

Triumph of the Spirit

Finding Peace and Purpose in a Troubled World

Buddhist Monk Matthieu Ricard: The Happiest Man in the World

I was intrigued by [Matthieu Ricard \(http://www.matthieuricard.org/en/index.php\)](http://www.matthieuricard.org/en/index.php)'s Buddhist-flavored thoughts on the art of happiness. Plus, it's the first time I've seen a Buddhist monk quote [Ayn Rand \(/2010/04/09/branden-audio/\)](http://www.aolhealth.com/2010/04/09/branden-audio/)! Here is the [Q&A article by Justine van der Leun \(http://www.aolhealth.com/2010/09/29/how-to-be-happy/\)](http://www.aolhealth.com/2010/09/29/how-to-be-happy/) of AOL Health.



(<https://bolstablog.files.wordpress.com/2010/11/matthieu-ricard.jpg>)

Matthieu Ricard

Buddhist monk [Matthieu Ricard \(http://www.matthieuricard.org/en/index.php\)](http://www.matthieuricard.org/en/index.php) claims you can practice your way to happiness, and he should know: After MRI scans showed that he experienced extreme levels of positive emotions and few negative ones, he became known as “the happiest man in the world.” Trained as a cell biologist in France, Ricard moved to the Himalayas in 1972 to study Buddhism. He’s now a translator, a photographer and the [Dalai Lama \(http://www.dalailama.com/\)](http://www.dalailama.com/)'s French interpreter. His books—the proceeds of which go to 41 humanitarian projects in the remote Himalayas—include [The Monk and the Philosopher \(http://www.amazon.com/dp/0805211039/?tag=sixtseco-20\)](http://www.amazon.com/dp/0805211039/?tag=sixtseco-20) (a dialogue with his father, a famed philosopher), [Happiness: A Guide to Developing Life's Most Important Skill \(http://www.amazon.com/dp/0805211039/?tag=sixtseco-20\)](http://www.amazon.com/dp/0805211039/?tag=sixtseco-20), and, most recently, [Why Meditate? \(http://www.amazon.com/dp/1401926630/?tag=sixtseco-20\)](http://www.amazon.com/dp/1401926630/?tag=sixtseco-20) (<http://www.amazon.com/dp/1401926630/?tag=sixtseco-20>) AOL Health spoke with Ricard about the cultivation of happiness, the benefits of altruism and how 30 silent minutes a day can change your life.

Do you think you're the happiest man in the world?

It's better than the unhappiest person in the world. It was a cover line on a Buddhist independent journal. Of course it's cute, but it doesn't rest on scientific evidence. I took part in some ongoing studies on compassion. It's a jump to say my results mean that.

What is happiness?

Happiness is a way of being rather than an endless search for experiences. Pleasure is fine but depends on things that are subject to change: people, places, things. Something tastes good; fire warms you when you're cold. But then this experience turns neutral or averse: Even the most beautiful music is unpleasant after 24 straight hours. But happiness is a more durable state. It's a cluster of basic human qualities that nurture a state of fulfillment, flourishing, of appreciating your life. It's inner freedom, inner strength, inner peace. These are the resources to deal with the struggles of life. The more you experience happiness, the deeper and more stable it becomes.

You link meditation with happiness. Why?

Meditation is not an exotic eastern practice but is actually mind training. We all have a mind and can work with it.

So the basis of happiness is mind training?

In the sense that mind training means harnessing the potential we have for less vulnerability to provocation from outside. Meditation helps you cultivate a better emotional balance and inner freedom so you are not a slave of impulses like anger and craving.

And you do this by sitting for 30 minutes a day?

There are different types of meditation, and I tried to gather all these exercises into a small manual for a Western audience ["Why Meditation?"]. But in clinical trials that study the effects of meditation in the West, 30 minutes a day has been the foundation. We always see that after three months, meditation has had a significant effect in reducing stress and the tendency toward depression. It reinforces the immune system and positive emotions. It's been studied for 10 years in the West. Sitting for that precious 30 minutes modifies the quality of the other 23 hours and 30 minutes.

So happiness is a skill?

Pleasure cannot be cultivated — only renewed. But you can cultivate inner peace, strength, freedom — the qualities that create genuine happiness. We start with different baselines: For instance, everyone will not become a champion of tennis, but within a few months or a few years of training, even a beginner can become a decent player and enjoy it.

Do negative emotions, like anger, have a purpose?

If you witness someone beating a child or an injustice, anger can motivate you to do something. But all the studies have shown that people who systematically vent their anger just reinforce their tendency to be angry. You don't just want to suppress it or you'll be like a time bomb. Instead, you look at your anger and let it vanish. When you cease to fuel a fire, it slowly dies out.

You're not talking about being a pushover.

A mother who gets angry and aggressive is taken over by nerves. A mother can be loving but still firm, straight and a bit severe. You can extend that attitude of the mother to others.

What about sadness?

Sadness is not incompatible with happiness because happiness is not just a pleasant sensation. Sadness can help you feel compassion. Even when you are sad, you can continue to do wonderful things.

What is the relationship between happiness and ambition?

Ambition for wealth, fame or power puts our hopes and fears outside ourselves. It's individualistic, self-centered and egocentric. But ambition in terms of becoming a better person, preserving the environment or finding inner peace can motivate you.

The search for material goods seems to become a cycle for people — the emptier they feel, the more money and stuff they seek to fill the void.

Yes, they feel empty so they go for a shopping spree or get a younger wife. You get addicted to selfishness.

Is it a lost cause with some people?

Sometimes people say, "I can't sleep." I say, "We have a clinic next door — go help, and I bet after two weeks, you will be able to sleep." They come back with a more humane perspective and find satisfaction and fulfillment.

So to snap out of it, help other people?

I've seen many successful people who feel empty. They start helping underprivileged kids and find such meaning in life. Everything is different.

People assume altruism may make them unhappy.

Your primary motive is to help others, but it's also the best way to be happy yourself. [Ayn Rand \(/2010/04/09/branden-audio/\)](#) said that you should be selfish and should not sacrifice any part of yourself. She didn't get the point. Altruism is the best way to make yourself happy. If you look at living beings and see how your actions can contribute to a more compassionate society, you flourish.

ABOUT PHIL BOLSTA