

## This is Your Brain on Happiness

by Matthieu Ricard

After 2,000 years of practice, Buddhist monks know that one secret to happiness is simply to put your mind to it.

What is happiness, and how can we achieve it?

Happiness can't be reduced to a few agreeable sensations. Rather, it is a way of being and of experiencing the world—a profound fulfillment that suffuses every moment and endures despite inevitable setbacks.

Matthieu Ricard, left, quit his career as a cellular geneticist nearly 40 years ago to study Buddhism. He is the French translator for the Dalai Lama, right. Photo by Pagoda Phat Hue, [phathue.com](http://phathue.com)

The paths we take in search of happiness often lead us to frustration and suffering instead. We try to create outer conditions that we believe will make us happy. But it is the mind itself that translates outer conditions into happiness or suffering. This is why we can be deeply unhappy even though we “have it all”—wealth, power, health, a good family, etc.—and, conversely, we can remain strong and serene in the face of hardship.

Authentic happiness is a way of being and a skill to be cultivated. When we first begin, the mind is vulnerable and untamed, like that of a monkey or a restless child. It takes practice to gain inner peace, inner strength, altruistic love, forbearance, and other qualities that lead to authentic happiness.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama often teaches that, while there are limitations to how much information one can learn and to our physical performance, compassion can be developed boundlessly.

**Practicing Happiness**

It is not difficult to begin. You just have to sit from time to time, turn your mind within,

and let your thoughts calm down. Focus your attention on a chosen object. It can be an object in your room, your breath, or your own mind. Inevitably, your mind will wander as you do this. Each time it does, gently bring it back to the object of concentration, like a butterfly that returns again and again to a flower.

In the freshness of the present moment, past is gone, future is not yet born, and—if one remains in pure mindfulness and freedom—disturbing thoughts arise and go without leaving a trace. That is basic meditation.

Find out what happens when the meditating mind of a Buddhist monk is examined by magnetic resonance imaging: Matthieu Ricard's brain.

Photo by Waisman Brain Imaging Lab, University of Wisconsin

Pure consciousness without content is something all those who meditate regularly and seriously have experienced—it is not just some sort of Buddhist theory. And anyone who takes the trouble to stabilize and clarify his or her mind will be able to experience it, too. It is through this unconditioned aspect of consciousness that we can transform the content of mind through training.

But meditation also means to cultivate basic human qualities, such as attention and compassion, and new ways of experiencing the world. What really matters is that a person gradually changes. Over months and years, we become less impatient, less prone to anger, less torn between hopes and fears. It becomes inconceivable to willingly harm another person. We develop a propensity toward altruistic behavior and the cluster of qualities that give us the resources to deal with the ups and downs of life.

The point here is that you can look at your thoughts, including strong emotions, with a pure mindfulness that is not associated with the contents of the thoughts.

Take the example of malevolent anger. We usually identify with anger. Anger can fill our mental landscape and project its distorted reality on people and events. When we are overwhelmed by anger, we cannot dissociate from it. We perpetuate a vicious circle of affliction by rekindling anger each time we see or remember the person who makes us angry. We become addicted to the cause of suffering.

But if we dissociate from anger and look at it with mindfulness, that which is aware of anger is not angry, and we can see that anger is just a bunch of thoughts. Anger doesn't cut like a knife, burn like a fire, or crush like a rock; it is nothing more than a product of our mind. Instead of "being" the anger, we understand that we are not the anger, in the same way that clouds are not the sky.

So, to deal with anger, we avoid letting our mind jump again and again to the trigger for our anger. Then we look at anger itself and keep our attention upon it. If we stop adding wood to a fire and just watch, the fire will die out. Likewise, anger will vanish away,

without being forcibly repressed or allowed to explode.

There is no question of not experiencing emotions; it's a question of not being enslaved by them. Let emotions arise, but let them be freed from their afflictive components: distortion of reality, mental confusion, clinging, and suffering for oneself and others.

There is great virtue in resting from time to time in pure awareness of the present moment, and being able to refer to this state when afflictive emotions arise so that we do not identify with them and are not swayed by them.

