

Achieving *Karunā*: Interconnectedness and Compassion through Awe

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Abstract: The urban setting seems to have made the Buddhist teaching of compassion towards humans and the environment unachievable because of two things: a) it is competitive and individualistic, and b) the use of fear appeals in teaching about the environment and its problems is prevalent. Unfortunately, these two problems make humans focus more on the self, and makes them exhibit environmental apathy due to ecophobia. However, as *karunā* necessitates a deep understanding of the interconnectedness of all things, and a focus on the other instead of the self, there is a transcendent emotion which can and should be utilized to aid in achieving *karunā*-awe. The feeling of awe is a powerful tool which could be harnessed to enable people to a) have a more interconnected sense of self, and b) be more compassionate towards others. This study consists of the discussion regarding the Buddhist concept of *karunā* and the feeling of awe as a tool against environmental apathy despite the two troubles presented by the urban setting. Ecophobia and apathy will be discussed first, followed by *karunā* and awe. Contentions and the conclusion will follow. This research, which combines psychology, environmental philosophy, and the Eastern philosophy of Buddhism, posits that in the fast-paced, competitive capitalist system, environmental advocates should strive to elicit more feelings of awe even through artificial means, and that human beings should strive to evoke awe for them to be a step closer to achieving interconnectedness, which translates to more actions of compassion.

Key Words: *Karunā*; Ecophobia; Awe; Environment; Interconnectedness

1. INTRODUCTION

The Buddhist teaching of compassion is achievable in the urban setting if the feeling of awe is harnessed and utilized. Many researchers have worked on these topics, such as Tim Connolly (2013) who compared and contrasted the Buddhist *karunā* and the Confucian *ren*; Jay L. Garfield (2010) who enlightened us on what it's like to be a *Bodhisattva*; Michael Nagel (2005) who discussed how the use and misuse of environmentalism is a contributor in the creation of "learned hopelessness" in children; Keltner and Haidt (2003) who explained what awe is; Davis and Gatersleben (2013) who found that experiencing the wild elicits feelings of transcendence, smallness, and humility, whether the area is manicured or not; Piff et al., (2015) who found that prosociality was an effect of awe due to the feelings of the "small self"; Shiota et al., (2017) who described awe as one of the few emotions which encourages self-transcendence instead of self-focus; Rudd, Vohs, and Aaker (2012) who found that experiences of awe has a time-expanding effect which increased their subjects' willingness to volunteer; Chirico et al., (2016) who proposed the use of virtual reality to elicit awe, among many others. This paper recognizes that not everyone has the luxury or the time to look for awe-inducing landscapes; therefore, people should utilize awe-inducing art forms in place of natural landscapes if ever the latter is unavailable, and that educators should also properly harness this emotion to teach kids to love the environment instead of bombarding them with just information about the environment and its problems. Non-Buddhists do not usually consider the helpfulness of Buddhist teachings especially in a predominantly Christian country, but these teachings are very much relevant even in our context today. Considering how our world is competitive and fast-

paced, especially in the urban setting where the competitive capitalist system is more concrete, environmental apathy is getting increasingly difficult to remedy.

2. ECOPHOBIA, APATHY, AND THE URBAN SETTING

According to the United Nations (2017), an estimated 54.5% of the world's population live in the urban areas, and this will grow even more by the year 2030. This means more and more people are living in asphalt and concrete environments, and under the system which promotes high individuality and competition.

Why is this significant? Multiple research state that teaching conservation and non-anthropocentric values necessitate having continuous contact with nature (Sobel, 2007; McKnight, 2010). This means that the more the people (especially children) are exposed to the natural environment, the more they have a connection, and the more they understand that the environment is not something abstract or too far-off a concept to mean anything significant. This is supported by research on urban settlements as well: according to existing literature, those living in the urban setting exhibit significantly lower conservation behaviors than their rural counterparts (Asumni et al., 2012). But just because we live in an urban setting, it does not mean that we simply do not think about the environment anymore. The problem is, we end up developing feelings of apathy and helplessness due to us having the information on the environment and its problems but having limited interaction with the environment itself.

