

First Maxim: Work Hard to Grasp the Immensity

Noirin Sheahan · Noirin's Essays · 3 min read

Preparing for Climate Change - First Ethical Maxim

This follows from the August tip describing six maxims that we can practice to fortify ourselves for the environmental and social consequences of climate change. The first maxim asks us to “work hard to grasp the immensity”; this tip won’t discuss the likelihood or extent of the consequences we can expect (if interested you could read the paper that suggested the maxims) but explore some links between the first maxim and the Dhamma.

The maxim fits perfectly with the Buddha’s advice that we come to terms with the fact that everything inside us and outside is in flux, vulnerable, dependent on circumstance. We plan our career, family, diary, around the presumption that we will continue to have a stable food and water supply, electricity, public transport, schools, internet, the rule of law, government. All of these are put in jeopardy because of climate change. But their absence is, for most of us, unthinkable. The mind skims over the implications, we might feel blocked or frightened or we might doze off or restlessly seek distraction. Soon we’re back to ‘business as usual’.

This parallels with the way we ignore our own mortality. Intellectually we know we will die someday, but rarely do we think about this. To overcome this reluctance, the Buddha asked his followers to deliberately expose themselves to the reality of death - to look at dead bodies, smell them, see the flesh rotting, the maggots feeding, the residue of bones and dust, reminding themselves “one day this will happen to my body; I am not exempt from this fate.”

To follow this approach regarding environmental and social collapse we could read relevant articles or watch documentaries. We could talk the matter over with friends or family or look for on-line support in coming to terms with the situation.

We should also remember that the contemplation of death is the final exercise that the Buddha lists for mindfulness of the body. He starts with mindfulness of breathing and posture and everyday activities. We get to know the body very intimately in life before we contemplate its death.

Similarly, we can become more mindful of the environment and social structures as they now function to fortify ourselves for their impending collapse. We can walk in nature, paying full attention to grass, trees, birds, sky, all the while being aware of our emotions e.g. enjoyment, boredom. Acknowledging our reactions honestly allows us forge a deeper relationship that will eventually transcend attachment, indifference, aversion.

This mirrors Joanna Macey’s advice to develop our relationship with nature in order to strengthen ourselves for the challenge of climate change. After reading her book “Active Hope” I started taking

a deeper interest in nature. My daily walks slowed as wildflowers and grasses and birdsong demanded attention. After some time I began to dread winter when the verges would be muddy and drab, the birds silent. I worked mindfully with this anxiety and dread till one day I noticed an underlying guilt, a feeling that I should somehow be able to give each flower the gift of everlasting life and was failing in my task! Once I became aware of this delusion I could smile at it and enjoy my walks again. I started to appreciate the grasses, flowers and birds as dhamma teachers. Their message of transience and vulnerability became a gentle way of learning about my own mortality. More recently my daily walks help me assimilate the possibility of environmental collapse. Walking by a tree I reflect that it might not live out its natural lifespan, that its roots might already be detecting degradation in the soil, its flowers noticing the lack of insects. Grief or anger might emerge but sometimes these resolve into a bitter-sweet ‘hello, goodbye’ as we meet on our journeys through life and death.

I find this next part more difficult but am trying to extend the practice to include social supports such as food in the shops, water pouring when I turn a tap, electricity flowing when I press a switch. I remind myself to be grateful for whatever services now work – transport, schools, hospitals, internet and the social norms that allow me feel safe on my daily walk. The more I value these wonders, the better I will be able to contemplate living without their immense benefits.

I also appreciate the support of others in this endeavor. If you think you might similarly benefit you could join the Satipanya forum dedicated to practicing with the Six Maxims. Email Noirin for further information or to register.

Some resources that are helping me ‘grasp the immensity’:

Hothouse Earth, Bill McGuire, Icon Books, 2022

This Changes Everything, Naomii Klein, Penguin, 2014

Climate Crisis and the Global Green New Deal, Noam Chomsky & Robert Pollin, Verso, 2020

What society might look like as its structures collapse:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lcem_tutbGc

<https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20170418-how-western-civilisation-could-collapse>

Gwen’s tip from the September newsbyte contained many additional resources and after our second Climate and Dhamma Zoom session, Gwen shared Caroline Bird’s poem “Prepper”:

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.