

INTERACTION FIRST

Sandra Kimball seeks the counsel of psychologist Ikemi Akira

Ikemi Akira grew up in a bilingual environment in Kobe and graduated from Marist Brothers International School. He is currently professor of clinical psychology at Kansai University. Besides teaching, he supervises and trains therapists. In summer, he teaches at the Focusing Institute Summer School in New York. In this interview, he talks about psychotherapy and why it is special in Japan.

Dr. Ikemi, you have been instrumental in introducing mental health training programs in several Japanese corporations. Why are they so successful?

At Kennedy Airport in New York, a customs inspector was trying to inspect my baggage as I was arriving. Before he began, he asked me, "What is your profession, Sir?" I answered that I am a psychology professor. He said, "Yeah? You're a psychology professor? What kind of psychology do you do?" I said, "Psychotherapy." The inspector didn't open my bags. He didn't even touch them. He turned to me and said, "Go Sir, New York City needs you guys!"

I was told once that mental health training in corporations would work in Japan but not in the U.S., because too many people in the U.S. have problems and that the corporations couldn't afford to pay the bills. Maybe that's true to some extent. But more than this, I feel that the Japanese corporation tends to be a big community, almost like a family, and that the corporation feels responsible to train its workers in many areas, including mental health. Also, what is often regarded as a "personal problem" could

be a work-related issue, or may be complicated by the work situation. As a therapist working (part-time) in a corporation, I feel that many of the "problems" workers have, are a combination of work and family or personal issues. A person could cope with them if the issue were only work, or only family, or only personal, but when they get all tangled up with one another, it does help to have mental health services provided at the corporation. And it helps to have managers who can provide real help, even if that help means simply to understand the person and point to available resources, or simply to listen sincerely.

Psychology and psychotherapy tend to stay in academic institutions or in corporate training programs in Japan. Why haven't they moved so easily into the public sphere?

I really don't know why. I used to believe what other senior Japanese professors told me: the story that Japanese people wouldn't pay money for psychological assistance, that counseling was supposed to be out of friendship and not for money; that in a mono-ethnic and uniform culture, people looked to a *senpai* (senior), those who had experience in the same difficulties for help, rather than to a stranger-psychologist. But now, given the diversity in Japanese culture, I am now beginning to think that it may have to do with the lack of an entrepreneurial attitude among psychologists. Those who study psychotherapy tend to want to get certified and be hired by some organization, such as a hospital, school, or public service agency. They don't envision

themselves running their own business, their own practice. There may be a lack of models to show how private practice in psychotherapy can work successfully. And therefore, the public couldn't find a therapist even if they wanted therapy.

In Western psychological theory, Freud and Jung laid the foundation for what has developed into psychotherapy. Is there a particular background in Japanese psychology?

There is no single background, although psychoanalytic theories (including those of Freud and Jung) do seem to be popular. I should say, to be precise, that the public doesn't know of other models of thinking about the psyche other than the outdated classical psychoanalytic models. These theories are about a century old! But these theories are already inherent in the way we think and see things, so they seem to "fit" with how we perceive reality. For example, many people in the West and also in Japan believe that there is an "unconscious" where there is a hidden truth about ourselves. We need to clean out our minds to receive anything new. Contemporary theories are vastly more complex and philosophical (even contemporary psychoanalysis). It is a challenge for us in academia to present these theories in a coherent and understandable form to the public.

Now, if you're asking what works, the answer is simple from my point of view. Theories, whatever they are, don't. Only a person can bring about changes in another person.

Can you talk more about this kind of relationship?

This relationship was very important in classical

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psychotherapy, but is emphasized even more today. I am greatly influenced by the philosopher and psychotherapist, Eugene Gendlin, who says "Interaction first." Things always exist in relationships. What we feel and think are always already in interactions with others, situations, languages, cultures, and symbols. So instead of thinking about feelings as "inside" our psyche, we need to see how feelings are connected to interacting and relating to others. I could go on with this for hours, but since that would be too long and overly technical, I just want to add that maybe something about me being Japanese makes me keenly aware of all this. As you know, there are many ways of saying "I" in Japanese, depending on who the other is. Even such a basic sense of existence like "I," does not exist independently of others in Japanese. More interesting is *jibun*, the Japanese word meaning "myself." It is written with two kanji, "self" and "to separate." It is as if the Japanese language were showing us that *jibun* (myself) comes into being when it separates and differentiates itself from a oneness that exists between oneself and others. When asked for one's opinion on a piece of music, for example, one needs to pull out of the oneness existing in the situation of listening to the music piece to differentiate a "self." So the Japanese language is helpful in getting a new perspective on human experience. I am not totally satisfied with Professor Gendlin's use of the word "interaction." The English word interaction assumes that there are two or more entities that are already formed, and then these entities "inter" "act" with one another. I haven't come up with a better expression, but my Japanese sense tells me that before we have formed entities, we have things going on from

which entities can be formed. There could be romance first, from which comes a "you" and a "me," for example. And therapy is much like this.

Buddhism is a significant influence on the Japanese psyche. Do you think that Buddhism can offer something unique to Japanese psychotherapy?

Buddhism is a spiritual and philosophical practice. Some say that Buddhism, at least in its early stages, was a psychological practice. There is a lot to be learned from Buddhist meditation. The challenge for psychotherapists is to present what comes from Buddhism in a secular form. I know that in the U.S. some therapists teach Buddhist meditation without calling it Buddhism. They might call it "mindfulness meditation." This is one way of going about it. But in an essentially Buddhist country like Japan, there may be other ways of bringing Buddhism into psychotherapy.

In the practice of psychotherapy, "listening" is important in the interaction between therapist and client. Is there something the psychotherapeutic community in Japan might need to be listening more carefully for?

Listening is the most important thing! But listening is not understood very well, both in Japan and in the U.S. The old paradigm is still with us. In other words, we tend to think of the person as being made up of certain things within the psyche. I imagine your question assumes the same paradigm, in asking if there are certain things to which we should be listening for. But no, if we think with the paradigm of "interaction first," then we have two persons, the client

and the therapist, in interaction first. From this interaction, contents get differentiated. In other words, what one feels differs greatly, depending on who one is with and how. With a severely critical person listening to you, the only things you might feel are tension, defensiveness, and self-criticism. In the presence of an accepting and empathic listener, you might start to think of your self and your life in a new way. Feelings that went unnoticed before might then emerge. And from the process of articulating those newly discovered feelings, more aspects might begin to emerge. From this emerging process, you might then see your life in a new light.

Now, many of my clients tell me, from the experience of having me listen to them, that they learn a way of relating to their own feelings. They learn to be more trusting and accepting of their feelings, they learn to value the meaning the feelings imply. And change begins to happen in their lives. Therapy happens not only in the therapy hour, but pervades their living processes. It is not like the old model, where you find certain "bad (pathogenic) contents" in your psyche and you drill through them in the therapy hour. Paradigms about human experience, the views of the person, are changing. New ways of thinking about human experience, like the model I'm using here, is emerging. Buddhism may teach us a lot, too. As opposed to the times when there were only several views of the person to which everyone attached their thoughts, we are now thinking in, and thinking with, a wide and wonderful opening! **KTO**

To contact or find out more about Dr. Ikemi, visit <http://hccweb5.bai.ne.jp/~hec13501/AkiraWeb/>