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Philosophical Counselling through Meditative Inquiry: Insights for Holistic and Contemplative Educators and Practitioners¹

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Abstract

Keywords

Meditative
Inquiry;
Philosophical
Counselling;
Dialogue;
Awareness;
Creativity;
Holistic
Education

This paper explores how meditative inquiry can contribute to philosophical counselling, and how these two perspectives together can inform the work of holistic and contemplative educators and practitioners. After outlining the definition, goals, and practices related to meditative inquiry and pointing to its transformative potential, the author draws attention to how meditative inquiry and philosophical counselling share similar goals, such as engagement in authentic inner exploration of questions of deep existential significance, and highlights the benefits of processes related to meditative inquiry, such as developing attentive listening and observation, engaging in creative and aesthetic exploration, and connecting with nature. Rather than medicalizing and pathologizing personal and relational conflicts, meditative inquiry and philosophical counselling encourage us to delve deeper into them through critical thinking, self-reflection, and dialogue, and embrace authentic transformation. Given their emphasis on holistic understanding and transformation, the author believes that philosophical counselling and meditative inquiry can provide theoretical and practical support to holistic and contemplative educators and practitioners, including schoolteachers, university professors, mindfulness practitioners, and counsellors.

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¹ I presented an earlier draft of this paper as a plenary speaker at the International Conference on Philosophical Counselling: Concepts, Methods, and Debates (online). The presentation video is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PrC4Gq4ncVM&t=11s>

Philosophical counselling, which has recently emerged as a cohesive field, has existed throughout human history. The *Bhagavad Gita*, *Ashtavakra Gita*, teachings of the Upanishads, discourses of Buddha from ancient India, and talks and dialogues of J. Krishnamurti in the recent past, can all be considered examples of philosophical counselling². In fact, there are many philosophers, spiritual teachers, and traditions from around the world—too numerous to mention here—that could be described as antecedents of the modern philosophical counselling movement. In both its ancient and contemporary manifestations, philosophical counsellors look at psychological issues/problems/dilemmas/conundrums from a philosophical and holistic perspective (Hategan, 2018; Lahav, 2018; Marinoff, 2002), seeking to engage in a deeper inquiry about life and its complexities rather than simply medicalize and pathologize them as is common in modern psychology and psychiatry (Beeker et al., 2021; Jacob et al., 2014). As Raabe points out (2002),

Philosophical counselling is a philosophical discussion rather than the clinical ‘treatment’ of a putative mental illness, and the fact that the counsellor is a philosopher rather than a clinical psychologist, psychiatrist, psychoanalyst, or psychotherapist, can substantially reduce the feelings of fear, shame, and guilt which keeps many people from seeking professional help in the first place. (pp. 23-24)

Similarly, according to Ran Lahav (1996),

The role of the counsellor is to lead a philosophical self-examination and thus to help counselees develop their philosophical understanding of themselves and their world, and empower them to deal with their problems and lives in their own way. These two goals—philosophical self understanding or wisdom (philo-sophia = love of wisdom) as an end in itself, and overcoming personal problems—receive different emphasis by different philosophical practitioners, some of whom aim mainly at the former while others focus on the latter. (p. 259)

As Lahav (1996) points out, philosophical counselling relates to both *sophia* (intellectual wisdom) and *phronesis* (practical wisdom) by encouraging contemplation and thoughtful action through one’s own deeper understanding of the world. In my view, philosophical counselling is a radical contribution that challenges the superficial, technical, and commercial orientation of modern psychology, where the goal is to help the individual to fit into the prevailing social and institutional systems rather than question those systems and one’s place in them.

I believe that my notion of meditative inquiry—which I have developed through my scholarly research, pedagogical practices, and creative endeavours (Kumar, 2013, 2019, 2022; Kumar & Acharya, 2021; Kumar & Downey, 2018, 2019; Kumar & Fischer, 2021)—can further the goals and aspirations of philosophical counselling. Due to meditative inquiry’s emphasis on deeper engagement with life in all its subtleties and complexities through a sense of existential awareness, it can contribute to the growing awareness in the field of philosophical counselling regarding how contemplation and meditation can deepen and enhance the process of philosophical practice. In this article, first I discuss the notion of meditative inquiry; I then offer a description of my use of meditative inquiry in the classroom as an example of how it can be applied in a variety of settings, followed by a discussion on how meditative inquiry can be a contributing voice to the emerging contemplative orientations in the field of philosophical

² For instance, see the special issue “Philosophical Counselling in India” published in *Philosophical Practice* (2021; Volume 16, Number 1). This special issue was edited by Lou Marinoff whose work is foundational to the field of philosophical counselling and who emphasizes the centrality of meditation in philosophical practice (Marinoff, 2002).

counselling (Hategan, 2018a; Lahav, 2018; Marinoff, 2002). Given their emphasis on holistic understanding and transformation, I believe that philosophical counselling and meditative inquiry can provide theoretical and practical support to holistic and contemplative educators and practitioners, including schoolteachers, university professors, mindfulness practitioners, and counsellors.

