

Research

Wondering Awe and Gratitude as an Indicator of Perceptive Spirituality: Its Potential Relevance for Mind-Body Interventions

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Interventions that refer to the wide field of Mind-Body Medicine can have different effects. Some have short-term direct effects without any deep impact on attitudes and behaviors, and others can have more profound effects as people may start to change their views on life and behave differently as a process of transformation. Depending on the interventions (i.e., mindfulness meditation, yoga), people may be sensitized to question what gives hope, orientation, and meaning in their lives, to live from these resources, to behave more consciously, and to reconsider their interactions with others, and thus may become more compassionate and caring. This process of change or transformation can be an aspect of spirituality in its widest sense (Büssing et al., 2018a; Büssing, 2019). The multidimensional construct Spirituality has different interrelated “layers”, such as experiences, attitudes and convictions, and related practices and behaviors; it may involve an existential search for meaning in life, convictions of interconnectedness, assumption of transcendence, and the perception of something Sacred in life (whatever this sacred is for a specific person) (Büssing, 2012, 2019).

This dimension of spirituality may be seen as implicit in mind-body interventions such as mindfulness meditation and yoga, but it is in most studies not explicitly addressed. While in recent mindfulness-based interventions, spirituality is assessed either as an outcome (i.e., spiritual wellbeing) or as a mediator (Hsiung et

al., 2023; Mahamid et al., 2023; Oner Cengiz et al., 2023), in yoga studies “spirituality is still a widely neglected area“, as stated by Csala et al. (2021). Instead, yoga studies focus on short-term effects on health markers, relaxation, fitness/resilience, and wellbeing - and often ignore that the underlying intention of mind-body practices is a change of the mindset and thus lifestyle. Even when this may not be the direct aim of the respective mind-body interventions, some participants and patients may nevertheless become sensitized that something should be changed in their lives and thus they may aim to develop new insights and perspectives in the long run. These processes of spiritual transformation are important issues that are worth to be specifically addressed.

To operationalize such processes one may refer to a model of spirituality as a transformation process that requires the experiences of something significant or maybe Sacred (Büssing et al., 2018a). Highly emotional experiences (“sacred moments”) can result in changes in personality, attitudes, and related behaviors (Cohen et al., 2010; Keltner & Haidt, 2003; Penman, 2021; Büssing, 2021). These can be conceptualized as moments of wondering that may result in perceptions of awe and gratitude (Büssing, 2021; Keltner, 2023). They are triggered by a wide range of situations, i.e., the view of impressive landscapes, a wild ocean shore, the behavior of specific people, a newborn child, or encounters with dying people (Büssing, 2021). The diversity and variety of

awe triggers could be exemplified by a statement from a 66-year-old woman:

In my childhood, I was fascinated by nature, the winter landscape, the white magical world; also the circus, and music, and our animals. The birth of my children and grandchildren, when I see newborn children, playing children, running around, dancing. When I watch our bees in the garden, the animals, nature, the singing birds, and their conversations in the forest fields and in the garden. In the theater, in concerts, in the old churches, when I listen to music ..., when I dance, when I am at the sea or in the mountains, in museums, or just the wonders of art, technology, nature. Reading pearls of literature. The wonderful human being - his biology, anatomy, psyche [...]. The list can be sooooo long. I was accompanying my mother in the last weeks of her life until her peaceful death. Also, my healing and the health I enjoy.

Feelings of awe may be characterized by altered time perception, self-diminishment (in terms of egocentric views), connectedness, perceived vastness, physical sensations, and need for accommodation (Yaden et al., 2019). Nevertheless, there are also small moments of wonder (Büssing 2021), not only the rare vast experiences that change a person's life with a need for accommodation as suggested by Keltner and Haidt (2003).

Awe perceptions were found to be related to openness to new experiences in life (Silvia et al., 2015; Yaden et al., 2019; Konaszewski et al., 2022), to meaning in life (Zhao et al., 2019), ethical principles (Büssing et al., 2021), and emotional wellbeing (Rudd et al., 2012; Krause & Hayward, 2015; Rankin et al., 2019; Büssing, 2021); they may buffer negative perceptions (Koh et al., 2017; Atamba, 2019), trigger gratitude (Büssing et al., 2018; Konaszewski et al., 2022), prosocial behaviors (Rudd et al., 2012; Piff et al., 2015), commitment for disadvantaged people and the environment (Büssing et al., 2018), and may relate to resilience and positive health behaviors

(Konaszewski et al., 2022). This resource was further a relevant predictor of positively perceived changes in attitudes and behaviors during the COVID-19 pandemic, albeit it could not buffer the negative outcomes of the lockdowns (Büssing et al., 2021).

As the frequency of awe and gratitude are related to spiritual practices (i.e., meditation and prayer) and are much higher in people with a specific mindful lifestyle (i.e. religious brothers and sisters, and yoga practitioners) as compared to other groups (Büssing, 2021), one could assume that these lifestyles and practices may sensitize to be more aware of such unique moments. One may assume that when yoga is more than some kind of physical fitness training but a mindful lifestyle, it can result in the development of specific aspects of spirituality and a change of mindset, and thus sensitize the perception of the Sacred in life (Büssing et al., 2024). In fact, within a 6-months observation period, yoga practitioners showed an increase in their conscious and compassionate interactions with others, religious orientation, and mindfulness (Büssing et al., 2012). Even in a secular society such as Germany, spiritual topics were of relevance for yoga practitioners, particularly the search for the Divine in the world and living in accordance with the underlying spiritual convictions (Büssing et al., 2024). In a current, not yet published study, Awe/Gratitude was indeed also related to the prosocial outcomes of an underlying spiritual transformation (i.e., living by faith, peaceful attitude and respectful treatment of others, and a commitment to disadvantaged people and the environment).

Therefore, it would be important to also address the multidimensional construct of Spirituality both as an outcome and as a predictor and mediator variable in mind-body intervention that aim to change the attitudes and behaviors of the respective practitioners and patients. For that purpose, the 7-item Awe/Gratitude scale (Büssing et al., 2018b) that addresses an experiential aspect of spirituality that is accessible also to non-religious people (Büssing, 2021) could be applied.

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