2.1. *Ecophobia*

One significant problem which arises from this is what is called “ecophobia” (Sobel, 2007; McKnight, 2010). Ecophobia is the feeling of being overwhelmed with environmental problems that it causes feelings of apathy and helplessness (Sobel, 2007). It is caused by two things: by providing too much abstract information too early (McKnight, 2010), or by providing messages about the environment which elicit fear and anxiety (Sobel, 2007). For example, if a child is bombarded with scientific concepts without or with barely any interaction with the environment, it makes the idea of the environment too abstract of a concept for them to have any real connection with it (McKnight, 2010). Or in another case, when children are shown photos or videos of environmental destruction, or messages such as the lone, starving polar bear in the middle of a brown piece of land with melted bits of snow, what happens is it elicits feelings of helplessness (Sobel, 2007). In this second case, the problem is that the recipients get bombarded with the message that it is their responsibility (even as children) to solve such a difficult problem to save the planet, and that is what causes them to feel helpless.

However, these examples are not just limited to children; even adults experience them as well. When Sobel (2007) talked about ecophobia, he used the terms “ennui” and “helplessness”. Ennui, according to Merriam-Webster (2017), is boredom or lack of interest. Considering the fact that 55.4% of the population of the planet live in urban settlements (United Nations 2017), and that not all of these people have either the time or the resources to go to natural environments; plus the fact that not all schools contextualize their environmental education in an effort to get the students to relate to them more, and adults are also more aware of the complexities of bureaucracy, economics, and politics, then adults are not spared from the “ennui” and “helplessness” when bombarded with information on environmental destruction.

For example, in two separate studies regarding environmental conceptions of young children and adults, it was found that children view their environment more as an object than as a subject that can be related to (Loughland, Reid, and Petocz, 2002). Unfortunately, it was the same thing with adults, which was surprising at first because one would expect that the more aware and the more learned the adult is, the more they would see the environment in a different light. But no, the researchers still found in their data that the adults also view their environment more as an object than as a subject that can be related to (Petocz, Reid, and Loughland, 2003). This is because we operate on the erroneous assumption that knowledge precedes behavior, even when it comes to issues of environmental behavior (Sobel, 2007). According to Hungerford and Volk (1990), it is much more complicated than the straightforward linear model that is traditionally used in changing behavior. The more accurate picture was presented by Sobel (2007) when he pointed out that there are several conditions that need to be met first before environmental behavior can exhibit itself: a) agency, b) knowledge, c) intention, and d) the correct conditions.

So, going back to the studies' respondents whose conceptions of the environment were more on the object side than the relational side. The first batch were children, so we could theorize that what is lacking are the conditions, considering how they need adults to put them in the right conditions in the first place. When Strife (2012) created a study regarding children's expression of their environmental concerns, she found that they felt a "distinct feeling of helplessness about the state of the environment". Yes, being able to switch off the lights to save electricity helps, and turning off the tap to save water helps, but when we see images of catastrophes such as landslides and starving or dead animals, those little acts of environmentalism feel exactly just that – little, and more importantly, insignificant. On the other hand, there are the adults. Keep in mind that these were adults who were able to take more advanced environmental education and science classes, yet for some reason, it did not entail that they would be more environmentally concerned people, or even more environmentally active people. Again, knowledge does not precede behavior. The knowledge is there, but the agency is absent; there is no sense of emergency, of ability to act, that one could perform in the present to help save the future (Nagel, 2005). And even with intention, it does not mean there would be action without the right conditions. The choices – the plausible choices – must exist first before anyone does anything (Sobel, 2007). That is why even with efforts on teaching and practicing sustainability, which is supposedly easy to do for the modern consumer, there is still a phenomenon called the intention-action gap (Carrington, Neville, & Whitwell., 2010).

2.2. Apathy

Other findings suggest that those who live in urban areas exhibit more narcissistic values than those who live in the rural areas due to elevated levels of individualism (Cai, Kwan, & Sedikides, 2012). This makes us more competitive towards each other instead of being more connected and compassionate towards one another. Although competition may be healthy every now and then, and it certainly keeps the people on their toes and may be necessary for personal growth and development, when competition pervades the system (or competition itself is the system), it has adverse effects. People are more cut off from one another due to the demands of both work and school, time feels hurried, stress levels are elevated, and those who cannot keep up with the system are perceived as failures. How do we prioritize what is outside of the self when we can barely keep up with the demands of school and work? How do we tell ourselves to care, to choose to live better and healthier, to tackle issues that are monumental when we feel that we have to focus on ourselves and our own survival? It promotes personal gain over collective gain (Hine et al., 2009; Juneman & Pane, 2013). But again, this does not mean that we are not aware of the environmental problems, or even the consequences of our actions. For example, we have the "tragedy of the commons" in which Hardin (2009) gave an example of a pasture open to all, and in which the arrangement was quite stable until social stability was reached, and the herdsmen began to ask how it would benefit them if one more animal was added to their own herd. This means that the people are aware of the benefits of not taking too much resources – of leaving plenty for the commons – but as time goes by, they take too much anyway. Same goes for the rest of us who know what environmentally destructive behaviors we exhibit despite our knowledge and awareness of how important the environment is – but we do them anyway.

