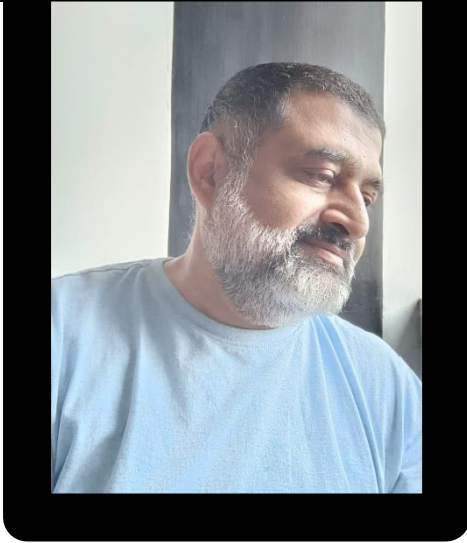


Psycho - Spiritual Counselling



Reconnect with yourself and start flowing again

- Write to me if you are interested in a three-day, in-person training workshop on psychospiritual counselling. To be conducted in Kerala,
- Intended Audience: Teachers, Spiritual Leaders and others who offer life-guidance that includes a spiritual dimension



Dr Mathai Fenn is a Cognitive Psychologist and Life Coach. He has a PhD from IIT Bombay and has taught at XLRI Jamshedpur for a decade. He has also taught at the American University of Armenia, SP Jain Global Campus Dubai, IIM Kozhikode, IIT Gandhinagar and GATI university, Baroda. He has designed and executed training programs for many of India's blue-chip companies. Recent clients include BHEL and Indian Oil. As a life coach, his Interests lie in the intersection between Depth Psychology, Spirituality and Cognitive Psychology.

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Excavating the Foundations

Everything that we do is based on certain assumptions that we make of the world (and of others) ... For the most part, our assumptions lie beneath the surface, hidden from plain sight. Yet, this foundation has a profound impact on what we see above ground. Indeed, the entire edifice of the world as we perceive it is built on this foundation. A certain amount of excavation can lay bare its basic structure, although it can never be completely exposed. For now, let's take the foundation as an unproven framework, a scaffolding that helps us to erect the building. The time will come when you must question this framework, take down the scaffolding, using critical enquiry and build your own.



The foundation of thought is not verifiable either by reason or by empiricism. Indeed, rationality and empiricism are themselves built on certain foundations. The ideas expressed in this document are not verifiable, nor do they exist “out there,” they are not “real.” They are ways of organizing thoughts and experiences, a way of interpreting the world around us and our relationships with the world.

What if human beings also go through a metamorphosis like the butterfly? What if who we are right now, is not what we are meant to be finally? What if the fully developed individual is so different from what we are, that we do not even recognize it? What if the change is not so much physical but in terms of consciousness? What if this transition is the norm rather than the exception? In Indian Philosophy, there is the idea that fully developed person is an enlightened being and that the culmination of human development lies in achieving this stage.

Tat Tvam Asi

Let's explore the possibility that God and His creation are not separate, they occupy the same space and time. Nature grows from within and is not like pottery shaped by an invisible hand. God is the life principle not a potter who

shapes clay according to HIS will. This notion of a creator separate from HIS creation is what is called an anthropomorphism.

1. **I seek to know God** through HIS creation. If God and HIS creation are inseparable, learning about nature and the universe is getting to know God better.
2. **Tat Tvam Asi:** I am GOD, since God and HIS creation are not different. There is nothing other than God, hence the words I am God, rather than God is in me. When we point to the sea on a beach, we do not say “This is a sea” or “This is part of the sea,” the correct grammatical use is to say, “this is the sea”, since there are no boundaries between that part of the sea and the rest of it.
3. **God is God of all Creation.** God is not a God of a particular tribe or even a God of those who believe. Everything that exists IS God (note the word IS and not HAS). God is not one of the ingredients that make up the universe, all ingredients are God (His Creation), and they are equal. The distinction between night and day, light, and darkness, good and evil are human constructs.
 - a. **All things deserve Respect:** If God is in All things, all things deserve to be treated with respect and care
4. **I choose Darkness,** since most people seek God in the light, I choose the path of mystery and wonder, because I do not have to know all the answers, and I am ok with not knowing.
5. **I do not know THE TRUTH:** I believe everything I have stated here is just my belief. It is speculative, a possibility that I believe is a good point of departure to begin the journey of understanding. It is not necessarily The Truth (with a capital T). Perhaps there is no Truth ... but is that statement true? Perhaps. Truth is a journey. Anyone can buy a ticket and join the journey.... But again... nothing wrong if you do not want to, either.