What is Meditative Inquiry?³

The essence of meditative inquiry is not something I have invented; its roots connect back to ancient approaches to learning and inquiry, much like those of philosophical counselling. In my view, the dialogical texts like the *Bhagavad Gita*, *Ashtavakra Gita*, and Upanishads, as well as the discourses of Buddha and Krishnamurti, are all manifestations of meditative inquiry. Human beings have always had the desire to understand the world within and without; we have been driven by curiosity and explorations of life itself. Meditative inquiry, simply put, is an exploration of one's self and of how one is related to other people and the world; it is suffused with a meditative sensibility that can support inquiry into any topic or field.

Through my theoretical and pedagogical work, I have explored and developed meditative inquiry as an approach to teaching, learning, researching, creating, and living. Meditative inquiry essentially implies the art of awareness. Its central focus is developing a deeper understanding of how one thinks, feels, and acts in everyday life. Through awakening a deeper sense of observation, within one's self and outside it, one begins to look at life and its processes more deeply. One begins to listen to others with attention and empathy rather than through judgment and control. Meditative inquiry allows for a sense of deeper communication and dialogue within one's self, and between and among individuals and groups. It looks at conflicts—personal and social—from the perspective of deep understanding so that the roots of the conflict are unearthed and eradicated through meditative engagement. The goal of meditative inquiry is not to resist or suppress the issues and complexities of living but to engage with them through meditative awareness.

Often, when individuals hear the phrase meditative inquiry, they assume that I am talking about mindfulness. While mindfulness has emerged from the ancient Buddhist traditions and their ethical and spiritual goals, in its current form it has been reduced to a set of techniques and tools to reduce stress, increase focus and efficiency, and perform better. By not directing us to explore truth and gain a deeper understanding of life (as is the focus of Buddhism and all its branches), modern-day mindfulness has become part and parcel of capitalistic culture and is used to gain instrumental outcomes rather than as an approach to change our lives—personally and socially—in a deep and foundational manner. While I do incorporate relaxation and reflective activities and exercises as part of the meditative inquiry approach to reduce stress and promote well-being, the ultimate goal of meditative inquiry is not to put up with the status quo but to challenge it at a fundamental level. Meditative inquiry is a broader dialogical approach for exploration rather than a set of tools, methods, or techniques. Meditative inquiry is also not a step-by-step or highly structured process where each individual follows a regimen and achieves pre-determined outcomes. Meditative inquiry is personal and pathless; it needs to be experienced existentially and in an emergent fashion. It enables us to engage with inner and outer conflicts and challenges at a deeper level (Hyland, 2017; Kumar, 2022; Sable, 2022).

The core purpose of meditative inquiry is to deeply understand and transform the conflicted

³ In this section I have drawn upon my ideas on meditative inquiry that I have developed in my previous writings (Kumar, 2013, 2019, 2022; Kumar & Acharya, 2021; Kumar & Downey, 2018, 2019; Kumar & Fischer, 2021).

nature of human consciousness by cultivating a deeper sense of awareness. Human consciousness implies our everyday inner states characterized by fears, anxieties, pleasures, jealousies, and conflicts. Our consciousness influences how we interact with one another as individuals and in groups; it lies at the very root of the social, political, economic, and educational structures we have created (Krishnamurti, 1954a; 1969). As the consciousness within each one of us is in a state of conflict, it not only deteriorates our psychological well-being, but also creates patterns of conflict in relationship with others, which, over time, crystalize as structural or systemic problems (Kumar, 2013).

Meditative inquiry implies developing a deep awareness of the patterns of consciousness within ourselves, in our relationships, and in the structures of society. Meditative awareness loosens the rigid patterns and structures within us, which are more often than not mechanical or unconscious in nature, and helps us become pliable, responsive, and authentic. Such deep awareness, which grows through questioning, self-reflection, listening, and authentic dialogue, brings about a sense of self that is rooted in holistic, integrated, and authentic being rather than in the conditioned patterns of psychosocial identity.

A central aspect of growing and deepening meditative awareness is learning the arts of listening and observation. Meditative listening and observation demand paying attention to one's self and one's relationship with people and nature in everyday life. The purpose of such listening is not to analyze, categorize, and classify what one sees according to one's knowledge and conditioning. On the contrary, meditative listening and observation bring about a state of mind and being that allows us to connect with each other and nature with a sense of open-mindedness, acceptance, and compassion. To experience meditative listening and observation, we need a mind that is relaxed and centred. Meditative inquiry encourages relaxation activities like quiet and attentive walks in nature, listening to its whispers and observing its immense beauty, qigong, calm breathing exercises, and listening to meditative music, among others. Unlike technique-based approaches such as mindfulness, however, meditative inquiry does not use these activities as means to fit into the existing system but to gain an authentic and centred being that can live peacefully and harmoniously and challenge oppression and injustices.

