherness of others frightens and disgusts him** (my emphasis, R.K.). And so powerfully impelling is the influence of these feelings on him that he would rather risk total destruction than bear the burden that an attitude of tolerance toward the demands of his fellow men, and the temporary renunciation of his own demands and of his own pride, would impose on him. (1978, pp. 526-7).

In the earliest plot recounted in the Old Testament after humanity's introduction into worldly life, having been expelled from the Garden of Eden, God is severely reprimanding Cain: "Where is Abel thy brother?" And Cain, the first human born of humans, offspring of his parents, not of God, responds evasively, horrendously: "Am I my brother's keeper?"

In Hebrew, there are two synonymous words, for the English 'I': *Anni*, and *Anokhi*. But at the same time, the second word, *Anokhi*, stands in Hebrew for **egoistic and egoism**. In his exchange with God, Cain used the word *Anokhi*: *Ha'shomer Akhi Anokhi?* Thus, in Hebrew, two interchangeable words, of identical meaning, present us with the tragedy embodied within the 'I', revealing the totality of the narcissistic dilemma of the human self, torn between its **Inness** and its **Selfishness**.

The tragic recognition of the human condition that echoes the biblical disturbing story of shattered brotherhood reveals to us that *liberty* and *equality* are not the primary human commandments. *Fraternity* is! Human solidarity alone is our shield against the anxiety and disgust aroused in us by the otherness of others. Without solidarity the world will not exist, nor will a human, and another human, and another human . . . Our answer to each other is YES—I **am** my brother's keeper! *Shomer akhi anni!*

Clinical moment

Boy at noon

The time is high noon on a hot summer day in the early 1980s in Jerusalem. A ten-year old boy comes in for his analytic session, sizzling furious, having arrived straight from special summer course, which he is obliged to attend instead of spending the summer vacation playing as all other kids.

He now swears at me, spits on me, screaming that he hates being here, that the treatment is just stupid, that he is dog-tired and wishes for nothing. He hurls himself onto the floor and lies down inertly in a far corner, saliva dribbling out of his open mouth, abandoned by the whole world and by himself, and withdrawn from both.

At first, I know that I am tense, irritated and angry, infuriated by the situation and by him for being in such a state. It is past noontime at the height of the summer break, and many of the clinic's staff have either left for home early in the day, or are off altogether on their annual vacation. In bitter despair I ponder, "Whatever am I going to say to this child here?" I look at him, nearly as helpless and abandoned as he is, watching the prone body with agony and wonderment. Then, suddenly, as my gaze is arrested by his small chest, heaving painfully, a great calm gently descends upon me, and out of this contemplative and compassionate quietude, I say to him: "It's real shit that—after a crappy school day with your annoying teacher, and with the disgusting Ashkenazi school food which makes you want to puke, and now dead-tired as you are—it's really shitty that on top of all this you must also come here and stay with me, instead of going home, have a cool drink, have Mommy cook for you your favorite dish of rice with beans, and have a nice rest on your balcony."

He looks at my face, and his features are irradiated with sadness, but also with soft relaxation, and he starts pushing himself away from the corner, slowly-slowly crawls and slithers along the wall toward my chair, and finally lies again flat on the floor, but now with his head gently resting on my bare feet in my summer sandals.

How deep is the humane chasm opened by anxiety and disgust between humans, generating cycles of alienation, fury and hatred! How far do we have to advance in order to transcend ourselves and be

for our other! But how much more stunning must be the realization that it takes so very little to carry out this transcendence!

Kohut believed that the future would force humans to cope with evolutionary psychological tasks that must involve superb narcissistic development, which he defined by the central term **renunciation**—the individuals' relinquishment of themselves, placing the other instead and ahead of themselves. This process of mind transformation must lead to drastic changes in the quality of human urges, so as to repeal anxiety and disgust, desires and attachments. Unless this evolution toward ultimate ethics happens, humankind is doomed to self-indulgence and self-destruction. Transcending our personal existence is our responsibility as individuals toward the whole of humanity, since both the survival and the evolutionary fate of the human species is at stake, as Kohut warned his Berlin audience, soberly yet optimistically.

