

EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCE OF AWE THROUGH THE LENS OF YOGIC PRACTICE: AN INTERPRETATIVE STUDY BASED ON THE PĀTAÑJALA YOGA SŪTRA

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Abstract

Awe is a widely discussed topic in contemporary research, recognized as a positive emotion due to its diverse benefits across various domains of life. Western psychologists suggest that the experience of awe can play a vital role in mitigating stress in today's fast-paced world, helping to balance and moderate its effects. In their paper Awe and the Interconnected Self, Susan K. Chen and Mariam Mongrain (Department of Psychology, York University, Ontario, Canada) argue that this positively valenced emotion can be cultivated, and that an individual's capacity for absorption may be a key antecedent in experiencing awe. Absorption refers to one's ability to fully engage with the world by utilizing perceptual, motoric, imaginative, and cognitive resources (Tellegen & Atkinson, 1974, p. 274).

In yogic philosophy, kaivalya (liberation) is achieved through the practice of Ashtanga Yoga (the eight-limbed path). While kaivalya and the emotion of awe are fundamentally different concepts, the practices outlined in Ashtanga Yoga may foster conditions that encourage the experience of positive awe. I propose that elements of yoga, particularly Yama, Niyama, and Asana, can help regulate and enhance the experience of awe. This paper explores the potential for yoga to regulate awe and investigates the connection between yogic practices and awe, with the aim of demonstrating how this relationship can contribute to a more positive and meaningful life.

Keywords: *Awe, Patañjala Yoga Sūtra, Ashtanga Yoga, Stress Reduction, Absorption, Positive Emotion, Mindfulness, Well-being.*

Introduction: The Search for Meaning and the Role of Awe

The human mind is naturally inclined to seek meaning and purpose in life. Every action we take—past, present, or future—is often linked to this fundamental search. Both spirituality and science attempt to offer answers, each through its own perspectives. Yet, regardless of the method we choose, one truth remains: the journey is more significant than the destination.

Philosophy and science may never fully resolve the question of life’s meaning, but the process of exploration itself holds greater importance than any definitive answer. Ultimately, what matters is not whether we uncover life’s ultimate purpose, but how we live—whether we experience happiness, fulfillment, and a sense of security. Many philosophers argue that the meaning of life lies in how well we engage with it, and science, in its own way, aligns with this perspective by striving to enhance human physical and mental well-being.

Mental and physical well-being are deeply interconnected; a healthy mind supports a healthy body, and vice versa. In today’s fast-paced world, mental health has become an increasingly important concern. But what if an emotion could elevate us beyond the mundane and connect us to something greater than ourselves? Awe is one such emotion—one that fosters positivity and has a profound impact on our thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors. It has the potential to shift our perspectives, offering a sense of wonder and transcendence that enriches our overall well-being.

Awe as a Transformative Emotion

Awe is a complex emotion or emotional construct, characterized by a mix of positive (contentment, happiness), and negative affective components (fear and a sense of being smaller, humbler or insignificant)(Arcangeli et al., 2020). It arises when we encounter something vast and beyond our usual frame of understanding. According to Keltner and Haidt, awe results from two key appraisals: the perception of vastness and the need for cognitive accommodation. Vastness refers to an experience so immense that it surpasses our ability to fully comprehend it, while accommodation involves reorganizing our mental structures to make sense of this new and extraordinary stimulus(Keltner & Haidt, 2003). Awe emerges when we encounter something novel that challenges our existing worldview.

We have all experienced awe at different moments—gazing at a vast, star-filled sky, witnessing a breathtaking natural landscape, or watching a spectacular sunset. Awe often leads to a sense of the "small self," where our individual ego feels diminished, and our hopes, needs, and sense of purpose become more integrated with the people and environment around us. The experience of the "small self" is reflected in statements such as, "I felt small or insignificant," "I sensed the presence of something greater than myself," and "I felt deeply connected to the world around me"(Shiota et al., 2017). These expressions highlight a shift in perspective, placing the individual within a broader context and directing their awareness toward the grander scheme of existence. While awe is often considered a positive emotion, research suggests that it can also have negative dimensions. When awe is accompanied by fear, uncertainty, or helplessness, it can evoke emotions such as existential dread or anxiety. For example, witnessing a powerful storm or contemplating the vastness of the universe may evoke a sense of insignificance or powerlessness(Gordon et al., 2016). Similarly, awe experienced in moments of existential realization—such as confronting one's mortality or the unpredictability of life—may lead to a feeling of unease rather than inspiration. However, this paper focuses on positive awe experiences and explores how yogic practices can facilitate them, as they have been shown to promote well-being, resilience, and psychological growth. Positive awe fosters an appreciation for life, enhances creativity and curiosity, and encourages individuals to seek deeper meaning in their experiences.