The Emergent Self

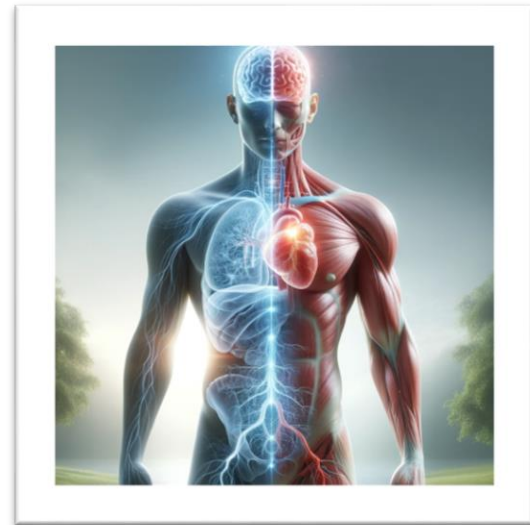


God and the universe are inseparable, how do we explain the existence of so many different things? Each having its own characteristics? Is there just one Being, or are there many? In nature we find incredible diversity despite an underlying unity. The Periodic Table lists 118 elements from which all matter is made up, and what is more, the subatomic particles appear to be the same, across all elements. Individual parts can exist even if we are all made of the same stuff.

I believe in a soul. The soul is not a thing, rather it is the unique way in which matter and thought are organized to make me what I am. I could say that my individual self is an emergent property, not contained within the individual components that go to make up who I am.

Who am I? The Soul, Mind and Body

I look down on my hands. I observe the wrinkles and the hair on them. Are these my hands? I guess they are, but as I stare at them, I do not feel that I am inside them, or even that somehow, they are physically a part of me. The only conclusion I can arrive at is that they are NOT ME.... Yet I am connected to them, in the way that I am connected to things that belong to me, that are precious to me. So, I guess I could say that they are mine, but I am definitely not my hands. I am the one who is looking at my hands. I am the observer. That way I can turn my attention to practically anything, including my own thoughts as I type this. The act of observing causes a split into the observer and the observed.



Realizing that I am not defined by my hands, the colour of my skin, my familial ties, or even my gender is akin to understanding the role of my computer monitor displaying the words as I type. They are content displayed on the screen but aren't the screen itself. Just as the screen remains constant regardless of what's displayed on it, my true self—my soul—remains unchanged despite these variable attributes.

The freedom to toggle between content parallels the liberty I have to relate to these attributes as I wish. I may not be able to alter them fundamentally, but I can choose how they fit into the narrative of my life.... For me, this has become a form of creative expression; I enjoy changing these aspects and observing how such shifts influence my interactions with the world.

This perspective underscores the idea that the soul has no attributes; what we see and describe are aspects of the corporeal body, not the underlying spirit. The TV screen remains the same, whether we're watching a comedy or a drama. Similarly, we can better understand the unchanging nature of our soul by observing how changes to our 'content'—our mutable characteristics—do not affect who we fundamentally are. This realization liberates us to explore changes to the non-essential parts of our identity without fear, knowing they do not define us.

Some people, however, do identify themselves with their body and its attributes. They find it difficult to change. I know a man who will only eat after he has had a shower. So, if for some reason, he is unable to take a shower, he does not eat. Some others are attached to a particular way of dressing that expresses themselves best. They find it difficult to change their appearance. The theatre provides us with a useful metaphor for this. An actor plays the role he is given, even trying to feel and see the world as the character would. While performing the actor may even forget who he is and become the character.

“Once upon a time, I dreamt I was a butterfly, fluttering hither and thither, to all intents and purposes a butterfly. I was conscious only of my happiness as a butterfly, unaware that I was myself. Soon I awoke, and there I was, veritably myself again. Now I do not know whether I was then a man dreaming I was a butterfly, or whether I am now a butterfly, dreaming I am a man.”

