

Revolutionising the Self. Colin Todhunter

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*Bindu Art School in Chengalpattu, a couple of hours by road from Chennai in South India, was set up in 2005 in the Bharatapuram leprosy colony. It was started by Austrian artist **Werner Dornik** and activist **Padma Venkataraman**.*

Werner, a multimedia artist from Bad Ischl in Austria, was 18 on his first visit to India in 1977, when he saw lepers begging on the streets. You can still see that today in Chennai.

After his first visit to India, he began to send donations to a leprosy home and, in 1981, contributed the proceeds of his photo exhibition in Austria to other leprosy homes in India. A chance meeting in 1995 in Vienna with Padma (daughter of former president of India R Venkataraman) eventually set things in motion.

On one of his visits to the Bharatapuram colony, Werner was impressed with the traditional Indian 'kolams' that were being drawn by people whose fingers were deformed and reduced to stubs. Werner thought that using art as a therapy would be a good idea. But as some of the elderly residents of the colony had hands that looked like claws, Werner taped paintbrushes to their fists and started them out with just two colours, black and blue. At first, the general mood of the painters resulted in art that was dark and depressing.



Kolam creation on the streets of Chennai from the author's online book [Life in the Lanes: Documenting Chennai](#)

Werner once told me:

“There’s no teaching here. The aesthetics are all their own. Students start with black and white, before they move on to colours. When they finally get to use all the colours, there’s an unrestrained explosion of life: forests, pink sunsets and even a hospital lined with patients that’s a kaleidoscope of colour and honesty but no pain.”

He added:

“There were no rules or any such thing as good or bad. Nor did I go into any technical details of art. The students were free to paint anything.”

In March 2006, some paintings were exhibited in Chennai.

Things have moved on since that first exhibition. The painters have subsequently had their work shown in trendy galleries from Vienna and London to Washington and Tokyo. Some of the paintings have sold for more than 200 euros. One of the four painters who made the trip to Vienna told an interviewer that he had received so much love and respect there that he almost forgot he had leprosy. Quite a statement for someone who had been labelled for most of his life as an illiterate ‘untouchable’.

The ethos of Bindu Art School is that of communal living, self-help, fellowship, dignity and independence. Werner Dornik’s personal outlook and his own art projects seek to make people aware that capitalism, crass materialism and consumerism are a deadening and ultimately self-destructive burden for humanity.

Werner states that his politics is ‘love’.

In a short film about Bindu Art School, Padmanabhan Krishna, a professor of physics, [says the following](#):

“The real beggar is honest. He puts his hat in front of him and says, ‘I need money. Please give me money, if you can.’ And we are also beggars. But we are dishonest beggars because we have invisible bowls, which we carry around. One bowl says, ‘Give me appreciation.’ Another bowl says, ‘Give me pleasure.’ Third one says, ‘Agree with me... support me.’ Fourth one says, ‘Give me security.’

“And when somebody puts something in that bowl, we say, ‘Friend. Very good man.’ And when he takes out of your bowl, you are angry, you create enemy. When you approach life like that, that means you approach it egotistically, and you will always create enemy.”

What he says encapsulates a fundamental flaw of modern society: an egocentric mindset that drives conflict and rivalry.

Revolutionary acts may take many forms. Bindu Art School being a point in case.

Arguably, the most effective acts often stem from a feeling of empathy, not anger, and camaraderie, not hate. Developing an appropriate mindset is easier said than done, however, especially in today’s world, where much of humanity is at the mercy of an increasingly globalised elite, whose policies of subjugation are driven by ego and fuelled by a relentless pursuit of power and wealth.

Many writers and thinkers have put forward solutions for building a better world. And over the years, so-called ‘model’ societies have been created, both large scale and small scale and for better or worse. But have these experiments solved humanity’s (self-inflicted) problems?

Humans have developed technologically, but, collectively, our mindset remains stuck. While physical evolution has occurred over millions of years, psychological evolution is a different matter. The ‘ego’ or ‘self’ cannot evolve in the same linear manner as physical forms

because it is rooted in conflict and division. _

The late Indian philosopher Jiddu Krishnamurti believed that an inner revolution is necessary for humanity to realise its full potential and to live in harmony with the totality of life. Individuals need to abandon their past conditioning, ambitions and accumulated psychological baggage. This process allows for a fresh and innocent mind, free from the constraints of previous experiences and societal conditioning. _

He argued that total awareness is crucial for freeing the mind from self-imposed limitations. By bringing unconscious patterns to light, individuals can transcend habitual responses driven by fear and insecurity. As a result, humanity's future hinges on its ability to transcend the ego and embrace a collective consciousness that recognises interconnectedness rather than division.