The Relationship Between Awe and Well-Being

The physiological effects of awe—such as elevated vagal tone, reduced sympathetic activation, increased oxytocin levels, and decreased inflammation—have been linked to improved mental health. Research demonstrates that these physiological changes contribute to greater optimism, a heightened sense of connection, and overall well-being;(Oveis et al., 2009),a receptive attitude toward others and an inclination toward prosocial behavior(Bartz, 2016);(Keltner et al., 2014); Decreased anxiety, depression, and feelings of social rejection(Dowlati et al., 2009; Slavich et al., 2010); as well as a reduction in cardiovascular issues and autoimmune diseases(Kiecolt-Glaser et al., 2002). Maria Monroy and Dacher Keltner emphasize that awe plays a crucial role in improving both mental and physical health. Awe-inspiring experiences contribute to emotional, social, and psychological well-being, potentially reducing stress, anxiety, and other mental health challenges.

Moreover, since mental health is closely linked to physical health, awe may also help alleviate physical ailments such as headaches, body aches, and digestive issues, while potentially improving cardiovascular health and promoting longevity (Monroy & Keltner, 2023) . If awe has the power to reset our minds and help us become better individuals, then this universal human emotion deserves greater attention and intentional cultivation. But is it truly possible to practice an emotion? Can awe be consciously nurtured? This paper seeks to explore these questions through the lens of yogic practices, examining whether awe can be intentionally experienced and integrated into daily life.

The Role of Yoga in Cultivating Awe

Yoga is a holistic, ancient practice that integrates ethical principles, physical postures, breath control, and meditation to cultivate overall well-being. The ultimate goal of yoga is Kaivalya (liberation). While Kaivalya and the experience of awe are fundamentally different concepts, the path to liberation—Ashtanga Yoga—may cultivate the conditions for experiencing awe more frequently. I propose that Yama, Niyama, and Asana, as outlined in the Sādhana Pāda (the second chapter of Patañjali's Yoga Sūtra), provide a structured approach to nurturing awe as a recurring emotional state.

The foundational principles of yoga suggest that liberation is achieved through the purification of the mind (chitta śuddhi), which in turn is attained through one-pointed concentration (chitta ekāgratā). In the Yoga Sūtra, Patañjali describes various methods to cultivate this deep focus. However, this paper does not aim to provide a comprehensive analysis of yoga but rather focuses specifically on how yogic practices—particularly Yama, Niyama, and Asana—may contribute to experiencing awe.

Why Might Yogic Practices Help Cultivate Awe?

Awe is an emotion, and yoga fundamentally focuses on the mind, emotions, and their regulation. Even if the connection between the two is not immediately apparent, they are inherently linked. What is emotion? Emotions are brief states that involve distinct experiences, expressive behaviors, cognitive patterns, and physiological responses (Ekman, 1992; Lench et al., 2011; Scherer, 2005). They emerge through a complex interaction between the brain, body, and environment. The limbic system, particularly the amygdala, processes emotions, while neurotransmitters like

dopamine and serotonin influence mood. Physiological responses, such as increased heart rate or chills, are triggered by the autonomic nervous system. Additionally, cognitive interpretation plays a key role—our past experiences and cultural influences shape how we perceive emotions. Social interactions and environmental stimuli, such as nature, music, or art, can also evoke profound emotional states. But can emotions be consciously cultivated? Since emotions influence thoughts and behaviors, they can also be intentionally nurtured. This means that awe, like other emotions, can be consciously cultivated through repeated exposure to awe-inspiring experiences (Schneider, 2017). In this context, yogic practices—which focus on mental discipline, self-awareness, and emotional regulation—may provide a structured means of fostering awe.

The Role of Yama, Niyama, and Asana in Cultivating Awe

In Patañjali's Yoga Sūtra, Ashtanga Yoga, which comprises eight steps leading to Kaivalya, consists of Yama, Niyama, Asana, Pranayama, Pratyahara, Dharana, Dhyana, and Samadhi—each serving as a stage in the path toward self-realization. This study focuses on the first three -Yama, Niyama and Asana.

