

## The World's Happiest Man on Altruism by Oliver Haenlein

Matthieu Ricard, also known as 'the world's happiest man', spent the best part of 25 years in the Himalayas with barely any contact with the Western world he was born into. At 26-years-old he left behind his molecular biology studies and settled into a life of serenity and spiritual training under his Buddhist teachers, high up in the heavens on the other side of the world.

However, he is now very much back on the Western scene. When I ask Ricard why he returned, he sighs and says: "When I was in my hermitage I thought, if I can do something useful, maybe I should come down for a bit". He seems to long for the mountains, but the continued success of his projects since abandoning his Himalayan retreat seem to have anchored him to the ground. The "something useful" the 69-year-old modestly refers to is a series of spectacular humanitarian and academic achievements.

He has set about trying to teach the world how to be happy, and how to show empathy, kindness and compassion to one another. He has done this, to name a few examples, through a range of books, including the recent compendium 'Altruism'; through talks and conferences including presentations for TED that have a combined view count of over six million; through advisory work with the Mind & Life Institute, a non-profit chaired by the Dalai Lama; through studies with neuroscientists to highlight the transformative effect meditation has on the brain; and through an amazing 150 humanitarian projects in 15 years.

Ricard tells me his charitable foundation, Karuna Shechen, aided more than 200,000 people in 500 villages after the recent devastating earthquake that shook Nepal. He has helped treat hundreds of thousands of patients, and put tens of thousands of children in schools. It seems then, that the world is a better place since he swapped the peace of the Himalayas for his new hectic schedule of engagements.

### Altruism

His latest book, *Altruism*, provides a complex look at a remarkably simple approach to solving the ills of the world. Ricard's work has always revolved around positive transformation, and now he has published an 800-page guide to using one of the traits most inherent to human nature to overcome the challenges of the 21st century.

Listening to Matthieu make a case for altruism and its plethora of positive consequences, it all seems so obvious. And is it a coincidence that the person who has helped so many humans on this planet is also known as 'the world's happiest man'?

The book took him five years to write, and contains an impressive 1,600 scientific references, providing a convincing argument on how important the widespread adoption

of genuine concern for the wellbeing of others could be for changing the world.

He takes a three-pronged look at the world's main challenges: the economy in the short-term, life satisfaction in the mid-term, and the environment in the long-term.

The last thing one might expect from a Buddhist monk is a deep and nuanced knowledge of modern economics, but this is just what Ricard possesses. Our conversation sees him talk in-depth on how the traditional model could be adapted to a more caring form of economics for the benefit of everyone. The issue of climate change is also covered in great detail in *Altruism*, with compassion presented as the solution to the growing catastrophe.

A global book

Ricard summarises his work: "The book is really the culminating point of all life between the east and west, modern science and traditional science, and mind science, or Buddhism let's say; but mostly it's not about Buddhism at all. It's really a global book of a human being who happens to be a Buddhist monk. I used everything I could learn through 70 years, and I researched for five years to point out that altruism is not a luxury or utopia, but the only answer to the challenges of our times.

Positive change

He has an indomitable belief in the goodness of the human spirit, but explains a new methodology is needed to create positive change: "Except for a few greedy psychopaths in suits who only want to make money at the cost of others, basically you can assume that people wish for a better world.

"But unless they have a concept with which to build a better world together, then they're just lost, groping in the dark. So the idea of having more consideration for others is the only concept that works, there's really no other.

"I'm not saying that I found something extraordinary. I didn't find anything, it just occurred to me when talking to all these wonderful people from different disciplines that this was the unifying concept; it's not a big discovery, it just seems obvious to me."

At the heart of Ricard's belief in the potential of widespread altruism is his confidence in human nature. But it's not just that he's an optimist; he says science is also on his side.

Basically good

"People are basically good. If you look at evolution, one of the difficult points was how evolution can explain altruism; now you see all the great evolutionists like Martin Nowak with ideas that actually say cooperation has been much more creative to evolution than competition. Those are not just eccentric guys; they are the core of the science.

