

Second Maxim: Cultivate Radical Hope

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Radical Hope, Saddha.

This continues a series of tips based on the six maxims[1] which have been suggested as a way to fortify ourselves for the environmental and social consequences of climate change. The first maxim challenges us to ‘grasp the immensity’ of the risk to our environment and social structures and possibly even to our civilization, posed by climate change. The second maxim asks us to cultivate radical hope.

Normally we think of hope in terms of a particular outcome. We hope for good news or recovery from illness. This is ‘hope for’ and the six-maxim authors¹ distinguish radical hope from this; radical hope is not based on optimism that we will find a way to restore stability to the climate and nature; its a form of hope that will survive ever deteriorating weather conditions with harsh consequences for the environment and mankind. It would inspire us to make the best of things even when our home had been burned by a wildfire. Having nowhere to live and only scraps of food to eat, it would motivate us to eat those mindfully, with gratitude.

In Buddhism this is termed ‘saddha’, normally translated as faith, but the better translation is trust. Saddha gives us confidence in the teachings of the Buddha. Even if our circumstances were totally miserable and the outlook equally bleak, saddha lets us trust that simply being aware of the misery is noble and worthwhile.

Radical hope, saddha, has no preferred outcome. It’s not driven by desire for any goal we can envisage. It trusts a goodness beyond the surface appearance of things, found in simply being present, aware of things as they are.

Mystics from all religions find radical hope. Julian of Norwich lived at the time of bubonic plague and the 100 year war but could confidently believe the inner voice that told her “All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well”.

Fortunately, saddha is naturally cultivated by meditation practice. Every time we drop our daydreams, plans, worries, and bring attention to the here and now we are letting go of outcomes. We learn that all we really know are present sensations and feelings; the future is but a thought of what might happen. Since we don’t yet know what’s to come, why waste energy worrying?

“Its one thing to do that in meditation practice” our inner sceptic argues “where we’ve decided to sit down and watch the breath. Its quite another thing to be facing a future where millions are competing for scarce food and water.” True, it will be a greater challenge. But its

one we are training for every time we overcome some obstacle in meditation. When pain makes us irritable or we grow bored, restless, dozy, or when doubt persuades us we're wasting our time. We're tempted to give up; we don't want to endure these miseries, we want to be entertained or to be doing something, achieving something.

Can we see all such challenges as spiritual muscle-building, preparing us for serious horrors which may come our way? Bringing a gentle curiosity to every experience we develop resilience to physical and mental discomfort, learn that we don't always need to be achieving goals or distracting ourselves.

These traits will help enormously in the event of climate catastrophe, when there may be little

we can do to avoid hardship for ourselves and for those we love. Saddha, radical hope, will bring out the best in the changed circumstances; for example we may be relieved that the delusion of human dominance over nature has been shattered along with the 'greed is good' message of consumerism.

With the loss of illusion, deeper humanity may come to the fore. During bereavement or serious illness people discover the value of family and friends. Neighbours who had hardly known one another before COVID helped each other during lockdown. Kindness and care may become our best survival-tools when climate change really bites and we can no longer rely on the social structures we now take for granted.

Radical hope will let us play our part to minimise suffering in what may well be appalling circumstances. Mindfulness practice is our training ground. We can use any worries about climate change to motivate our practice. We may not be able to persuade governments to avert the disaster, but we can persuade ourselves to be ready for disaster, ready to find meaning in being present, just breathing, even if the future looks horrifying.

[1] Ethical Maxims for a Marginally Inhabitable Planet David Schenck* and Larry R. Churchill, Perspectives in Biology and Medicine, Vol 64,4 2021 https://media2-production.mightynetworks.com/asset/39337730/Schenck_-_Ethical_Maxims.pdf

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