Lertzman (2009) stated that the reason why people are so apathetic towards the environment is due to extreme anxiety about ecological problems (Juneman and Pane, 2013). This extreme anxiety, in turn, causes two defense mechanisms: denial and projection (Lertzman, 2009). When it comes to denial, a good example would be the tragedy of the commons as well, since the people who take part in it understand full well the consequences of their actions; there are also those who deny that they are the problem, or at least, that they are a significant contributor to it; there are those who outright deny that they have environmentally destructive behavior; and finally, there are those who deny that there is environmental destruction going on, such as the people who deny that climate change is real and that it is in the here and now. Accepting responsibility and accepting the truth that there is, in fact, a problem means not just changing one's values, but changing one's behavior. Values don't fix the problem; actions do. Projection means pointing fingers and relinquishing power to do anything about the environmental problems they are aware of. A frighteningly common example is when people throw garbage out on the streets and when called out, they say that there are street sweepers anyway; pointing out that it is the government's job to fix the environmental laws to ensure that problems regarding waste disposal or the climate change would be solved; and finally, thinking that oneself is too small to be able to contribute anything significant, and that is why they go on living the way they do, because the bigger powers are the ones who are capable of creating actual change. Considering how the empathetic (or at least, those who have low individualism) cooperate

more when it comes to social dilemma situations, then we need to find a way to make people more interconnected and compassionate (Rumble, Van Lange, & Parks, 2010).

3. INTERCONNECTEDNESS AND *KARUNĀ*

What makes the Buddhist teaching of compassion significant? Seeing how the urban setting is competitive and individualistic, and we are too disconnected from the environment to truly learn to empathize with it, *karuṇā* is most needed in society. The only question we need to ask ourselves is if it's even achievable considering our situation, which I believe that it is. But before we discuss compassion, we must discuss interconnectedness first.

3.1 *Interconnectedness*

Buddhist teachings talk about the interconnectedness and interdependence of all things. This theme is present in both the Four Noble Truths and dependent origination, the two teachings that must be understood to gain enlightenment (Santina, 1984). For example, the Four Noble Truths can be divided into two groups: suffering and the cause of suffering, and the end of suffering and the way to end suffering (Santina, 1984). Śāntideva also talked about how suffering arises from a series of actions, dispositions, and consequences caused by confusion, and one of these is not recognizing the interdependence of all things (Śāntideva, 1997; Garfield, 2010). As one can see, there is a causality at work. In dependent origination, it talks about how one thing cannot arise without another as its cause, and how that cause is also mutually interdependent with another that it arises when another does and ceases when its causes disappear (Harvey, 2012; Connolly, 2013). For example, water cannot boil if there is no flame, and there can be no flame without twigs, branches, logs, heat, and sparks from two flints which are struck together, and there can be no logs if there are no trees, and so on and so forth. Dependent origination also talks about the twelve links that pertains to suffering and rebirth, and these links – as links go – also exhibit causality (Santina, 1984). A 'person' is also made up of five interdependent factors called aggregates, a word which literally means "formed by adding together two or more amounts", or *khandhas* (Harvey, 2012; Merriam-Webster, 2017). These aggregates are then called the *upādāna-kkhandha*, which is also not separate from suffering as it is what connects the 'person' to suffering and its causes (Harvey, 2012).

This is significant in the teaching of compassion because compassion is supposed to be grounded on the deep understanding of interdependence of all things, without thinking that all things are the same thing (Garfield, 2010; Harvey, 2012). When the Buddha taught that all of life is suffering, he also meant that everyone is suffering regardless of one's status in life because everyone is essentially stuck in the same condition as everyone else: the cycle of attachment, suffering, and rebirth (Connolly, 2013). This means that instead of recognizing the suffering of *only* those who are literally and obviously suffering, or only those who are human, we should be compassionate towards all sentient beings (Sutra). And just like how the 'person' is made up of the five interconnected aggregates, Buddhism also teaches us that the being is a 'non-Self' or *anatta* due to the impermanent and changing nature of the *khandas* (Harvey, 2012). Many people would think that the idea of impermanence and the lack of a static "I" would mean that we can be absolved of bad deeds (especially since Buddhism teaches the art of non-attachment), but Śāntideva argues that it is precisely because of the *anatta* that we are capable of saving everyone from suffering simply because we can recognize suffering for what it is, regardless of who is suffering (Connolly, 2013). Simply put, because of the *anatta*, nobody "owns" suffering.