Attentive listening and observation create a conducive space for what I call dialogical meditative inquiry (Kumar, 2022). Dialogical meditative inquiry creates the possibility of expressing one's ideas and engaging with others' ideas contemplatively and compassionately. It allows us to be open to different worldviews, thereby facilitating deeper and richer exploration of personal, relational, and social problems, issues, and conflicts. Together, the arts of listening and observation and the practice of dialogue—the key elements of meditative inquiry—offer a pathway towards asking deeper questions about life, discovering ourselves, and connecting with one another and nature on a deeper level. When engaged with sincerely and holistically, meditative inquiry opens the door to authentic living.

Meditative inquiry as an approach can be used in any form of inquiry. Each person who engages in a meditative inquiry will find their own path; there are no specific techniques or methods to follow. I have, however, created a list of seven principles that underpin meditative inquiry (Kumar, 2022, p. xxiv):

Questioning deeply about everything without fear
Critiquing social injustice, oppression, and discrimination
Celebrating the freedom to think to observe, to express, and to be
Cultivating awareness of the ways one thinks, feels, and acts

*Partaking and rejoicing in the creative flow of life
 Understanding relationships and connecting with people and nature deeply
 Participating in dialogue with oneself and others honestly and authentically.*

In the next section, I offer some contextual examples of explorations with meditative inquiry, focusing in particular on my own teaching.

Meditative Inquiry in the Classroom and Other Contexts

Meditative inquiry can be used in any form of inquiry, ranging from personal explorations of questions, such as “Who am I” to asking deeper epistemological questions about the nature of knowledge, or as an approach to teaching and learning. Some examples of the diverse potential of meditative inquiry can be found in the edited book, *Engaging with Meditative Inquiry in Teaching, Learning, and Research: Realizing Transformative Potentials in Diverse Contexts* (Kumar, 2022). This book is a collection of the narratives, stories, and reflections of a wide range of scholars and professionals from African, Asian, Buddhist, Indigenous, and Western backgrounds, each exploring an inquiry of their own, in their own field, in relation to meditative inquiry. The book explores a variety of themes, concepts, and practices in relation to meditative inquiry (e.g., arts-based research, poetic inquiry, Africentricity, Indigenous worldviews, martial arts, positive psychology, trauma, dispute resolution, and critical discourse analysis), thus making it an invaluable multi/inter/cross-disciplinary resource for holistic and contemplative educators and practitioners.

I myself have used meditative inquiry in a variety of ways, including as an approach to learning Indian classical music (Kumar & Downey, 2019), and as a pedagogical approach for my university classroom where I practice as a full-time professor of education. My philosophy of teaching can be summed up in one phrase: *Teaching as Meditative Inquiry* (Kumar & Downey, 2018; Kumar & Acharya, 2021). It permeates all of my courses in the BEd, MEd, and PhD programs, and it is rooted in culturally responsive, inclusive, experiential, and holistic pedagogical approaches that aim towards providing transformative educational experiences to students. Its core purpose is to develop a deeper sense of personal and social awareness through listening deeply, posing foundational questions, and engaging in dialogical exploration. Developing a deeper awareness of our bodies, thoughts, and feelings as well as engaging in relaxation, meditative, creative, and reflective activities are central to this approach. Teaching as meditative inquiry critiques instrumental, transmissive, and mechanical approaches as they reduce teaching to measurable outcomes instead of a holistic and transformative process. Instead of prescriptive and restrictive modes of teaching, teaching as meditative inquiry underscores the importance of freedom and creativity to support deep learning. Teaching as meditative inquiry is thus a holistic approach to teaching that fosters deep learning and nurtures students’ minds, bodies, and hearts. By offering students choice and flexibility, teaching as meditative inquiry centralizes their autonomy, individuality, originality, passion, and creativity and thereby makes space for their unique personal development and expression. Below, I briefly describe the five pillars of teaching as meditative inquiry approach with examples.⁴

Dialogue and Inquiry. Dialogue and inquiry are central to my teaching. A dialogical classroom promotes critical thinking, engagement, and deep learning and understanding. It encourages students to develop an authentic voice and share original thoughts with their peers.

⁴ For a detailed theoretical and practical discussion of teaching as meditative inquiry see Kumar & Acharya (2021) and Kumar & Downey (2018).

