



Philosophers, shrinks, spiritual gurus, mentors, messiahs, social media proliferates with preachers whose credentials are unknown, whose expertise is suspect and whose methods are popular. Inspirational quotes, memes, posters, links dole out truisms about life. Mind workshops across the town promise life-changing discourses in easy-to-digest nuggets. But how effective are these sessions? How much can one relate to the pearls of wisdom? Are they just popcorn for the soul? Or help in really touching one's soul?

Mind It!

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A study by some random university in the UK found that if you had more than 324 friends in Facebook, you are likely to slide into clinical depression. That, apparently, is the threshold where you start perceiving everyone else as having a great life and that you are a miserable, sad bag of dismal, dreamless days. The researchers ended the study with the ominous warning that if you want to be normal, avoid filling up your Facebook list with all and sundry, like a voters' list.

And yet, our day dawns with checking our notifications and reading sleepily through a barrage of posts that people in a different time zone would have posted overnight. In addition to cameos from daily life, what these days populates FB is a form of popular wisdom, posted through posters, links, photographs, quizzes, memes and interactive sessions.

'Life is like an ice cream' twinkles one poster while another challenges you take a quiz to know 'which SRK character are you?' Some tell you that you should be living in Barcelona, some others that you should be an investment banker. Some give the feminist message, some the liberal discourse. They emphasise on the profoundness of love and loss while some other teaches you to be determined in the face of adversity. Faith, failure, love, grief, success, sentiment, sensitivity, enterprise – the range of key mind issues that the posts address are wide and deep.

Where did this begin? With simple email forwards? Or with e-greeting messages? The social networking sites have come to be platforms for a form of global pop psychology, of witticisms and truisms, of colour and studied solemnity, of solutions, advice and counseling. Each post garners a battery of responses and comments, each a pearl of wisdom in itself.

How did this scenario emerge? "This is a trend that answers a need in everyone to be sympathised with, to be solaced; the need to be understood, to be appreciated and to be encouraged. Something people outside in the busy world have no time for. Thus, daily posts of daily life are left behind as a massive, gigantic process of advising takes over," says Dr Lakshmi Kala, a cultural sociologist, whose research focused on the emergence of micro-blogging sites as a form of new social platform. And, these stupendous levels of sharing have led to an intense demand that enterprising message messiahs are only too happy to meet. Thus are generated mammoth amounts of truisms, picture postcards and advice through eloquent paragraphs.

"It is interesting how some kind of universality is achieved in the preparation of this material. A student sitting in the US would feel the same response that a housewife sitting in India would on reading a post that talks about life in a picturesque way."

So, how do these work? How does one relate to them? How do these work on the mind at all? "When I read a well-written poster or link or

quote, it is an elating feeling for me. It is an enervating moment, to read the intelligent witty philosophy packed into a couple of sentences," says Padmavathi Kotamraju, a media professional. "They work for me to the extent that it is a moment of positive feeling that would eventually ward off a series of negative thoughts."

But do they work beyond? Are there really life-changing posts and quotes? "I am not sure they work like that for me," says Kotamraju. "I feel that they work for people who are already in a frame of mind to be guided, to be given an insight, to listen to advice without much protest."

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"It is a matter of chemicals. When one looks at a beautiful, pleasing thing, happy chemicals like serotonin, dopamine and endorphins are released. So, it is not just a witty, insightful, smart quote. It could be beautiful scenery, photo of a beautiful person, eating something tasty...or lis-

tening to good music. The quotes work because they involve other people and measurement of our own mental power against them," explains Dr Suresh Chincholi, a neurophysician.

From inspirational posts to mind workshops, training programmes to shape personalities, sessions to influence the psyche, to help find one's own

self and to go on a spiritual journey – which is the popcorn for the soul? Which is the real medicine for the psyche?

"All these messages work. But only when given out by a Master. Whether it is a training workshop or a personality mentoring session, it works

when the person who is teaching knows what he or she is talking about. It has always been like that. Spiritual discourses were always by Gurus who visibly followed what they preached. Finding spirituality is a journey that needs a mind that can guide," says Revathi Turaga, international trainer and inspirational speaker.

Whether the master who preaches has the right credentials, is someone who leads by example or not is no longer a relevant factor to people, she says. "Everyone is an expert and theoretical knowledge passes of for life experience."

What has come to be of inspirational discourse ultimately, as crystallised by Facebook, is the need of the individual not just to listen, to share but also to demonstrate and display, says Dr Lakshmi Kala. Hence, the post is not so much about what is said there but also about how smartly we respond to it.

"Look at some posts where someone would have expressed some anxiety. And there will be scores of comments where everyone is doling out advice, as if that is the ultimate piece of advice anyone can give. People do not understand that pushing my solution on to you is not the way, what works for me may not work for you."

"The mind workshops that happen every week in this city are nothing but a major con," says a noted personality trainer who does not want to be named. "For a small amount of a few thousands, people tell you they can make you one with the universe, discover your soul, change your stars, find lasting peace and even earn money. How does that happen? It is okay to gently lead the person in the right direction, making them find their own answers and another to promise life perfect delivered on a platter."

"It is exhibitionism of a sort. It is about one's own need to show how smart one is. A Facebook post is a classic example. Soon, a post becomes obscured under the deluge of comments, each vying with others in sounding brilliant and scintillating," says Dr Lakshmi Kala.

It is not totally true that they are just bubbles that can be pricked in a moment, says Revathi Turaga. The sessions truly help in encouraging and facilitating life decisions. They can serve to make people see the nuances of life. They can help an individual to find focus and stability. Provided the teacher is a worthy one, she says.

"Those in real grief, or depression or facing some immense loss may not find them completely relevant," says Padmavathi Kotamraju. "It is like a half full glass for them. The philosophy is the full part; their own struggle is the empty part. Both are in the same glass."

Inspirational quotes and social media posts are like the various good things that warm up our life. Like coffee, like cookies, like a nice bunch of flowers or like a nice song. They are a prop for us to express our thoughts, a peg on which to hang our great discoveries of the mind. No wonder everyone feels important like the class leader in a middle school class who is called upon to write the 'Thought for the Day' on the blackboard.