_____Zhuangzi (AKA Chuang Tzu)



- **The Body** – refers to my physical body AND the environment it is embedded in, both the physical environment and the socio-cultural environment.
- **The Mind** – This is the realm of Psychology. Some people call it the ego It is often referred to as the sixth sense (not in the supernatural meaning), is the part of us that makes sense of the world around us, considering the inputs from our five senses. It is also responsible for how we respond to the world. It includes things that we are conscious of and the many things that we are not aware of, but potentially can be. It manages the cognitive functions of input (perception of the world around us) and output (our response to the world including how we put it together. The same event can be viewed differently by different people, and this could result in very different responses. We choose how we view/interpret the world and how we respond to it.
- **The Soul** – The soul is the source, the thinker behind the thoughts, the actor behind our actions. Since it is the subject and not the object of all thought, people say that it cannot have any “attributes”. When I am sad, it is the I in the sentence not the sadness. In short everything that happens to us because of our experiences and our body, are not part of the soul. The soul is the white canvas, and all feelings, emotions and actions are part of the mind.... Yet sometimes we feel closer to the soul than in other times. These are times when we experience something without reflexive thought. When we have an aesthetic or peak experience, we feel at one with the world. When there is only the self and the experience, no reflexive thought, no judgment, we feel somehow more authentic and closer to our soul. Hence an authentic life is one that is lived inside out, that is how animals live. They do not THINK. Authentic life involves more than that. The idea is not to numb the mind but stay awake. The aim of authentic living is to reduce conflict between the soul, mind, and body to align them so that there is harmony between them.

Resilience and Flexibility

As I
this, I



write
am in

Ahmedabad, India. The dry heat makes me thirsty, and I would really enjoy a cold beer... But Gujarat is a dry state and drinking a beer requires a permit... But wait... do I really need a beer to quench my thirst? We could say I NEED a drink to quench my thirst, but I WANT a beer. The beer is just one of the ways in which I can achieve my goal of quenching thirst. If I can disconnect the thought of beer from my thirst, I would realize that there are a wide range of ice-cold drinks to choose from. *Dis-associating what we need from what we want is the secret of resilience.* A lonely teenage girl who believes that the solution to her loneliness lies in a particular boy, or a student who has built his dreams of living the life of his dreams based on the result of his immediate examination, both are unable to think of how else they can get what they need.

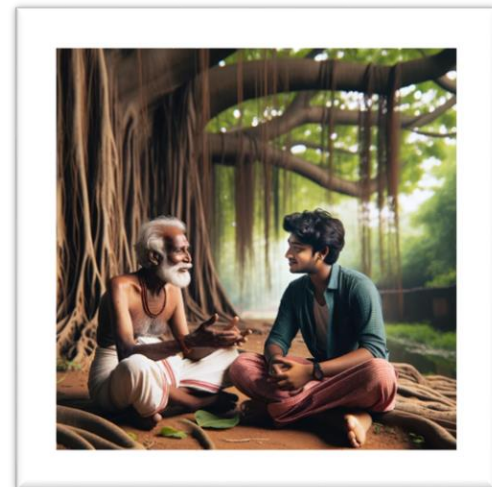
Resilience is all about letting go of things that do not matter and still finding life meaningful.

In Greek mythology, Narcissus is a hunter who falls in love with his own reflection in a stream.... Yet the reflection is not a person and cannot do anything on its own. There is only one human there, that is Narcissus. If one source of stress lies in not getting what we WANT in life. Another source lies in seeing ourselves as somehow less than perfect, as inferior. This happens when we look at ourselves from the outside. Somehow, we become the OBSERVED, not the observer. The observer, in this case is a hypothetical point of view located somewhere outside of ourselves. This perspective allows us to critically compare ourselves to others. The observer (self) feels inauthentic, nevertheless it brings up some questions. When comparing ourselves to others we realize that everyone dies at some point, and at that means we will die soon, and the observer will no longer exist. The other source of anxiety lies in comparing ourselves with others and finding ourselves lacking (inferior).

Psycho-Spiritual Counselling

Understanding and aligning the soul, mind and body are important for healthy living. Of these, Psychology deals with the mind and it's function. To the psychologist, all spiritual entities are nothing but symbols of psychological energy¹. The conceptual framework that outlines the interconnections among the mind, body, and soul provides the counsellor with a navigational chart. This framework demarcates the specific domain in which the psychologist operates, as well as the boundaries that confine it.