Dialogue fosters listening and communication skills and opens minds to diverse perspectives. It creates a collaborative community where we are all co-learners. I begin each of my courses with a “Dialogue on Creating a Dialogical Classroom” session where we explore questions like: What is dialogue? What factors may inhibit and facilitate dialogue? How can we create a dialogical classroom? This session sets the tone for the term and ensures deep engagement with the subject matter and one another. I ensure that all students feel welcome in my classroom and comfortable participating even when dialogue pushes them gently out of their comfort zones. Voluntary participation, clear expectations, and a collegial environment empower even hesitant students to participate enthusiastically in class dialogues and contribute to the process of collective exploration and co-construction of theoretical knowledge and creative practices.

The dialogue relating to course material is facilitated through open-ended questions (e.g., what struck you about the culturally responsive pedagogy article? What principles of Indigenous wisdom can you incorporate in your teaching?) that encourage independent, critical, and divergent thinking rather than regurgitating memorized information. I ask students to reflect on the questions individually, then discuss them in small groups, followed by sharing key points with the whole class. Even during presentations, especially when BEd students teach their lesson plans in small groups to the whole class, I encourage students to use an interactive and conversational style to give them practice in creating dialogical spaces—the more they practice conversational, experiential, and interactive teaching skills, the more confidence they gain over the subject matter and their ability to incite transformative learning in their future classrooms. These experiences allow students to move from transmissive to transformative models of learning, which in turn, will positively impact their own future students. To enrich the class dialogue, I also invite diverse guest speakers including international scholars, community members, and former students. This allows students to consider the course content in broader contexts.

I use assessment as an opportunity to promote dialogue and achieve personal growth by giving constructive oral and written feedback on assignments and by creating collegial peer feedback opportunities. Students are invited to offer their feedback to me throughout the course, which allows me to make important adjustments, and via a detailed anonymous feedback sheet at the end of the course, which helps me to make changes for future semesters.

Reflection and Introspection. Reflection and introspection facilitate a deeper understanding of the subject matter, pedagogy, thoughts and feelings, and the state of our world. Most of my courses include a “Reflective Journal” assignment where students reflect on what they think and feel about the course materials and their exchanges with the guest speakers and each other, and how they are building conceptual and practical connections in their minds. Students may share their reflections via prose, poetry, art, music, podcasts, websites, etc. Most experiment with a variety of media. I also enable reflection and introspection via a detailed “Autobiographical Statement” assignment at the beginning of my courses in which students reflect on their educational journey—and the challenges and opportunities it affords them—and share their learning styles and expectations of my course. It allows me to learn about their unique personalities, goals, interests, and challenges, and thereby, tailor my curriculum and pedagogy to recognize their diversity and support their active learning.

Relaxation and Meditation. Relaxation and meditative exercises support our well-being and learning. I begin my classes with a form of meditative relaxation activity, such as music, diaphragmatic breathing, yoga stretches, body scans, free drawing, qigong movements, or silent

sitting. In my all-day summer courses, I take students for silent nature walks. These activities help center and ground us, improve our attention and mood, reduce stress, allow us to be intuitive and open, and prepare us for deep learning. Students love these experiential exercises, inspiring me to develop an assignment called “Creativity and Relaxation Activity” that I incorporate into many of my courses. In this project, students experiment with an activity that is beneficial to their overall well-being. Students really like this assignment and have tried out diverse and experiential activities, including singing, meditating, nature walks, painting, star gazing, dancing, and nature photography, among others. It is really amazing to see them explore their creativity so deeply. I also share my passion for Indian classical music by playing harmonium and singing meditative music in my classes. Relaxation, meditation, and creative exploration enable holistic growth by including the body, heart, and mind in the educational experience.

Freedom, Flexibility, and Creativity. While I expect students to produce work of a high standard, I offer them freedom and flexibility in the choice of readings, assignments, and presentation formats to encourage originality, creativity, and personal engagement. One example that incorporates all three is the portfolio assignments for the BEd Holistic Teaching and Learning course. In this course, students create a portfolio—a collection of resources and teaching and learning activities—on a topic of their choice related to holistic education, such as contemplative pedagogy, alternative schools, or Indigenous wisdom. They organize and present it in a way that they find most suitable to their theme rather than following a structure imposed by me. Students appreciate the opportunity to dig into their areas of interest, tap into their creative potential, grow as learners, and complete high-quality work that they are proud of.

Personal and Social Transformation. From the determination of course goals and selection of course materials and guest speakers to the development of assignments that encourage creativity, the ultimate purpose of my teaching is to facilitate personal and social transformation. I offer educational experiences that: foster deep learning about oneself and critical engagement with one’s rootedness in the larger social structures; enable a dialogical and collective exploration of social issues and problems; and engender a sense of conviction that, with a holistic education, both personal and social change are possible.