On an individual level, overcoming perhaps decades of conditioning may seem a tall order. It is not impossible, but humanity's future rests with the young.

Jiddu Krishnamurti viewed education not merely as a means to acquire knowledge or skills but as a transformative process aimed at cultivating a deeper awareness of oneself and one's relationship with the world. In effect, education should help students become aware of their conditioning and biases, allowing them to grow without fear and develop their capacities fully. _

Krishnamurti emphasised cooperation over competition, arguing that the latter fosters jealousy, conflict, rivalry and a fear-driven mindset among students. When students are pitted against each other, they become more focused on outperforming their peers rather than on genuine learning and self-discovery. _

Instead of nurturing individual talents, competitive environments often lead to conformity, where students feel pressured to fit into predefined moulds. Krishnamurti envisioned an education system devoid of competition, where learning is seen as a shared exploration rather than a race for grades or accolades. He believed that such a paradigm would cultivate not only knowledgeable individuals but also compassionate and responsible members of society.

Those who are familiar with the work of Ivan Illich (especially on the issue of 'deschooling society') will probably see similarities here. Both thinkers' discussions often revolved around the nature of education and structures of authority in shaping human consciousness.

Krishnamurti emphasised the importance of understanding and transforming the self to achieve genuine change. He argued that the self is an illusion, constructed through memories and desires, which leads to a hardened identity (a sense of permanence) that perpetuates conflict and suffering. To achieve true transformation, individuals must recognise the impermanence of the self and detach from their identity tied to possessions, beliefs and societal roles.

It follows that genuine change can only occur when one understands the nature of this illusion, as it drives self-interested desires that further entrench the individual in a cycle of striving and suffering.

But what are the material underpinnings of this illusion in today's world?

Karl Marx focused on the economic dimensions of power and how they shape individual identities within a capitalist framework. For Marx, power is primarily exercised through economic relations and class structures, which dictate individuals' experiences and opportunities. This economic power creates a 'fixed capital' mentality where individuals are seen as cogs in a machine, limiting their capacity for self-realisation and transformation.

In developing this line of thought, philosopher Louis Althusser explored the concept of the subjectification of the self. Althusser introduced the idea that individuals are 'hailed' into existence as subjects through ideological processes that prompt them to recognise themselves within a particular identity or social role. For Althusser, this recognition is crucial for the formation of the subject, as it signifies an acceptance of one's position within the social order.

Althusser argued that ideology is not merely a set of beliefs but a material practice that shapes how individuals perceive themselves and their relationships with others. Ideology operates through institutions such as education, religion and family, which reinforce specific identities, social norms and structures of power.

He challenged traditional notions of self-consciousness by suggesting that the self is not a pre-existing entity but is constructed through ideological processes. The subject is thus seen as a product of external social forces rather than an autonomous individual.

The French Philosopher Michel Foucault looked at disciplinary power. He argued that power is not merely repressive but productive; it shapes knowledge and identities in ways that individuals internalise. This concept implies that individuals actively participate in their own subjection by adhering to societal norms and expectations, which can hinder their ability to transform themselves as envisioned by Krishnamurti.

The interplay between Krishnamurti's insights on self-transformation and analyses of power grounded in everyday material conditions reveals significant barriers to personal change. Power dynamics are internalised within individuals, leading them to perpetuate their own limitations. This internalisation creates resistance against recognising the illusory nature of the self as described by Krishnamurti.

While Krishnamurti advocates for a deep understanding of the self as a means to break free from societal constraints, other thinkers provide critical frameworks for understanding how those constraints operate through economic systems and disciplinary practices.

All very interesting. But as Marx implied, it is not enough to know the world; the point is to change it.

It has almost become a cliché that to change the world we must first change ourselves, free ourselves from conditioning and propaganda and reinvent ourselves. But is that realistic or possible? And what type of material conditions might be best suited for liberating the self and bringing about positive change?

My recent online book *Power Play: The Future of Food* (read [here](#)) sheds light on these two final questions and calls for reestablishing humanity's (spiritual) connection to the land and nature and encouraging communities based on cooperative labour, fellowship, self-determination and local control over productive resources.

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