Typical questions in Psycho-Spiritual Counselling



¹ CG Jung is a good introduction to this approach

1. **General Anxiety:** Unlike fear that is towards a specific object, say like fear of snakes, general anxiety has no specific object; alternatively, the object may keep changing from one to another. Although there are many theories about its cause, we do not even know whether this is due to the body (e.g., Hormonal changes) or the mind (deeper aspects like existential anxiety or social anxiety).
 - a. Our triad approach allows the possibility that the source of this anxiety may not be from the mind at all, however we still have to adapt and live with it. One approach is to treat the ups and downs of life as waves in an ocean and the mind as a boat floating on the ocean, bobbing up and down. All the time, the soul is seated in the boat unperturbed. Our problems arise from our attachment to the ups and downs, allowing them to define us.
2. **Low Self Esteem /Self Worth:** We all have times when we question our own worth. Some people have it more than others. It may be tied to your physical appearance or to career achievements, sometimes it is hard to put a finger on the source of the feeling.
 - a. Our approach says that everything has value, and it does not come entirely from how you look or behave. In my work, I have come across beautiful girls who tell me that they feel they are not attractive. Perhaps they expect me to counter them and affirm that they really are attractive. My answer... it doesn't matter if you are beautiful or ugly. It is just the body and it is like the clothes we wear. We try to look good, but some clothes are better than others. While it is fun to try on different clothes, what is more important is to remember things that lie deeper.
3. **Social Anxiety:** Do you find it hard to start a conversation or to meet new people? Are you always afraid that people will find you boring or worse?
 - a. Live life inside-out and not outside-in. This problem happens only because you look at yourself critically and try to see yourself through other people's eyes. Try turning it 180 degrees to throw the spotlight on them. Ask them about their life. Truly listen as they speak. Try to experience/live their life as they portray it. In the meantime, try to create a safe space where people can speak without being judged. If some kind of judgment comes up, try to focus on accepting them rather than expressing your approval or

disapproval. Make a soul-to-soul connection. Value the other person as a valuable human being, yet another expression of the one God. View the differences with curiosity and compassion.

Don't be afraid to show genuine appreciation for the other.

4. **Psychoses:** Psychosis can be frightening with perceptual distortions like hallucinations and delusions. Much of it can be traced to the breakdown of the set of interlinked principles that make up the mind.
 - a. Traditional Psychiatry aims to reduce these experiences and bring the person back to normalcy; to suppress, if not cure such experiences. Our approach distinguishes between the experience and the one who experiences these events. In fact, in many spiritual traditions talk about such a breakdown of "normalcy" as an unavoidable part of the spiritual journey towards being a fully functioning individual. An impending psychotic episode creates a lot of anxiety and perhaps the most difficult part of the psychotic experience lies in making sense of it all. Locating one's identity in the soul and not identifying it with the mind, helps to reduce this anxiety. In fact, there are those who are able to maintain relatively stable lives despite some psychotic symptoms.
5. **Fear of Death and Old Age:** The fear of death needs no added introduction. Many people live their life by avoiding the thought of death, but for others, this denial lies at the root of many problems. Fear of death has two components. First is the worry about what happens after death and the question of survival of the soul. The second is about the process of dying. Old age on the other hand, recognizes the dynamic nature of the person, about pain and slow fading away of consciousness. The person at 65 is not the same as the person at 25. Navigating this change lies in the knowledge of what is core and what is not, to the identity. Like the case of many psychological conflicts, the core of successfully managing the stages of life requires resilience and flexibility. The Psycho-spiritual perspective takes the view that death is an inseparable part of life.

Summary

In summary, Psycho-Spiritual Counselling offers a refreshing framework that transcends the limitations of traditional psychological approaches. By embracing a tripartite model of human existence—mind, body, and soul—this form of counselling provides a richer, more holistic view of well-being.

The approach integrates well-established psychological methods aimed at the mind and body while incorporating spiritual practices that delve into the soul. This harmonious blend equips you with a versatile toolkit for your counselling practice, enabling you to address a broad spectrum of human experiences and needs.

As you take your first steps in your counselling career, Psycho-Spiritual Counselling offers an enriching path that acknowledges the complexities of human life in all its dimensions. We invite you to delve deeper into this integrative model, enriching both your professional practice and personal understanding of the human condition.

