

Mattieu Ricard: Happiness Is A Skill by Tami Simon

Tami Simon: Today my guest is Matthieu Ricard. Matthieu is an author and photographer who earned a PhD in cell genetics. He is also a Buddhist monk who has served as the Dalai Lama's French interpreter since 1989. Matthieu has written several books, including *The Monk and the Philosopher*, *The Quantum and the Lotus*, as well as *The Art of Meditation*. With *Sounds True*, he has released an audio learning program based on his book called *Happiness: A Guide to Developing Life's Most Important Skill*.

In this episode of "Insights at the Edge," I spoke with Matthieu via Skype quite late at night while he was at his monastery in Nepal. We discussed the skill of happiness, as well as the conditions for happiness. We also discussed the physical and psychological effects of meditation, along with the ways to track the progress you make in your spiritual practice. Here's my conversation with Matthieu Ricard.

Matthieu, you talk and write about happiness as a skill, and since I heard you introduce this idea that happiness is a skill, honestly I've been thinking about it very deeply ever since. I think most people think about happiness as something that descends from the clouds if you're lucky. How is it a skill?

Matthieu Ricard: Well, the thing that puzzles me is when people say, "Well, you know, you cannot define happiness, because it's very personal." And then the second thing that I find so puzzling is when people say, "You know, happiness comes like a magic moment. You cannot cultivate it. If you look for it, then you are sure that you won't find it."

So I think there's two misunderstandings. One of them is that happiness is very personal. That means somehow that— I think it's a confusion between pursuing our fancies or the way we would like the world to be. So "I will be happy if I have a big house, or this and that," all kinds of mostly outer conditions. Or "Oh! I'm just happy when I play the violin!" Well, that is very narrow! I read things in magazines, like "Oh, happiness for me is to eat a good plate of macaroni" or something like that. It's quite sad to hear that.

But I think, if we think of happiness as a way of being, as something that represents a state of flourishing, of fulfillment, of a well-being that endures through all events in life, even all different kinds of emotions and mental states, something that gives you the inner resources to deal with whatever comes your way—pleasant, unpleasant circumstances, helpful circumstances, adverse circumstances—something that gives you some kind of platform or way of being that's behind all that, and that gives you the resources to deal with all that. So then if it's something that pervasive, then it's not something that is so personal that it's incommunicable with others.

I think it comes with a cluster of qualities. There is no such thing as "happiness" as an isolated quality or skill. It is a skill, but it is a skill that has many components, and each of

those components are constructive ways of being, like altruism or benevolence, compassion, inner peace, inner strength, inner freedom. [It is] the sense of freedom from being carried away by all sorts of wild chain reactions of thoughts due to craving, or hatred, or all that. It is the real freedom to maintain your inner peace. All of those together make a way of being that I think characterizes authentic happiness.

It is a skill, because each of those factors, like altruistic love, can be cultivated, a greater inner strength can be cultivated. There are ways to cultivate the skills to be free from being overwhelmed by afflictive emotions. You could say that all of those combined make a general skill, a resulting skill that is authentic well-being or happiness.

TS: How do I make sure, when I'm cultivating something like altruism, that I'm not just sugarcoating my experience? For example, say I'm going to cultivate being generous. I'm giving, giving, giving, but really underneath I don't really feel it. I'm just acting the part.

MR: Cultivating generosity is not fundamentally by giving! It's by cultivating generosity as an inner quality, and then naturally the giving will follow up! You don't start by the action; you start by the motivation, and motivation is something that can be cultivated. Otherwise, if you're just mechanically giving, then you could have a robot that gives away money all around, and it's definitely not going to be generous.

Generosity is a state of nongrASPing that is combined with a genuine concern for others, a reduced feeling of self-centeredness and self-cherishing, in the sense of an egoistic way, and then naturally the outcome of that is spontaneously, joyfully, naturally—you'll be so concerned that it is a joy to give to others! Of course, if it becomes something that is against your nature, against your feeling, that makes you feel miserable, then simply you are not generous! You're just forcing yourself with some kind of weird idea of duty, or I don't know what.

It is the inner quality that you need to cultivate first, and then the expression in speech and action will just naturally follow. The mind is the king. The speech and the activities are the servants. The servants are not going to tell the king how it is going to be. The king has to change, and then the other ones follow up.