It is difficult in the beginning, but becomes quite natural as you become increasingly familiar with such an approach. Whenever anger arises, you learn to recognize it right away. If you know someone to be a pickpocket, even if he mingles in a crowd, you will spot him right away and keep a careful eye on him.

Interdependence

Just as you can learn to deal with afflictive thoughts, you can learn to cultivate and enhance wholesome ones. To be filled with love and kindness brings about an optimal way of being. It is a win-win situation: you will enjoy lasting well-being for yourself, you'll act in altruistic ways towards others, and you'll be perceived as a good human being.

If altruistic love is based on an understanding of the interdependence of all beings and of their natural aspiration to happiness, and if this love extends impartially to all beings, then it is a source of genuine happiness. Acts of overflowing love, of pure, disinterested generosity—as when you make a child happy or help someone in need, even if nobody knows what you have done—generate a deep and heartwarming fulfillment.

Human qualities often come in clusters. Altruism, inner peace, strength, freedom, and genuine happiness thrive together like the parts of a nourishing fruit. Likewise, selfishness, animosity, and fear grow together. So, while helping others may not always be “pleasant,” it leads the mind to a sense of inner peace, courage, and harmony with the interdependence of all things and beings.

Afflictive mental states, on the other hand, begin with self-centeredness, with an increase in the gap between self and others. These states are related to excessive self-importance and self-cherishing associated with fear or resentment towards others, and grasping for outer things as part of a hopeless pursuit of selfish happiness. A selfish pursuit of happiness is a lose-lose situation: you make yourself miserable and make others miserable as well.

Inner conflicts are often linked with excessive rumination on the past and anticipation of the future. You are not truly paying attention to the present moment, but are engrossed in your thoughts, going on and on in a vicious circle, feeding your ego and self-centeredness.

This is the opposite of bare attention. To turn your attention inside means to look at pure awareness itself and dwell without distraction, yet effortlessly, in the present moment.

If you cultivate these mental skills, after a while you won't need to apply contrived efforts anymore. You can deal with mental perturbations like the eagles I see from the window of my hermitage in the Himalayas deal with crows. The crows often attack them, diving at the eagles from above. But, instead of doing all kinds of acrobatics, the eagle simply retracts one wing at the last moment, lets the diving crow pass, and then extends its wing again. The whole thing requires minimal effort and causes little disturbance.

Being experienced in dealing with the sudden arising of emotions in the mind works in a similar way.

I have been exposed to the world of humanitarian activities for a number of years since I decided to dedicate the entire royalties of my books to 30 projects on education and health in Tibet, Nepal, and India, with a group of dedicated volunteers and generous philanthropists. It is easy to see how corruption, clashes of ego, weak empathy, discouragement can plague the humanitarian world. All this stems from a lack of maturity. So the advantages of spending time to develop human altruism and compassionate courage are obvious.

### The Fragrance of Peace

The most important time to meditate or do other types of spiritual practices is early in the morning. You set the tone for the day and the “fragrance” of the meditation will remain and give a particular perfume to the whole day. Another important time is before falling asleep. If you clearly generate a positive state of mind, filled with compassion or altruism, this will give a different quality to the whole night.

When people experience “moments of grace”, or “magical moments” in daily life, while walking in the snow under the stars or spending a beautiful moment with dear friends by the seaside, what is really happening? All of a sudden, they have left their burden of inner conflicts behind. They feel in harmony with others, with themselves, with the world. It is wonderful to fully enjoy such magical moments, but it is also revealing to understand why they feel so good: pacification of inner conflicts; a better sense of interdependence with everything rather than fragmenting reality; and a respite from the mental toxins of aggression and obsession. All these qualities can be cultivated through developing wisdom and inner freedom. This will lead not just to a few moments of grace but to a lasting state of well-being that we may call genuine happiness.

In this state, feelings of insecurity gradually give way to a deep confidence that you can deal with life’s ups and downs. Your equanimity will spare you from being swayed like mountain grass in the wind by every possible praise and blame, gain and loss, comfort and discomfort. You can always draw on deep inner peace, and the waves at the surface will not appear as threatening.