The book's chapter 'The Banality of Good' asserts that many have the wrong impression about humanity: "Everyday good does not make much commotion and people rarely pay attention to it; it doesn't make the headlines in the media like an arson, a horrible crime, or the sexual habits of a politician."

Kindness

However Ricard believes inspiring kindness is all around us: “There’s this vast exaggeration of the negative aspect of human activities. When you tell people that violence has constantly declined over the last five centuries people say ‘it’s impossible, it’s not true’. But violence has steadily decreased - it’s about 100 times less than five centuries ago all over the world.

“Look at NGOs; the rise of the NGO is the true revolution of the 20th century. There are millions of NGOs and people who spend their time trying to do something for others, so why do we not give more attention to that?”

This vision means, Ricard believes, that we are perfectly placed to start tapping into what is already a part of us, to create something better: happier societies, a more compassionate business environment, and a less damaging approach to the environment.

## Environment

While he had not initially planned to include the environment in his work, Ricard tells me that the book took a whole lot longer since the importance of altruism to the planet’s future became all too apparent.

“Professor Lord Stern from the London School of Economics did a calculation that there might be 200 million climate refugees within 30 years. Compared to that, Lampedusa is just nothing”, he says, referring to the Italian island currently at the heart of a refugee crisis.

“Around 30 per cent of all species could disappear by 2050. Everything is interdependent, it’s not just about losing a few frogs in the Amazonian forest, everyone will be affected; not only humans, our whole biosphere will be completely different. That’s the sixth major extinction of species since life appeared on earth. It’s not about some apocalypse doomsday scenario, it’s just what’s happening.”

The problem, he tells me, is short-sightedness: “We are equipped to react to immediate danger. If a rhinoceros comes in your kitchen, you run. If someone tells you that it’s coming in 30 years, you say ‘oh, we’ll see’.”

Since we need to look beyond our emotional reaction, he calls for a ‘cognitive altruism’ when looking at climate change: “It’s not that we don’t care, but it’s about thinking carefully about what’s going to happen; cognitive altruism, cognitive compassion, cognitive empathy.

“I hope there will be a million people in the streets in Paris before the United Nations Climate Change Conference to say ‘that’s our planet, don’t mess it up, that’s our children, our grandchildren’.”

## Application

So the idea is all well and good, but how can we practically and actively start applying altruism to society and business?

Ricard explains that education and working with children is immensely important, “knowing that the potential is there

in children and knowing their tendency, their propensity to be cooperative and so forth”.

In business, he believes a practical application is, for example, simply increasing cooperation within a workplace, to boost morale, efficiency and the flow of information.

He believes we are already starting to see encouraging signs: “The most vibrant part of the economy is the positive economy: crowdfunding, impact investing, socially and environmentally responsible investment, cooperative banking, microcredit with business people like Mohammed Yunus, and so forth.

“Although it’s just seven per cent of the world economy, it’s the fastest-growing and it also fares best through crisis because people are more motivated. When something is meaningful, if there’s a component of benefiting others, then you are more likely to stick with it.”

## Optimism

Unsurprisingly, the happiest man in the world is optimistic about the future of ‘caring economics’. “There are many encouraging signs”, he says. “At the World Economic Forum, what you could call the sum of the capitalist world, Klaus Schwab (founder and executive chairman) said, ‘let’s place this week under the sign of care and compassion’. These might be just words, but they are significant words in a place where usually they say more about consumption or the euro crisis. Action might not follow immediately, but 10 years ago this was definitely not happening.”

Matthieu’s achievements are surely seminal in creating a happier, more compassionate, more peaceful, and more sustainable world. The tremors of his work could be felt for years to come. If business leaders, politicians, or even the everyday person on the street can embrace the principles laid out in Altruism, Ricard, who has touched so many lives already, could just help to save us all.

Maybe he’ll now let himself return to a more peaceful existence in the Himalayas. “I’m 70 next year,” he says, “I think it’s a good time now to slow down a little bit”.