The Path to Seeing

The true miracle is not walking on water or walking in air, but simply walking on this earth.
Thich Nhat Hanh

BRAND NEW TO THE WORLD, FRESH to its own existence, and wide open to all it encounters, it isn't unusual for a young child to ask such paradoxical, Zen-like questions as "Why is there something and not nothing?" "Where did the world come from?" or "Who was I before I was born?"

However endearing such inquiries may be, they are all too easily dismissed by jaded adults as naive childish musings, rather than recognized as the profound philosophical questions that they truly are.

In the eyes of a young child, everything is new and waiting to be discovered, nothing is taken for granted, and virtually anything is capable of inspiring awe or wonder.

From a child's perspective, the simplest and most commonplace things can seem amazing: the feeling of walking barefoot on wet grass, the sight of a flower growing in a crack in the footpath, the smell of a puppy, the sound of a bird, the taste of an apple.

Of course, adults can experience this sense of awe as well, but it usually takes some extraordinary experience to shock them out of their everyday complacency, like experiencing the magnificence of nature, art, or music; falling in love, or witnessing some exceptional talent or achievement.

But this doesn't have to be the case, as it is really only familiarity that dulls the senses and causes one to take ordinary things and experiences for granted.

In reality, we are surrounded every day with opportunities to feel astonishment or awe, provided we merely have the presence of mind to pay our full attention to them.

The word *awe* comes from the Old Norse *agi* (fright), and ironically, denoted not a euphoric sense of astonishment but rather an overwhelming feeling of dread or terror. In fact, the word astonishment itself originally meant not a state of amazement but of being paralyzed or stunned, as if thunderstruck. (The root of *astonish* is the Latin *tonare*—literally 'thunder.')

This reflects the fact that the state of awe was once an emotional condition reserved for the realm of religion. Being 'in awe' was a response to contemplation of God, not to someone accumulating a billion dollars or watching a last-second winning field goal. (In fact, some religious people might frown at today's casual use of the word 'awesome.')

But while awe has essentially been demystified in modern usage, the more mystical aspects of awe have always had a prominent place in secular culture, and are expressed in innumerable forms, including music, architecture, sport, and ritual.

The mystic tradition is a thread that runs through the heart of virtually all religions, but is an especially strong influence in Zen Buddhism and more devotional traditions like Sufism in Islam or bhakti in Hinduism.

In this respect, cultivating a sense of awe in our lives can even be viewed as a spiritual practice, a means to precipitate what Buddhists refer to as 'ego death' or the dissolution of the self. (In Zen, the term for this intuitive experience of awe is *kensho* or *satori,* and it is seen not as a particular way to see the world but in fact, the "sole path to seeing"—the true state of our existence once the veil of ego is cast aside.)

Unlike many pleasant emotions that fade with familiarity, the experience of awe is regenerative: The more we practice feeling it, the more we begin to find it omnipresent.

Psychologists have long studied more familiar emotions like happiness, sadness, fear, and anger, but awe has typically been seen as a 'luxury' rather than an essential component of our emotional makeup.

But with a little practice, one can begin to see that experiences like a taking a walk in nature or visiting an art museum can be just as essential to our mental and physical health as going to a therapist or to the gym.

Simply taking time during the day to experience awe can have many unexpected benefits, improving mood and satisfaction with one's life, instilling humility, inspiring creativity, and allowing one to feel more connected with the world and other people.

Awe can even alter our sense of time: By immersing oneself in the moment, awe allows one to savor the here and now, with a sense that time is plentiful and expansive.

One simple way to develop our ability to experience awe is to practice walking meditation: walking anywhere at a leisurely pace, imaging that we are seeing everything we encounter for the first time: trees, cars, houses, clouds, other animals, and people.

Imagine, for example, that you are an alien being, or a Stone Age man transported 50,000 years into the present. Everything, even the paper or plastic litter on the ground, would seem absolutely amazing.

Cultivating the ability to experience awe in the ordinary and beauty in the mundane can arguably even be as great a personal accomplishment as climbing a mountain.

Albert Einstein—certainly no stranger to the wonders of Nature and the Universe—once remarked about those who find it difficult to experience awe: "He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead; his eyes are closed." ■