"We must show that . . . psychoanalysis makes a contribution to the activation of wholesome social, cultural, and historical effects, which may influence the future of not only a handful of individuals, but of large groups, whole layers of society, and—yes!—even of mankind as a whole". (1978, p. 514).

Yet even this high level of psychoanalysis's contribution to the healing and evolution of the human species, does not exhaust Kohut's utopian vision. The summit of selfobject psychology is Kohut's most radical proposition that the entire world possibly dwells and exists within a universal empathic matrix, and that the psychological dimension constituted, maintained and resonated by the selfobjecting principle, is not limited to humans, but also exists and is valid for animals, plants, and even for the supposedly inanimate, unaware matter that constitutes the universe itself.

While attending our excellent Vienna conference last year, I became extremely excited when I heard the title of Shelley Doctors's Kohut memorial lecture: *"The Selfobject Concept—The Heart of the Matter"*. With outside-awareness-intuition our dear colleague referred to the metaphysical idea of the ultimate reality embodied in all phenomenology: *The idea that every Matter has a Heart* (Doctors, 2020). We can have no deeper and no higher definition of the spiritual dimension where the republic of psychoanalysis now resides, from which stemmed Kohut's 1970 appeal to Germany, and to the whole world, and even to the contemporary world, our world:

What I do wish to express is the hope that the influence of psychoanalysis will indeed be brought to bear broadly on future generations and . . . as an important civilizing force will become actively engaged in man's battle for his biological and spiritual survival. The goal of my presentation is therefore, generally, a moral (1978, p. 516).

Clinical moment

One girl and ultimate selfobjecting

Several years ago I was requested to perform clinical evaluation of a sixteen-year-old girl, whose emotional conduct aroused serious concern as to a possible psychotic process. The girl had firmly resisted any professional help, yet with the help of counseling to her parents we finally succeeded in getting her to my office doorstep. There she stopped. Having dismissed her mother, she remained standing near the entrance, holding onto the door-handle as if to secure the possibility of retreat from any contact with me. Then she asked me the ultimate test-question:

Can you think of humans as the lungs of the world, when we breathe we are the breathing organs of the world that needs air?

And I, looking at her in utmost amazement and gratitude, said: *"WOW! I would never have thought of this on my own, but now that you have revealed it to me . . . What a thought!"*

I don't know if that girl became well over the years, but during that hour, the only one I had the privilege to be with her, she had been healthy, creative, blooming, 'greater than life'. Perhaps a small peephole into her personal existence, where she always was, probably beyond reach, in regions beyond conventional reality, but at the same time also within transcendent existence, which should not be seen

as a defense against life and its distresses, here on this earth, but as an alternative existence of total entanglement with the universe. A living selfobject to the matter of our planet.

Several years ago we were invited to meet the Dalai Lama, in order to obtain his blessing for our *Ruach Adam Psychoanalytic-Buddhist Training Program*, and in his presence we witnessed a spiritual teaching.



**His Holiness, the Dalai Lama
Pomaia, Italy 2014**

An elderly, tiny woman with tormented features suddenly forced her way into the midst of the group of dignitaries and body guards that surrounded the dear teacher and knelt on the ground in front of him. Kneeling beside the woman, the Dalai Lama gently grasped her hands in both his palms. The woman, weeping abjectly, asked him in a heart-breaking whisper: “What am I to do with this life of mine?” From his warmly smiling lips issued words which I shall recall forever: *“Find someone to serve, find someone to serve”*.

I have no idea what happened to that woman later in life, but at that moment, she, maybe like that girl, became calm and relaxed, her face illuminated with contentment, happiness and a kind of existential certainty.

At the start of my talk I proposed the term **“serving leadership”** as the psychoanalytic imperative of selfobject psychology for us, ordinary humans, who are able to respond to our life’s summons and serve repeatedly. Words cannot express my profound gratitude to Heinz Kohut and to Self Psychology, fostered by all of you here and wherever you are, because within it I have found, and will continue to find until the final moment, a compassionate and wise cradle for a life of service.

My appearance here today is dedicated with deeply-felt love to the memory of Paul Ornstein, whose love to Heinz Kohut touched our hearts.

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