

Fifth Maxim: Train the Mind and Body

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Fifth Maxim: Train your Body and your Mind.

This tip looks at the 5th of the six maxims which have been suggested as ethical preparation for climate catastrophe. The authors, David Schenck and Larry Churchill, believe that we are heading towards social collapse due to the unstoppable consequences of Climate Change and that the trauma of losing so much of what we take for granted – like food, water, social stability – will lead to huge levels of stress and mental illness. My purpose in writing these tips is to tease out some links between these maxims and the Dhamma.

The fifth maxim advises us to train the body and mind. Here's what they say: Learn breathing exercises. Develop the physiological capacity to deal with despair. Despair isn't just psychological, it's physiological. Learn skills for getting beyond ego—not just the cognitive limits of ego, which many are at least familiar with pondering, but the emotional and physiological limits of ego.

Training the mind is central to the Dhamma. Three strands of the Eightfold Path are to do with cultivating the mind: Right Effort, Mindfulness and Concentration. The first verse of the Dhammapada tells us that all our suffering is mind-made: we don't suffer because of what happens to us in life, we suffer because of our reactions – wanting this, hating that. Although the body plays a central role in the Buddha's teaching, it is always as a method for training the mind. In a similar vein, the six maxim authors aren't advocating fitness for its own sake, but for the sake of dealing with despair. Thus their advice has a number of resonances in the Dhamma:

Breathing exercises: The Anapanasati Sutta lists a number of breathing exercises. These start with mindfulness, knowing when we're breathing in and when we're breathing out, and go on to include the kind of yogic breathing exercises David and Larry are indicating e.g. using the breath to calm the body and mind, to develop pleasant feeling, to gladden the mind & develop concentration.

The need to deal with despair: Despair was what fuelled the Buddha's quest for enlightenment: his early life of luxury was rendered meaningless once he realised that this would end in sickness, aging and death. His whole teaching, he said, could be reduced to a simple statement: there is suffering and there is an end to suffering. Having transcended his own despair we can be confident that the Dhamma will teach us to do likewise.

Develop the physiological capacity to deal with despair: The Buddha's first attempts at spiritual development started with deeply concentrated forms of meditation. Seeing these gave only a temporary

respite from despair he went on to practice strenuous asceticism. On the verge of death from starvation and hardship he abandoned this approach, accepted a bowl of rice-milk and went on to discover his own path to liberation. Taking the rice-milk indicates the need for physical energy in order to make his spiritual breakthrough. While physical health isn't lauded as a virtue in his teaching, he encouraged people to maintain good health e.g. to do walking meditation so as to develop energy, health and aid digestion; to eat healthy food like rice-gruel so as to enjoy health, strength and a comfortable abiding.

Ego limitations manifest not only cognitively, but emotionally and physiologically: In Dhamma terminology, we suffer because we cling to the wrong view of self. This suffering manifests as emotional burdens like greed and hatred, which have physical aspects – for some it might be muscular tension, for others headaches, stomach upsets, breathing difficulties.

Getting beyond the ego: This is one way of describing the teaching on 'Not-Self'. Believing there is a substantial core to the person we call 'me', we suffer when things go wrong for us – when we get blamed or mistreated, when we get ill or incapacitated, when we lose those we love. The Buddha does not deny the suffering, or the fact that it is happening to the person I call 'me'. Caring deeply for that person, he would respond with compassion, while knowing the suffering as unnecessary, based on mistaken identification with body and mind, with the person called 'me'. All our practice is aimed at seeing through this illusion, so as to gain the peace and joy of liberation.

This penultimate maxim resonates well with the Buddha's teaching. Despair will emerge of all of us as we witness the increasing impact of climate change on nature, on vulnerable communities and as our own food supplies and social structures grow ever less reliable. Can we take the coming storm to heart, prepare ourselves as advised in the 5th Maxim? If we care for our body as the necessary basis for learning the Dhamma, train body and mind according to the Anapanasati and other suttas, we will be ready to let it become part of our path to the end of suffering.

When despair becomes widespread in society, those of us who can meet it mindfully will become ever more important in preserving hope, preventing a decline into chaos.

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