3.2 *Karuṇā*

Compassion or *karuṇā* is perhaps the most important virtue, at least in the Mahāyāna branch of Buddhism, but the Theravada branch puts high value on it as well (Connolly, 2013). First of all, Siddhartha Gautama left his family to seek Enlightenment then went on to teach the rest of the sentient beings as the Buddha out of compassion (Ñāṇamoli & Bodhi, 1995; Connolly, 2013). This means that compassion is not just a teaching from the Buddha to the rest of the sentient beings, but it is the reason why the Buddha did not go on to leave everyone else after he had achieved Buddhahood; this is also why the Buddha describes himself as an enlightened being who appeared in the world out of compassion and for the welfare of everyone else (Ñāṇamoli & Bodhi, 1995; Connolly, 2013). And just as I had mentioned earlier, the teachings of interdependence and interconnectedness are interwoven with the teaching of compassion; the more that one deeply understands those two things, the more that one stops serving others out of "self-service" or any other selfish reasons which does not enable us to truly be compassionate (Goodman, 2009; Connolly, 2013). For example, there are instances wherein individuals (e.g.,

politicians or even members of charitable organizations) would serve the poor and needy, or those who are living in disaster-stricken areas not just because it is their moral duty to help, but also because they know that there will be photographers and they can say that they are benevolent people who care for humankind. There are also instances wherein people join organizations for the double benefit of being able to help, and also being able to put down the projects that they had participated in (and the name of the organization) in their résumés. This is why when the Buddha taught compassion, he taught it in combination with *prajñā* or wisdom (Harvey, 2012; Connolly, 2013). Even the “Sūtra of the Upāsaka Precepts” mentioned this, that compassion is invoked because the *wise* man sees that all sentient beings are suffering (Sūtra).

Compassion is so important in Buddhism that one of the most important figures and ideals is the *Bodhisattva*. Any sentient being who, out of great compassion for all beings, activates the *bodhicitta* or “the bodhi mind” solemnly vows to express this compassionate for the benefit of everyone else is a *Bodhisattva* (Garfield, 2010; Harvey, 2012). In the “Sūtra of the Upāsaka Precepts”, Sujāta asked the Buddha why sentient beings activate the bodhi mind, and the Buddha’s answers are also grounded in the ideal that the *Bodhisattva* wishes to eradicate the suffering of all sentient beings, that they want to liberate them, and because they understand the interconnectedness of all (including oneself) sentient beings and their suffering. The Buddha emphasized multiple times that compassion is the root cause for the existence of the *Bodhisattva*, and for good reason, too: compassion is *not* easy, it involves wisdom, endurance, and a lot of hard work (Sūtra).

4. AWE and *KARUṆĀ*

There has been an interest in the emotion on awe and it has been talked about with regards to its effects in different fields, from aesthetics to religion (Burke, 1990; Keltner & Haidt, 2003; Weber, 1978; Shiota, Keltner, & Mossman, 2007). There are good reasons why this one complex emotion has piqued the interest of humans across decades, and one of them is that it mixes the positive feelings of pleasure and vastness with the negative feelings of fear and uncertainty (van Elk et al., 2016). Another reason is that it is not something that we come across every day unlike happiness, sadness, anger, and all the other usual feelings that focus on the self, which is why awe could be literally life-changing (Keltner & Haidt, 2003). Although the feeling of awe is usually triggered by non-manicured nature, existing literature also show that awe can be triggered through other means (Davis & Gatersleben, 2013).

