



Talk Aug. 11, 2023

The 'World's Happiest

Man' Shares His Three Rules for Life

By David Marchese Photo Illustration by Bráulio Amado

Matthieu Ricard is an ordained Buddhist monk and an internationally best-selling author of books about altruism, animal rights, happiness and wisdom. His humanitarian efforts led to his homeland's awarding him the French National Order of Merit. (Ricard's primary residence is a Nepalese monastery.) He was the Dalai Lama's French interpreter and holds a Ph.D in cellular genetics. In the early 2000s, researchers at the University of Wisconsin found that Ricard's brain produced gamma waves – which have been linked to learning, attention and memory – at such pronounced levels that the media named him “the world's happiest man.” He was also late for our Zoom, and it was driving me nuts. Didn't he get my confirmation email? Why hadn't he emailed to say he was running late? I had deadlines! *Tight* deadlines! My carefully planned schedule was being shot to hell! Alas, everything turned out fine, as it was always going to. Clearly, I had much to learn about taming the mind. “You should not get quickly discouraged,” said Ricard, whose memoir, “Notebooks of a Wandering Monk,” is forthcoming. “You cannot master playing the piano *now*. These skills take time.”

OK, so I've been meditating twice a day for probably 15 years, and I feel as if it has improved my ability to control my thoughts and emotions instead of letting them control me. But still sometimes I'll walk by a mirror and have an extreme flash of self-loathing. Or I'll get all agitated over something stupid,

like finding a parking spot. Will that stuff ever go away? Well, they can. Absolutely. You know, once I was on the India Today Conclave.¹ They said, “Can you give us the three secrets of happiness?” I said: “First, there’s no secret. Second, there’s not just three points. Third, it takes a whole life, but it is the most worthy thing you can do.” I’m happy to feel I am on the right track. I cannot imagine feeling hate or wanting someone to suffer.

¹
An annual TED-like event that gathers leading thinkers from a variety of fields.

It’s not the best thing to say, but I can easily imagine wanting certain people to suffer. How are we supposed to deal gracefully with our polar opposites in a world that feels increasingly about polarities? I mean, the Dalai Lama could talk to Vladimir Putin all he wants, but Putin’s not going to say, “Your compassion has changed me.” Once, a long time ago, someone said to me, who is the person you would like to spend 24 hours alone with? I said Saddam Hussein. I said, “Maybe, maybe, some small change in him might be possible.” When we speak of compassion, you want everybody to find happiness. No exception. You cannot just do that for those who are good to you or close to you. It has to be universal. You may say that Putin and Bashar al-Assad are the scum of humanity, and rightly so. But compassion is about remedying the suffering *and* its cause. How would that look? You can wish that the system that allowed someone like that to emerge is changed. I sometimes visualize Donald Trump going to hospitals, taking care of people, taking migrants to his home. You can wish that the cruelty, the indifference, the greed may disappear from these people’s minds. That’s compassion; that’s being impartial.

But why does compassion have to be universal? Because this is different from moral judgment. It doesn’t prevent you from saying that those are walking psychopaths, that they have no heart. But compassion is to remedy suffering wherever it is, whatever form it takes and whoever causes it. So what is the object of compassion here? It is the hatred and the person under its power. If someone beats you with a stick, you don’t get angry with the stick — you get angry with the person. These people we

are talking about are like sticks in the hands of ignorance and hatred. We can judge the acts of a person at a particular time, but compassion is wishing that the present aspect of suffering and the causes of suffering may be remedied.



Matthieu Ricard, right, with his teacher Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche in Paro, Bhutan, in 1983. Marilyn Silverstone/Shechen Archives

What are the limits of compassion? Could blowing up a pipeline be a compassionate act? Well, we discussed a lot in those meetings with the Dalai Lama at the time of Kosovo what we call “surgical” violence.² But the problem is if it triggers a chain reaction, leading to escalation from both sides. Also, if the barrel is bad, all the apples get rotten, so the *system* has to change. You can see that with this deep divide now in the United States based on ignorance. Delusion is a cause of suffering. If you could get rid of that, that will alleviate suffering in many forms.

For a while now, people have been calling you the world’s happiest man. Do you feel that happy? It’s a big joke. We cannot know the level of happiness through neuroscience. It’s a

² “Surgical strikes” are intended to limit damage to opponents’ targets while minimizing collateral damage. In 1999, NATO deployed air forces in Kosovo in its war with

good title for journalists to use, but I cannot get rid of it. Maybe on my tomb, it will say, “Here lies the happiest person in the world.” Anyway, I enjoy every moment of life, but of course there are moments of extreme sadness — especially when you see so much suffering. But this should kindle your compassion, and if it kindles your compassion, you go to a stronger, healthier, more meaningful way of being. That’s what I call happiness. It’s not as if all the time you jump for joy. Happiness is more like your baseline. It’s where you come to after the ups and downs, the joy and sorrows. We perceive even more intensely — bad taste, seeing someone suffer — but we keep this sense of the depth. That’s what meditation brings.

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Do you ever feel despair? There’s no point. We can feel sad if we see suffering, but sadness is not against a deep sense of eudaemonia,³ of fulfillment, because sadness goes with compassion, sadness goes with determination to remedy the cause. Despair: You’re at the bottom of the hole, there’s no way out. That’s fatalism. But suffering comes from causes and conditions. Those are impermanent, and impermanence is what allows for change.