As can be seen in the examples of my own teaching and in the book mentioned above (Kumar, 2022), meditative inquiry can contribute to any field or profession, especially those who would like to promote a deeper, existential inquiry in its practice. It is for this reason that I believe meditative inquiry has much to offer to philosophical counselling. In the next section, I will outline my thoughts on the ways in which meditative inquiry can contribute to emerging contemplative focus in philosophical counselling.

How May Meditative Inquiry Contribute to the Contemplative Orientations within Philosophical Counselling?

Meditative inquiry and philosophical counselling share a lot of common ground. Meditative inquiry could be considered a form of philosophical counselling that is rooted in deep inner awareness of one’s thinking, feelings, and actions. In fact, key contemporary proponents of philosophical counselling, such as Lahav (2016, 2018) and Marinoff (2002), consider contemplation and meditation central to the theory and practice of philosophical counselling (Hategan, 2018). Below, I describe the ways in which meditative inquiry can contribute to the discourse and practice of philosophical counselling, especially in relation to its focus on contemplation and meditation.

Expanding the Meaning of Philosophy, Counselling, and Philosophical Counselling:

First of all, the perspective of meditative inquiry can support us in expanding the meanings of the three key terms: philosophy, counselling, and philosophical counselling. From the meditative inquiry viewpoint, philosophy is not merely the intellectual and cognitive pursuit which has become central to concepts of philosophy in modern Western thinking. Meditative inquiry allows philosophy to return to its foundational root—the love of wisdom—and become a holistic form of inquiry which brings together the intellect, emotions, and action, as well as being and awareness. Similarly, from a meditative inquiry outlook, counselling goes beyond helping someone to fit into a predominant system or treating psychological issues and problems as isolated from existential and social issues. Through the lens of meditative inquiry, counselling is invited to assume a deeper meaning where the intention is to understand the structure and process of one's self through direct observation and authentic and free dialogue, rather than through pre-established structures and theories. So, a meditative inquiry orientation aligns with and supports an approach to philosophical counselling that emphasizes gaining deeper wisdom about one's own self and one's relationships to the world, without being limited to resolving a discrete problem that a person may have.

Existential and Authentic Exploration: One central goal of philosophical counselling is to engage in authentic inner explorations of questions with deep existential significance including: Who am I? What is the purpose of my life? What is death? What does it mean to live a good and happy life? Why is there inner and outer conflict? How can one live with one's self and others peacefully? These questions are central to the notion of meditative inquiry, as they are to philosophical counselling; through them, we are encouraged to connect the wisdom of our thoughts and ideas (*sophia*) with actions and practices (*phronesis*). Through its personal focus, meditative inquiry allows us to explore these questions with our whole being. In a meditative exploration, the goal is not just to find intellectual explanations for these questions, but to actually live with them and allow them to unfold existentially.

Intellectual answers, however profound and logical, do not satisfy our very being. They only partly and superficially ease the existential angst. Meditative inquiry, on the other hand, does not merely engage with these questions intellectually, but allows them to pervade the whole being so that they can touch our very roots and begin to transform our thoughts, feelings, and actions deeply and organically. For example, one can explore the question of fear and why one is afraid on an intellectual level. In intellectual exploration, we tend to focus on understanding fear from a rational and logical framework. We use language, analysis, and thinking to understand the meaning and causes of fear and how it affects our lives. While an intellectual exploration of fear is helpful, it does not necessarily help us understand it in an existential and meditative manner. In fact, intellectual exploration can serve as a barrier to a deeper understanding. I can understand that I am afraid of snakes intellectually, but that does not transform my fear. From a meditative perspective, on the other hand, one pays attention to the feeling of fear as it arises. There is no attempt to explain it away or control it. Rather, the focus is on fully experiencing the fear as it happens without resistance, control, or judgment. A meditative exploration of fear helps one see how fear actually happens within one's self and how it influences, subtly or explicitly, one's thinking, feelings, and actions. It allows us to go to the existential roots of our fear and thereby deeply experience it and see its structure and process. Such meditative seeing and experiencing brings about an intelligent and conscious awareness of the fear in action and thereby gives us the real strength to meet it fully rather than run away from it or control it. When we are able to face our fears with our whole being, they simply dissolve. According to J. Krishnamurti (1954b),

Can the mind observe fear? Your fear: fear of death, fear of life, fear of loneliness, fear of darkness, fear of being nobody, fear of not becoming a great success, fear of not being a leader, a writer, fear of many different things. First of all, is one aware of it? Or one leads such a superficial life, everlastingly talking about something else, and so one is never aware of oneself, of one's own fears. Then if one does become aware of those fears, at what level do you become aware? Is it an intellectual awareness of them or are you actually aware of your fears, and aware at the deeper levels of your mind of fear, of the deep hidden recesses? And if they are hidden, how are they to be exposed?