4.1. Aspects and Effects of Awe

First of all, what is awe? According to researchers, awe is the feeling that one gets when faced with something significantly greater than oneself and is beyond one’s current understanding (Keltner & Haidt, 2003; Van Cappellen & Saroglou, 2012). It has been talked about in many cultures and even religions ranging from Hinduism to Christianity (Keltner & Haidt, 2003). Although not everyone gets these experiences, we still have little pockets of awe-experiences that we come across every once in a while, such as when doing nature-related activities like hiking in the mountains, visiting historical or religious sites, or going to places that are relatively untouched by humans. Keltner and Haidt (2003) identified two important features of awe that had been observed in awe-experiences: vastness and accommodation. “Vastness” is any stimulus or experience which is larger than the self; hence, challenging the person’s usual frame of reference (Keltner & Haidt, 2003; Shiota et al., 2017). Vastness, then, doesn’t just include things that are of large physical size in comparison to the perceiver, but it can also be any stimulus that challenges whatever the perceiver is used to (Shiota, 2017). “Accommodation” talks about having to adjust one’s existing mental structures or worldview in order to make sense of the “vast” experience or stimulus (Keltner & Haidt, 2003; Shiota et al., 2017). Some good examples would be a person who visits Florence to see the celebrated David of Michelangelo, then realizes that the sculpture is enormous at 17 feet tall, and surprisingly full of life from the knot in his brow, to the veins on his hands, to his tense stance. Or a person who visits Madrid to see the Las Meninas of Diego Velázquez and realizes that the 10.5 feet painting, although at first glance just looks like the usual paintings commissioned by the court, is infinitely more captivating in its mystery and the talent that it took to create it, which usually goes unnoticed when see through the eyes of an uninterested tourist.

Awe experiences are also not cognitively exhausting, which is surprising since it deals with information that cannot be easily assimilated into the person’s current mental structures (Keltner & Haidt, 2003; Shiota et al.,

2017). However, it has effects that are not just interesting but also significant: it triggers feelings of “smallness”, self-transcendence, and time-expansiveness, which in turn triggers prosociality (Shiota, Keltner, & Mossman, 2007; Rudd, Vohs, & Aaker, 2012; Piff et al., 2015).

Emotions such as happiness, gratitude, and pride, even anger and sadness, tend to make the person focus more on their own selves (Haidt & Morris, 2009; Shiota et al., 2017). This is what awe, what is called a “transcendent emotion” prevents. Multiple studies have shown that awe induces feelings of a “small self”, and has compared the experience to a religious one due to the feeling of being under the presence of a higher power (Keltner & Haidt, 2003); so, instead of focusing on the self, it makes the perceiver focus outward on that which they perceive is greater than the self (Shiota et al., 2017). Van Elk and his co-researchers (2016) even found that experiencing awe does not just make one think of themselves as figuratively smaller than their stimulus, but awe can make one feel literally small compared to the stimulus. Simply put, since the stimulus is so great that it fills the perceiver’s sensory and mental capacities, it demands the full attention of the perceiver, leaving no room for the latter’s self-focus. This is why awe has been called a self-transcendent emotion (Shiota et al., 2017).

Next, due to the feelings of the “small self” where the self is not at the forefront of one’s mind or focus, the self-transcendence and interconnectedness part comes in. Studies show that awe can elicit feelings of oneness with large groups, even with the human community (Keltner & Haidt, 2003; Shiota, Keltner, & Mossman, 2007; Van Capellen & Saroglou, 2012). Since the self is not at the center of the individual’s attention, they in turn get the feeling that their sense of self is wider and more accommodating, and that one is part of a more meaningful reality (Shiota et al., 2017). Those who experience awe even refer to themselves using more universal descriptors as an effect (Shiota et al., 2017). People who experience awe report feeling insignificant, but not in a bad way; it is similar to stargazing in a field on a clear night, and realizing that one’s problems are diminished, and that the universe is massive and potentially infinite, and that it is mysterious and frighteningly beautiful.

Rudd, Vohs, and Aaker (2012) found in their study that experiencing awe makes one feel as if they have more time available, even when are told that they are under a time constraint – and it has its benefits. Those who feel that they lack time are more likely to make bad decisions for their own well-being, and is a common hindrance to volunteer work as well (Rudd, Vohs, & Aaker, 2012). Considering how we live in a time when we feel that we have too many things to do and too little time, being “in the present” grounds us and enables us to stop rushing towards the next activity we must engage ourselves in, whether in thought or action.

One answer to the question of why awe triggers prosociality is because a diminished sense of self is needed to be able to do cooperative and collaborative work as the interests of the self must make way for the interests of the group (Piff et al., 2015). Research has shown that those who experience awe, since they feel less self-important, less rushed, and more interconnected to their environment and the larger group, feel more inclined to be kinder, more selfless, more ethically minded, less materialistic, and they express willingness to volunteer more than those who are individualistic and busy (Rudd, Vohs, & Aaker, 2012; Piff et al., 2015; Ying et al., 2016; Shiota et al., 2017).