Your response to my question about despair was, “There’s no point,” which suggests that you’re making conscious choices about your feelings — whether to follow them or not — based on their perceived value. That’s not something everyone is

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A Greek word used by people who base their reason and morality. I drawn parallels between and the Buddhist con

able to do. Short of also becoming a Buddhist monk, how might other people start developing the ability to control their emotions like you can? Emotions are just like any characteristic of our mental landscape: They can change. We can become more familiar with their process; we can catch them early. It's like when you see a pickpocket in a room: Aha, be careful. Twenty-five hundred years of contemplative science⁴ and 40 years of neuroplasticity – everything tells you we can change. You were not born knowing how to write your columns. You know it's the fruit of your efforts. So why would major human qualities be engraved in stone from the start? That would be a total exception to every other skill we have. That's why I like the idea of Richard Davidson's⁵ that happiness is a skill. It can be deeper, more present in your mental landscape. We deal with our mind from morning to evening, but we spend very little attention on improving the way we translate outer conditions, good or bad, into happiness or misery. And it's crucial, because that's what determines our day-to-day experience of the world!

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Meaning the practice which arose between century and early four

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A professor of psycho psychiatry at the Univ Wisconsin. He led the effects of meditation helped make Ricard f

But if I were explaining that to someone, they still might say, OK, how do I change? Is the answer as simple as “Just start thinking about compassion”? When you are in that moment of unconditional love – say, for a child – this fills our mind for 30 seconds, maybe a minute, then suddenly it's gone. We all have experienced that. The only difference now is to cultivate that in some way. Make it stay a little longer. Try to be quiet with it for 10 minutes, 20 minutes. If it goes away, try to bring it back. Give it vibrancy and presence. That's exactly what meditation is about. If you do that for 20 minutes a day, even for three weeks, this will trigger a change.



Ricard with the Dalai Lama at an international meeting on Tibetan issues at the French Senate in 2016. Philippe Lopez/Agence France-Presse, via Getty Images.

Who gets on your nerves at the monastery? My nerves? Once in New York, when I was promoting one of my books, a very nice journalist lady said, “What really upsets your nerves when you arrive in New York?” I said, “Why do you presuppose anything is upsetting me?” It’s not about something being on your nerves. It’s about trying to see the best way to proceed. Paul Ekman⁶ once asked me to remember when I got really angry. I had to go back 20 years: I had a brand-new laptop, my first one, in Bhutan, and the monk who didn’t know what it was, he was passing by with a bowl filled with roasted barley flour and spilled some on it. So I got mad, and then he looked at me, and he said, “Ha-ha, you’re getting angry!” That was about it. I get indignation all the time about things that should be remedied. Indignation is related to compassion. Anger can be out of malevolence.

Not to reduce 2,500 years of contemplative science to a single sentence, but is there a thought that you can suggest to people that they can carry in their minds that might be helpful to them as they go through life’s challenges? If you can, as much as possible, cultivate that quality of human warmth, wanting

⁶ An emeritus professor at the University of California, San Francisco, known for his work on facial expressions and emotions. He is the co-author, with the author, of the book “Emotional Intelligence.”

genuinely for other people to be happy; that's the best way to fulfill your own happiness. This is also the most gratifying state of mind. Those guys who believe in selfishness and say, "You do that because you feel good about it" – this is so stupid. Because if you help others but you don't care a damn, then you won't feel anything! Wanting to separate doing something for others from feeling good yourself is like trying to make a flame that burns with light but no warmth. If we try humbly, with some happiness, to enhance our benevolence, that will be the best way to have a good life. That's the best modest advice I could give.

What's the wisest thing the Dalai Lama ever said to you? I

remember I came out of this one-year retreat to take care of my father.⁷ At the same time I was interpreting for the Dalai Lama in Brussels. So I told him: "I'm going back to the retreat. What is your advice?" He said, "In the beginning, meditate on compassion; in the middle, meditate on compassion; in the end, meditate on compassion."

⁷ Ricard's father was the writer Jean-François F. Ricard. His son collaborated on the book "The Monk and the Philosopher" which consisted of a dialogue between the two on various philosophical and political themes.

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Sorry, are you wearing an Apple Watch? Yes.

Why does a Buddhist monk need an Apple Watch? I walk in the forest. I try to count 10,000 steps to be healthy at 77 years old. I don't do many interviews anymore, but when I do, I usually

don't put this on, because the first thing the guys say is "Why do you have an Apple Watch?"

I realize this is a question that no one on the path to enlightenment would ask, but broadly speaking, am I on the right path? *You?*

Yes. [Laughs.] I mean, I cannot make a clinical examination, but I feel that you resonate with ideas which are dear to me. So that's a good sign.

I'll take it! If you had said, "Oh, that's all rubbish" — you know, once there was a French journalist, very cynical, and he said to me, "This thing about becoming a better person and all that, this is the politics of the hash trade." I don't know what he meant. But what I said was, "My dear friend, if genuinely trying to become a better person and do a little good — if that's the politics of the hash trade, I'm happy to spend my whole life in the hash trade."

Opening illustration: Source photograph by Raphaële Demandre

This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity from two conversations.

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David Marchese is a staff writer for the magazine and writes the Talk column. He recently interviewed Emma Chamberlain about leaving YouTube, Walter Mosley about a dumber America and Cal Newport about a new way to work.