So how do you uncover the whole structure, the intricacies of fear? This is a tremendous problem, not just to be listened to for two or three minutes and then forgotten, to find out for oneself whether it is possible to expose all fears, or whether there is only one central fear that has many branches. When one sees the central fear, the branches begin to wither away. Is there one central fear like the trunk of a tree, though it has many branches, and if you could understand that single root of fear you have understood the whole network of fear? How do you approach this, from the periphery or from the centre? If the mind can understand the root of fear, then the branches, the various aspects of fear have no meaning, they wither away. So, what is the root of fear? Can you look at your fear? Please look at it now, invite it. (1954b, paras. 1 and 2)

Dialogue for Deeper Understanding. The next contribution of meditative inquiry to the contemplative focus of philosophical counselling pertains to the notion of dialogue. According to physicist and philosopher David Bohm (1996, p. 9),

Dialogue is really aimed at going into the whole thought process and changing the way the thought process occurs collectively. We haven't really paid much attention to thought as a process. We have engaged in thoughts, but we have only paid attention to the content, not to the process.

Meditative inquiry brings the element of existential awareness to the process of dialogue. Existential awareness means that one is highly attentive to how one is thinking and feeling in the moment without judgment or control, and extends the same awareness to the person one is engaging with. This quality of deeper awareness changes the dynamic of usual conversation where the goal is to engage merely cognitively or intellectually. The listening and speaking that happens in a meditative dialogue allow for a deeper connection and understanding. It not only helps break the power structure between individuals but also allows them to engage on an existential plane. When one engages in meditative dialogue, one is engaging holistically. There is attentiveness to how one is speaking, the emotions that are behind the verbal expressions, and the prejudices that one may hold. The same attention is also given to the person one is engaging with. One looks at the person to whom one is talking to with full attention and tries to connect on a deeper, more existential level. In such an engagement, listening and speaking are not merely cognitive processes. There is attention to emotions, cultural conditioning, and the other being. When one engages in this manner, not only is there a deeper perception of the thoughts and feelings of the other person, but there is also a sense of organic release and connection, which is not possible when we engage with one another only intellectually.

Being in Nature. Meditative inquiry, in its orientation to bringing more than the intellectual dimension into the process of living, encourages us to establish a deeper connection with nature. Nature is perhaps one of the best counsellors and healers in our lives. Ancient cultures of the world have known this for thousands of years; modern science is now slowly catching

up to the deep, mystical, and spiritual qualities of nature. We are beginning to realize that everything in nature is alive and is connected to everything else and that healing nature is absolutely essential, not only to mitigate climate crises but to heal human consciousness. The idea of nature deficit (Louv, 2005) and the significance of spending time in nature for health and well-being is now well established (see, for example, meta-studies such as Jimenez et al., 2021; Bratman et al., 2019). One central tenet of meditative inquiry is spending time in nature, because being in nature naturally heightens one's awareness—one's capacity to observe, to listen, to touch, and to feel. This point is often asserted by Krishnamurti in his description of nature in many of his books, particularly in the *Commentaries of Living*, Series I–III (1956c). Krishnamurti writes (2006),

Nature is part of our life. We grew out of the seed, the earth, and we are part of all that, but we are rapidly losing the sense that we are animals like the others. Can you have a feeling for a tree, look at it, see the beauty of it, listen to the sound it makes; be sensitive to the little plant, to the little weed, to the creeper that is growing up the wall, to the light on the leaves and the many shadows? You must be aware of all this and have that sense of communion with nature around you. (para. 5)

Rousseau's meditative conversations with himself on his walks in nature and descriptions of how these walks impacted his thinking in *The Reveries of a Solitary Walker* (1796/2019) are examples of the ways in which nature can allow us to engage with ourselves at a deeper level, as is Thoreau's immersion and deep connection with nature described in *Walden* (1854/2004). Establishing connections with nature is an antidote to the harms inflicted on us by the over-digitalization, technologization, and mechanization of life that is taking us away from nature and submerging us in artificial, lifeless spaces. Williams contends (2018, p. 6),

We have gained much since the dawn of the Internet, but many experts argue we've also grown more irritable, less sociable, more narcissistic, more distracted and less cognitively nimble. We can't blame all our malaises on separation from nature, but our complaints reveal some fraying of psychological resilience. There are times when we could all be a little less reactive, a little more empathetic, more focused and more grounded. That's where a nature dose can help...

Not only does nature create an aesthetic and meditative space in which stress and tension wash away, but it also re-generates our sense of holistic being through which we can connect with others and with ourselves. An individual interested in philosophical counselling needs to establish a connection with nature and seek the counselling that nature offers through its subtle and healing ways.