4.2. *Elicitors of Awe*

There are numerous elicitors of awe, and since studies have shown time and time again that awe is triggered by vastness of the stimulus and the need for cognitive accommodation, untamed nature is a powerful tool in eliciting this experience due to its mysterious and even spiritual energy that gives the perceiver a glimpse of life as a whole (Keltner, 2003; Van Capellen & Saroglou, 2012). But of course, untamed nature is not the only way that people would experience awe, although it is arguably the best one. However, as I have stated in this paper, I recognize that not everyone has the time or resources to look for untamed nature or to even engage in nature-related activities, that is why it is utterly useful that there are other elicitors out there that can be utilized in the urban setting.

Human creations such as art and music, literature, film and videos, and even the mere act of reliving a memory are proven to be elicitors of awe (Keltner & Haidt, 2003; Rudd, Vohs, & Aaker, 2012). I have already given examples of this with *David* and *Las Meninas*. What is important is that these elicitors would meet the conditions set to elicit awe: they have to be literally massive, or they have to somehow exhibit power (Keltner & Haidt, 2003). Works that involve mystery and are rich in information are also more effective than works that are easily understandable and not at all significant (Keltner & Haidt, 2003; Shiota, Keltner, & Mossman, 2007). It is

also important to note that both positive and negative awe-elicitors (such as environmental disasters) both trigger prosociality (Piff et al., 2015).

4.3. Awe and *Karuṇā*

Now, the question is, how can awe enable us to achieve and practice *karuṇā*? As I have discussed earlier, awe can elicit feelings of smallness, interconnectedness, time-expansiveness, and prosociality. Awe removes the focus from the self – even going so far as detaching oneself from one’s awareness of themselves – and makes one feel a part of a bigger reality (Shiota, Keltner, & Mossman, 2007). One might think that there has to be a feeling of power and control for one to be able to help the suffering, but research has shown that these types of emotions are negatively correlated with prosocial tendencies and empathy (Caprara, Alessandri, & Eisenberg, 2012; Boer & Fischer, 2013; Piff et al., 2015). The *Bodhisattva*’s understanding of interconnectedness and interdependence, and the compassion that is the root cause of their wish to be a *Bodhisattva* in the first place, has no place for narcissistic values because they have to understand in the first place that they are not alienated beings whose suffering is separate from everyone else’s (Garfield, 2010). Also, since awe changes one’s self-concept due to its features of vastness and accommodation, and as accounts from the studies I have mentioned earlier said that they feel insignificant, the only rational thing to do is to be more compassionate towards others (Garfield, 2010). Those who have experienced awe are also more motivated to devote their time and energy into helping those in need, and to be kinder and more selfless, and this is significant in *karuṇā*. First of all, as Garfield (2010) stated, compassion is not a mere passive emotional response, it is commitment and action. Compassion without action is empathy, or even pity, because you feel terrible for the plight of those who are in need, yet there is still no action involved, no commitment to do anything to alleviate suffering. But *karuṇā* demands, aside from wisdom to recognize the state of all things, action. Buddha would not be Buddha if he had simply gone on to achieve his own enlightenment without turning back and teaching it to the rest of the sentient beings, and *Bodhisattvas* would not be such if they do not even bother to be compassionate enough to activate the bodhi mind in the first place.

Another significance of the “small self” and the interconnectedness it entails is that *karuṇā* teaches compassion for all sentient beings, not just those who are closest to the person (Connolly, 2013). Eliciting feelings of awe enable people to feel more at one *in general*, not just with one’s friends or personal relationships (Van Capellen & Saroglou, 2012; Shiota et al., 2017).

Of course, practicing *karuṇā* is not easy. But since awe triggers prosociality towards other beings and the environment, and since the perceiver feels that they have more time (hence, volunteers), *karuṇā* towards sentient beings is achievable. In the Theravada branch of Buddhism, *karuṇā* happens because suffering is overwhelming, especially seeing others’ suffering (Buddhaghosa, 1999; Connolly, 2013). The person who sees this helplessness in those who suffer becomes compassionate in the hope that these beings would be saved (Buddhaghosa, 1999).

