

# Learning

## □ *about the self*

A school set up by the spiritual teacher Jiddu Krishnamurti celebrates its 30th anniversary this year.

Matthew Barnett reports



How is it possible in our society to find a school and a system that meet all of a child's needs: not only academic but emotional and spiritual? One school which believes it may have some of the answers is Brockwood Park, a small co-educational boarding school set in 36 acres close to the village of Bramdean in Hampshire. Celebrating its 30th anniversary this year, Brockwood is one of a handful of schools founded by the humanist philosopher and educationalist, Jiddu Krishnamurti.

Far from being an orthodox Indian guru, Krishnamurti was an iconoclast whose chief concern was to free humanity from the constraints of dogma and narrow ideologies. "Truth", he once said, "is a pathless land, and you cannot approach it by any path whatsoever - by any religion, by any sect."

Blessed with a powerful intellect, yet unfailingly modest and self-critical, Krishnamurti's simple, holistic message influenced many leading writers and thinkers, from Aldous Huxley and George Bernard Shaw to Henry Miller, while his biography was written by Mary Lutyens daughter of the architect, Sir Edwin,

One of his greatest convictions was the inherent perniciousness of nationalism in all of its forms, and he believed implicitly in the need for humans to shed all notions of class, colour and cultural identity. In founding Brockwood, Krishnamurti expressly wanted to create a new generation of individuals who were "free from self-centred action".

The main school, housed in a classically styled, white mansion with uninterrupted views of rolling fields and woodland, educates approximately 60 students aged from 15 to 20. A large and dedicated staff drawn from all parts of the world and including many specialist academics, artists and musicians, provides both a learning environment and also, critically, an extended family. With small teaching groups and a teacher pupil ratio of 1:6 which would embarrass many leading independent schools, Brockwood's approach is to encourage pupils to discover their own aptitudes and potential in an atmosphere without constraint or narrow rules. While there does exist tangible structure and moral framework - for example, drugs and smoking are expressly forbidden and 'inappropriate' relationships between the sexes are not permitted - the guiding philosophy is to allow a high degree of self determination, both in intellectual and moral development.

Explains Brockwood Park's Administrative Director, Bill Taylor: "We want the students to understand that freedom is not simply about doing exactly what you want to do. Real freedom has to do with the capacity to understand, and go beyond, the various internal conflicts and problems that we are faced with. This requires a readiness on the part of both student and educator to be self-reflective and to be disposed towards asking questions and challenging one another. When this is done within a friendly and secure environment, then excellent relationships are formed and the student begins to understand the link between being free and being responsible."

While fostering excellence in all subject areas, a natural corollary of Krishnamurti's preoccupation with the aesthetics of human relationships and their bearing upon the natural environment is a powerful artistic tradition, one that is immediately apparent in almost every sphere of school life. Painting, pottery, music and dance are strong and an aura of creative excitement permeates every corridor and classroom.

Art teacher Louisa Simons, whose workplace is an exquisitely proportioned oaken hall designed by Keith Critchlow of the Prince of Wales's Institute of Architecture, says that pupils flourish in an atmosphere of "creative learning" where they are allowed to push at the boundaries of possibility "I don't know anywhere else where such an approach exists, where all concerned are involved in the learning process on a moment to moment basis."

"If students are educated properly, that is, if we can coax out of them what they want to do, then that is a great achievement. To me it seems relatively easy to pass exams and to find jobs, but less so to be happy - that is a quest, and it is a supreme function of what I do at Brockwood to foster what brings that sense of joy to an individual."

One of Brockwood's mature students, Wollu, who also studied at Krishnamurti schools in India, says she owes to them her passion for crafts and design - she is now planning to open a business in Goa along with a like-minded friend.

"While there is plenty to do, one has time at Brockwood to reflect about one's life, which is important. Also, while there are sensible rules, there is no institutionalised thinking - you think for yourself".

Again in line with Krishnamurti's teachings, the pupil intake is truly international and over a vegetarian lunch in the school's dining room, conversation ranges far and wide, both in subject matter and, crucially, perspective. One "old" Brockwood pupil, who left two years ago, is Valentin Gerlier Belgian-born son of a painter and dancer who now lives in London where he supports a nascent musical career with part-time work. His parents became acquainted with Krishnamurti through books and articles and, after Valentin's other schools failed to impress, they visited Brockwood. It was, says Valentin, "love at first sight". "The first thing which struck me was the warmth and openness here - a willingness to listen - and also the environment, which is not only beautiful but peaceful. I came to Brockwood with a clear idea of what I wanted to do. But for many the discovery happens at school - it might be bread making or archaeology. Either way Brockwood will bring it out and allow it to flourish. It really is a matter for the individual to discover - once you realise that it is your own hands then you are, in a way, liberated. This is at the heart of what Brockwood stands for: "self discovery."

Now, in its 30th year and on the eve of the new millennium, there are some exciting developments. A new junior school - Inwoods - has been launched, introducing what it describes as "The Children's Space" where Krishnamurti's vision of providing an holistic environment embracing the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual is being extended to children aged between 3 and 6. Already it is proving a great success.

Lectures and seminars, to be delivered by leading contemporary educationalists and writers, are planned for the anniversary year, together with a celebratory weekend in October. All of which, the school hopes, will help to raise the profile of Brockwood and, in particular, stimulate long overdue debate about Krishnamurti and his relevance to today's fragmented and uncertain society.

As staff member Dave Robertson puts it: "Brockwood helps you to understand who and what you are. It is a truly religious place, in the sense that it is our intention to live a moral life with integrity of purpose and self knowledge. Above all, that we live peacefully together."

**Amen to that.**

Brockwood Park school was founded in 1969 by Jiddu Krishnamurti.

Situated midway between Winchester and Petersfield, Brockwood is a co-educational boarding school educating approximately 60 students between the ages of 15 and 20.

All major subjects are studied and, with average class sizes of six, academic standards are high. The school offers the Cambridge Advanced International Certificate of Education (A levels), which is widely recognised as approved courses of study for university entrance.

In 1998, of 13 students taking the Cambridge AICE exams, nine passed with grades A - C, and four with lower grades. Of the eight taking Cambridge's English as a second language, all passed with grades A - C. Most students go on to university, while virtually all proceed to some form of further education.

Brockwood's junior school, Inwoods - The Children's Space, was founded two years ago and caters for children between the ages of three and six.

Fees at the senior school are £9,500 for a full year, which includes all tuition and board (the school has two terms, not three). Scholarships are available for children of all ages, conditional upon criteria such as the character of the individual, his or her sensitivity to the aims of Brockwood, expected contribution to the school, and financial circumstances of the family.