There are many ways in which one can be with nature in a meditative way. The first and most important thing is to avoid taking digital technologies and other distractions along with you when in nature. I have often seen folks with headphones on, or chatting endlessly without giving attention to the space they are in. Nature is astoundingly mysterious. When we look at a blade of grass or a leaf, we see how extraordinarily creative, magical, mysterious, and beautiful nature is. When we truly look at the clouds and the sky and the waves in the ocean, it is hard not to be mesmerized by the magic of it all. The whole of nature is in a meditative state. Everything is spontaneous, organic, and connected. The whole thing is superbly aesthetic and deeply charged spiritually. When we take the time to connect with any aspect of nature with our full attention, we connect with its meditative dimension. This meditative dimension brings about a sense of peace and well-being, and it is deeply healing. A philosophical counselor may

wish to experiment with this to see its impact on their own sense of wellness. Based on their experience, a philosophical counselor can encourage one's clients to experience the healing quality of nature.

Contemplation, Reflection, and Relaxation: Meditative inquiry helps us understand that we need to take time for reflection and contemplation as well as relaxation, which was central to the work of ancient philosophers in both the East and the West (Hategan, 2018a; Lahav, 2016, 2018; Marinoff, 2002). Reflective activities like journaling, heart-to-heart conversations, and taking the time to think about issues that impact us in a contemplative manner, which Lou Marinoff (2002) calls "active meditation" (pp. 57–64), are central to developing a meditative mind. Relaxation exercises like body awareness, qigong, yoga, breathing exercises, or what Marinoff calls "inactive meditations" (pp. 57–64), are also ways to create balance within ourselves, physically, emotionally, and psychologically. Adding meditative reflection and relaxation are the experiential aspects of meditative inquiry that focus on holistic well-being and wellness rather than simply dealing with psychological issues in an isolated manner.

I have been experimenting with relaxation and contemplative exercises for about 10 years in my university classrooms as I discussed above. A majority of my students, most of whom are pre-service and in-service teachers, have greatly appreciated the significance of these exercises in helping them become more reflective, thoughtful, centred, and connected, thereby promoting their sense of well-being and their relationship with their students, family members, and friends. Relaxation and reflection can provide the needed experiential and contemplative foundations to the field of philosophical counselling.

Creative Exploration and Expression: Meditative inquiry highlights the intrinsic creativity of nature and all beings and emphasizes the need for engaging in creative exploration and expression. Creative expression allows our subjective and spiritual experiences to come forth, thereby healing and strengthening our being and, consequently, supporting the work of philosophical counselling, which prioritizes human well-being.

Creativity from a meditative perspective is not just confined to a particular talent that is recognized in society and brings rewards and accolades. Creativity from the perspective of meditative inquiry means a creative way of being—of looking at things with fresh eyes, of appreciating the beauty in nature, of engaging with the creative expressions of others. Creative engagement interrupts the mechanical lifestyle that undermines the quality of our living. Creative exploration can add an aesthetic dimension to philosophical counselling. Engaging in meditatively creative expression and exploration allows an outlet for emotional, spiritual, and creative release, thereby unburdening our beings and supporting our healing.

Meditative inquiry can help us tap into our creative potential. Society and its educational institutions hardly help us understand ourselves deeply and discover our creative possibilities. We primarily emphasize instrumental ways of living and learning because they fit the capitalist and neoliberal structures of society (Kumar, 2019; Ross & Gibson, 2007). Because of such instrumental ways of being, we have reduced life to a mechanical entity without deeper connections with one's self and creative sources. In our instrumentalism-driven world, even when we talk about creativity, we talk in terms of its utility. Meditative inquiry can help us see the instrumentalist and mechanical forces that operate within ourselves and outside. It gives us a perception of how these forces have shaped our individual and collective ways of being in the world. If engaged seriously, meditative inquiry can help us remove the blockages of our creative flow. I have discussed this idea in relation to my exploration of music elsewhere

(Kumar & Downey, 2019). Meditative inquiry allowed me to remove the internal and external factors that blocked my musical exploration and development. It allowed me to access the deeper sources of creativity which has acted as a healing force for me.

A key factor behind feeling a lack of well-being is the dryness that modern life imposes on us. Experiencing creativity can act as an antidote to this dryness, and creative exploration should be part of a holistic and healthy life. Realizing the transformative potential of creativity, I devote one full class in most of my university courses to the topic of creativity. In this class, we discuss what creativity means and what are the factors that undermine it or support its development; we create a non-judgmental space where we each share creative passions with each other rather than worrying about performing to impress anyone. After a free-flowing discussion, students one-by-one share what inspires their creative passions. Most students take about five minutes each to share their thoughts, performances, or artifacts with the class. What students share is unique to each of them and therefore very diverse. Some of the creative passions that students share include their or their inspiration's poetry, songs, dances, instrumental musical pieces, pictures, quilts, paintings, stained glass paintings, journals, mathematical and statistical concepts, family pictures, nature photographs, ancestry books, collection of discarded art pieces, ornaments, candles, tattoos, podcasts, community art projects, and knitted objects, among others. After the students share their creative passions, I sing my own Indian classical music-based compositions for them. I invite them to sit on the ground with me and just close their eyes and enjoy the music.