1. Yama: Ethical Restraints

The Yamas, the first limb of Ashtanga Yoga, provide ethical guidelines for harmonious living. They include:

- Ahimsa (Non-violence) – Encourages kindness and compassion in thought, speech, and action.
- Satya (Truthfulness) – Promotes honesty while being mindful of its impact on others.
- Asteya (Non-stealing) – Fosters contentment and respect for what belongs to others.
- Brahmacharya (Moderation) – Advocates self-restraint and balance in desires.
- Aparigraha (Non-possessiveness) – Urges detachment from material excess and attachment.

These principles not only guide moral conduct but also cultivate mental clarity, inner peace, and a sense of interconnectedness, all of which are key components of awe. Patañjali emphasizes that these should be practiced universally, reinforcing their significance in shaping both individual and collective well-being.

2. Niyama: Personal Disciplines

The Niyamas, the second limb of Ashtanga Yoga, focus on self-discipline and inner growth. They include:

- Shaucha (Purity) – Emphasizes cleanliness of the body, mind, and environment to cultivate clarity.
- Santosha (Contentment) – Encourages acceptance and gratitude for life as it is.
- Tapa (Self-discipline) – Fosters determination and perseverance in personal and spiritual growth.
- Svadhyaya (Self-study) – Involves introspection and the study of scriptures to deepen self-awareness.
- Ishvarapranidhana (Surrender to the Divine) – Promotes humility and trust in a higher purpose.

The Niyamas serve as tools for inner transformation, helping individuals develop resilience, peace, and a deeper connection to themselves and the universe—a state that aligns closely with the experience of awe.

3. Asana: Physical Postures

The third limb, Asana, refers to the physical postures of yoga. While modern yoga often emphasizes asanas for flexibility, strength, and health, Patañjali defined asana as a steady and comfortable posture (sthira sukham asanam), designed to prepare the body for deep meditation. A well-conditioned body supports a calm and focused mind, which is essential for deep introspection and heightened awareness. Over time, various postures have evolved, each promoting physical well-being, energetic balance, and inner stability. Asana practice strengthens the connection between body and mind, facilitating an inner journey toward self-awareness and transcendence—a process that mirrors the awe experience, where one feels both small yet deeply connected to a greater whole.

How Do These Practices Help in the Path of Awe?

Even though awe is a powerful emotion, several factors can hinder the experience of awe, ranging from psychological and environmental barriers to habitual thinking and physiological limitations. Psychologically, excessive rationalization, skepticism, or a strong ego can prevent openness to awe, while fear and anxiety narrow perception, making it difficult to engage with vast or extraordinary experiences. Environmental factors, such as urbanization and limited exposure to

nature, along with cultural conditioning that prioritizes control and certainty over wonder, can reduce opportunities for awe. Additionally, excessive digital engagement and constant stimulation may desensitize individuals to awe-inspiring moments. Habitual thinking also plays a role—familiarity with certain experiences can dull their impact, while a lack of mindfulness and rigid belief systems can prevent individuals from embracing the unknown. Physiologically, chronic stress, fatigue, and certain neurological conditions may reduce emotional receptivity to awe. To overcome these obstacles, one can cultivate mindfulness, engage with nature and art, limit digital distractions, challenge rigid beliefs, and allow space for wonder. Since yoga enhances mental clarity, presence, and emotional openness, it may serve as an effective tool for breaking these barriers and fostering awe as a regular experience.

Conclusion

While awe and Kaivalya are distinct, the structured path of Ashtanga Yoga—particularly through Yama, Niyama, and Asana—provides a foundation for cultivating awe as a regular experience. Both awe and yoga encourage a shift in perception, dissolving ego-centric thinking and fostering a deeper connection with the world. Awe has been shown to enhance emotional well-being, reduce stress, and promote a sense of unity, while yoga, through its ethical principles, self-discipline, and physical postures, prepares the mind and body to be more receptive to such transformative experiences.

If yogic practices can enhance awe, they may contribute not only to personal transformation but also to a more conscious and connected society. The study of awe is still evolving, but the connection between trait absorption, mindfulness, and awe-inspiring experiences suggests that yoga may serve as a practical tool for fostering this profound emotion. Ultimately, yoga offers more than just physical or spiritual benefits—it provides a structured path for expanding awareness and deepening one's experience of life. By integrating ethical discipline, mindfulness, and physical stability, yoga creates the conditions for awe to flourish, enriching one's perception and fostering a profound sense of wonder and connection with existence. Through dedicated practice, individuals may not only experience greater inner peace and clarity but also cultivate a life infused with more moments of awe, appreciation, and transcendence.

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