Again, yes, it will not be easy, but the emotion of awe allows us to take the first necessary steps towards – not just being more compassionate – but living a compassionate existence. Awe enables us to feel at one with everything, to not put ourselves in the forefront of everything, and to have the desire to be better people in general. Kindness is compassion, and we can start there (Ñānamoli, & Bodhi, 1995; Connolly, 2013).

5. CONTENTIONS

As was mentioned earlier, both positive and negative awe-elicitors trigger prosociality – which means that instead of triggering apathy, it triggers the exact opposite. Considering how we have been talking about ecophobia and the mistake of bombarding people with visuals and information regarding environmental destruction, negative awe seems to negate those research findings.

However, I have three contentions, a) that there must be higher awe levels than fear levels, b) that children must not be exposed to such stimulus so as not to form ecophobia, c) and the recipients must be informed of ways to cope with the stimulus.

For the first, contention, it is necessary that the recipient does not close themselves from the experience due to elevated levels of fear which could trigger helplessness instead of prosociality. One of the examples usually given in eliciting awe is a mysterious trail leading into the forest. Imagine seeing that mysterious trail in the daytime, or nearing sunset, when the blending of the colors gives a magical atmosphere to the forest. One would then want to go in and immerse themselves in the experience. Now, imagine seeing the same trail in the middle

of the night, when everything is dark, the trees are looming, and their canopies blocking the light of the moon. No one would want to walk down that trail because it sends signals to the brain which sets off sirens screaming danger. The experience would have been frightening and completely useless in triggering prosociality because what it would trigger instead is self-preservation. Researchers have also found that the more complex the environment is, the more negative the experience (Andrews and Gatersleben, 2010). What we want to evoke are feelings of humility, insignificance, transcendence (Davis and Gatersleben, 2013); we want the recipient to be immersed in the experience because of how engulfing the experience is, not because they are on high alert.

For the second contention, I argue that children must not be exposed to negative awe if we do not want them to develop ecophobia. Children must be given the chance to, in a way, fall in love with the environment first before making them feel that the future of the world is on their shoulders. There is nothing wrong with informing children about environmental destruction; but just like with the first contention, the appeal to fear must not be at the forefront so as to influence their behavior effectively (Finger, 1993; Sobel, 2007). We already know that research states that experience with the environment is the best way to teach children pro-environmental values; the deeper the relationship one has with something or someone, the more one takes care of them. Images of catastrophes give a sense of inevitability, especially when these are constantly seen. If a child would keep on seeing terrifying images of thunderstorms, or hearing stories about how a certain animal has no home anymore, the message it sends is, “This happens all the time, and now it’s up to you to stop it.”

Children still lack the skills necessary for coping with huge, seemingly insurmountable problems. Not all adults even have those skills, what more children? According to Stern (2000), when a threat is too much and there seems to be no way to deal with it, the response goes haywire, such as what we have discussed earlier – denial, or projection, hopelessness, frustration. That is why it is extremely important to ensure that when children are informed about environmental problems, they must be given that sense of agency, and the problem must be broken down to manageable chunks. Bombarding them with problems will just discourage environmental behavior (Sobel, 2007).

For the last contention, recipients must be informed of what they can do to deal with the stimulus. Stopping at awe, stopping at providing information on environmental problems is not enough. Fear appeals can work, but as I have said earlier, there must be higher awe levels than fear for it to not backfire. But the process does not stop there; to at least ensure that the recipients would not ignore the problem, other factors must be taken into consideration as well, such as their perceived vulnerability to the problem, its severity, awareness of possible responses, and the belief that those responses are doable (Gardner and Stern, 1996; Stern, 2000). The intention must lead into action.

5.1. The “small self” and Nagel’s (2005) “learned helplessness”

Another question which may be raised would be the compatibility of the “small self” and Nagel’s “learned helplessness.” I would like to answer this question by arguing that having a perceived smaller sense of self does not automatically entail that one would feel helpless. The stimulus is important here; again, if we use too much fear, then it could backfire. As we have discussed earlier, awe is central to religious and spiritual experiences because feelings of humility and insignificance lead to a sense of interconnectedness with everyone and everything else (Keltner and Haidt, 2003; Van Capellen and Saroglou, 2011). The sense of “small self” here, then, means that one perceives their own selves and their personal problems as insignificant compared to the greater whole which they are a part of. In “learned helplessness,” it is different. The emotions are either dismissive or negative, and there is a barrier between the self and the other. That is why those who develop “learned helplessness” due to ecophobia end up denying or projecting, instead of helping deal with the problem the best they can.