What students and I share in substance is important as it is connected to our hearts very deeply, but what is even more important is our willingness to share openly and freely. Sharing our work makes many of us feel very vulnerable, but at the same time, it also allows us to express our emotions and to be open to experiencing others' emotions and passions. Through this class, we all gain a very different—deeply human—perspective about each other. We become appreciative of each others' talents and passions. The class goes beyond just being a place where we engage with our heads to discuss intellectual ideas. We enter our hearts where our emotions, vulnerabilities, and compassionate energies are activated. The experience heightens our attentiveness to each other and therefore we listen fully with our whole being rather than just with the mind. Such empathetic and open attentiveness brings us very close together, and we all become part of a community. We also begin to appreciate that there is no one way of being creative, and that we do not need to depend on external standards to know what creativity is. Students have shared with me that this class is one of their best educational experiences in the context of higher education, because it helps them nurture their creative passions and thereby supports them to find aesthetic ways for personal development and healing.

I think individuals seeking counselling to understand their issues and problems and gain a deeper understanding can profoundly benefit from tapping into their creative potential and expressing themselves through aesthetic processes. Philosophical counselling should embrace the transformative potential of creative and aesthetic experiences.

Meditative Critical Thinking: Finally, meditative inquiry can add an existential dimension to the process of critical thinking. Critical thinking implies examining beliefs and ideas and questioning taken-for-granted assumptions. It helps us understand and transform patterns of our thinking cognitively. One of the key focuses of meditative inquiry is to observe one's thoughts and feelings and understand their roots in one's being. We have all gone through conditioning influences from a variety of sources (religious teachings, educational institutions,

political propaganda, the advertising industry, news media, and social media, among others) since our childhood. These sources of conditioning create patterns of thoughts, feelings, and behaviours in us over a period of time, which, more often than not, become habitual. Meditative inquiry encourages us to look at these patterns and behaviours non-judgmentally and without a desire for control and suppression. It may appear that this non-judgmental observation does not contribute to the process of critical thinking. However, when we look at ourselves, without judgment and control, we go to the very root of where the thinking and behaviour patterns are emerging from.

Meditative observation can go deeper than mere intellectual criticisms of our worldviews and habitual patterns. Not only does meditative observation help us see the deeper structures and rigidities of our worldviews, but it also helps us see the reasons why many of us are so rigid about our beliefs and ideologies. Questioning and critiquing our ideologies and worldviews are helpful, but unless one cultivates a meditative awareness of how these habitual patterns occur on a day-to-day basis, influencing us and our relationship with others, a deeper transformation of the mind is not possible. Providing a meditative foundation to the process of critical thinking can, in my view, contribute to the central focuses of philosophical counselling. This can be illustrated through the below example.

Imagine meeting a client or a student who holds a fixed and rigid perspective that competitive behaviour is the best way to be successful in the world. They may come to you looking for help because their desire to be the best at their job is causing them a lot of anxiety and stress. They may genuinely want to be free of their anxiety. Simply telling them that their desire to be the best is the source of their anxiety may help them see the problem intellectually, but it will not alter the deeper structures of their understanding and perspective, both of which are part of larger social structures that gave rise to their perspective and worldview in the first place. Here, in addition to engaging in the process of critical thinking to unravel their worldview and its deeper structures, it is also important that the person looks at how the competition unfolds in their life on all levels, and how it affects them existentially on a daily basis. The goal here is not to forcefully change the tendency to compete, but simply to observe this tendency in all its manifestations. This observation and study, when done in a non-judgmental and non-suppressive way, provides one with a deeper existential understanding of the operation of competitiveness within one's self and how that is connected to social conditionings, fears, jealousies, and so on. To me, critical thinking accompanied by meditative exploration gives rise to a more holistic understanding of one's self and all of one's relationships with the world.

Conclusion

In this article, I have explored how my work on meditative inquiry can contribute to the contemplative goals and practices of the philosophical counselling movement. I have argued that the existential focus of meditative inquiry—through meditative awareness of how we think, feel, and act in daily living, learning from and being with nature, and experimenting with relaxation exercises—can further enrich the contemplative orientations within the field of philosophical counselling. I believe that meditative inquiry and philosophical counselling together invite us to deeply inquire into life and its issues and problems. Rather than medicalizing and pathologizing personal and relational conflicts, meditative inquiry and philosophical counselling encourage us to delve deeper through critical thinking, self-reflection, and dialogue and embrace authentic self-transformation. Together they can provide holistic educators and contemplative practitioners, including schoolteachers, university professors,

mindfulness practitioners, and counsellors, with a plethora of perspectives and practices to guide their thinking and practice.

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