6. CONCLUSION

In the competitive, fast-paced world that we live in, it is getting increasingly difficult to constantly remind ourselves that we are not individuals isolated from everything and everyone else. Buddhism has been teaching us that nothing arises on its own; we are interdependent, and that has its implications and repercussions, too. However, we can utilize the emotion of awe to understand these things, and to take the first steps towards being more compassionate beings, towards achieving *karuṇā*.

Perhaps one of the first doable things that we can do is to use awe-inspiring material in the classroom. This paper recognizes that not everyone has the luxury nor the time to be near nature, especially those who are in the upper tiers of education, that is why it is of high importance that teachers and professors utilize awe and not fear in teaching compassion and environmental education. We already know what we need to trigger awe; we can start integrating those materials into our everyday lives. One important tool that should be utilized as an elicitor of awe is virtual reality (VR). Since it is widely available, more people can make use of this to have their own experiences of awe. The VR system is a technological system which makes the user feel as if they are in the virtual world by making use of combined sensorial displays and a tracking device (Chirico et al., 2016). We live in a world where people are getting more engaged and involved in stories by way of technology through video games, but VR enables the user to be “there”, providing a more intense experience (Chirico et al., 2016). There have been researches on the VR on its uses to combat addiction and mental illnesses, and to elicit moods, which says plenty on its effectiveness on the user’s emotional and mental states (Riva et al., 2016; Dobricki & Pauli, 2016; Chirico et al., 2016). Reinerman-Jones and his group of researches (2013) were the first ones to use virtual reality as an elicitor for awe, which means that it is not impossible. Virtual reality can be used to recreate sceneries ranging from a forest to outer space, which means it is capable of reproducing the natural, complex elicitors we need to experience awe (Riva et al., 2016; Chirico et al., 2016).

For schools, we should also do away with field trips that involve going to the mall. Field trips are supposed to be educational, and it is one of the few venues the school has that allows children to be guided by a teacher outside of the classroom. It is the perfect opportunity to be near or in nature, to immerse oneself and get up close and personal with what used to be abstract; we should not take that chance for granted.

Considering how majority of the populace, especially those living in urban settlements, have access to the internet, then it is highly possible that experiences of awe are attainable. Environmental groups should utilize this emotion as well in creating their advertisements and information material. There are plenty of mediums out there which are accessible to large groups of people, from books to movies to photos, and those who have experienced awe through various mediums said that they felt smaller and more motivated to do good (Piff et al., 2015). It’s just that not everyone knows how to immerse themselves in these things, and not everyone feels that they have the time. However, absorption, or being able to feel completely engaged in what one does or experiences, can be manipulated (van Elk et al., 2016). This means that those who are not predisposed to be completely in the moment can also have awe experiences simply if you tell them to be open to that experience (van Elk et al., 2016).

As multiple literature has shown, the main problem that we have now when it comes to volunteering, or even to making better decisions, is the feeling that we lack time. The experience of awe, with its time-expanding properties, help us feel more “in the moment” because we lose the feeling of needing to rush things because we have “more important things to do.” This is important as well when it comes to tackling ecophobia: correct conditions does not just mean being surrounded by nature per se, it also means having the time to make better choices. It is like picking between fast food and a home-cooked meal; if one is in a hurry, they are more inclined to pick up food along the way instead of preparing and cooking a meal at home. The other scenario would be having the time to actually volunteer instead of being too busy or too exhausted to do so.

We also have to be smart in using negative awe to aid ourselves in being more compassionate, as it can backfire if not used properly. The goal is to be elicit feelings of humility, not helplessness; interconnectedness, not fear. Awe is a powerful tool which can and should be utilized as it has unique components which enable a person to transcend themselves – and this transcendence, this lack of focus on the self – is necessary to being more compassionate.

Lastly, I understand that awe is not the ultimate solution that we need to achieve *karuṇā* and be compassionate towards ourselves and the environment. But we already know how important this emotion is, and how its rarity makes it life-changing. With the way the times are changing, with how self-focused and busy we are all becoming, this is something we need. It literally makes one feel smaller and insignificant, and it enables us to have a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness of everything. We are a part of a bigger reality, and this reality tells us that we are all subject to the same conditions. Now that we know that, the only logical thing to do – to be – is to live out a compassionate existence for all things.

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