TS: Now you mentioned this very important thing: cultivating the right motivation. Can you speak more about that? How do I do that?

MR: First of all, in terms of actions and consequences of our actions, it's very hard to predict all the consequences of our actions in the short-term, and even less in the longer term. If ethics were only based on the way the actions look and the ultimate consequences, then it would be very hard to be sure that one is engaging in ethical action. But you can always check your motivation. You know, very simply: Is it totally selfish? Or is it motivated by a genuine sense of concern for the well-being or the suffering of others? And then is it for the small number of those who are dear to me or treat me well, or is it for the greater number, or all sentient beings?

Nobody wants to suffer, and all of [us] want to find happiness, even though we're sometimes very unskillful about the way to find happiness. But fundamentally, deep within, no one wakes up in the morning thinking, "I'll suffer the whole day!" That sense of concern, and then is it for the smaller number or the greater number? Is it for the short-term, or for the long-term? Is it just to make someone happy right now, like giving drinks to someone who is already drunk, or just thinking of the long-term of the person's health?

So just doing the best you can, the most altruistic [thing that you can], taking all that you can know into consideration, and then the rest is out of your control. What's actually going to happen in the long-term, you cannot predict. You cannot mass-control that, but the motivation—whether you are extremely well informed or not, whether you are extremely smart or a little bit less smart—you can always check your motivation honestly, sincerely, deep within. We say that we are the best person to look at the mirror of our minds, so our motivation is something that we can have access to, that we can check, that we can improve, that we can correct, that we can infuse with altruism, with concern for others, and with less self-centeredness.

TS: Now I know, in the process of writing your book on happiness, that you studied the factors that contribute to happiness from a sociological perspective, looking at many different studies that were done where people reported about their own happiness—whether they had money or didn't have money, whether they were married or not married. And I'm curious what you learned about happiness from these sociological studies.

MR: Well, the main thing I learned— You see, there are all these studies, but then what I think is most interesting are the so-called meta-studies, those that consider all of those factors pulled together. They conclude that, in the end, all of these outer conditions barely contribute to 15 percent of what we could say are the various components of well-being. In fact, although there might be quite a significant difference whether you are alone, or with friends or family, or so forth, still this is only a small fraction of the contributory factors. There are a few factors from genetics, but I think the main factors are the inner conditions, because it's quite clear! The other conditions, you have very little control over them. They are changing all the time, and it's often an illusion to think that we are in control.

Also, the way you translate the outer conditions into inner experience, that's what really matters, because your inner state of mind can easily override and eclipse the outer condition. That means that you can be miserable when everything seems to be fantastic outside, you know you are in a kind of little paradise, and yet you are completely depressed and you'll feel so terrible within. And then on the opposite [side], you can be full of joie de vivre, the sense that every moment is valuable and is worth living, even in the face of adversity or circumstances that people priorly would not wish for. That is key!

So why are we putting so much effort to either gathered or deferrable conditions, getting rid of unfavorable outer conditions? Of course we should do the best we can, but why do we so much neglect the cultivating of the inner conditions that nourish this sense of fulfillment and flourishing? And also why do we spend so little time to get rid of the inner conditions that undermine well-being—you know, like animosity and arrogance and envy and craving, and so forth?

TS: I want to talk specifically about the envy and craving that I think a lot of people experience, which creates unhappiness for them. I've heard that one of the biggest factors in unhappiness is this sense that I want something that you've got, this comparing mind. What can we do about that?

MR: Well, you just have to make an honest assessment of the effect of it! You know, when people say, "Oh, no! All of these passions and jealousy and all that, that makes a colorful life! That makes a strong personality!" That's OK, fine. OK, let's spend a weekend together to cultivate your jealousy, so you'll be 30 percent more jealous at the end!

Immediately you'll back up and say, "Oh, hey, hey! That's not what I want to achieve!" You feel that that's something you certainly do not want to do, even though you say that's what makes the fullness of existence. We know that those things don't help us. And when we are under the sway of those things, even if we want to clear our mind from them, and then they still come back. If we had a way to let them fade away or dissolve, then I think we would be much better off. That's exactly what the various techniques of mind training are providing.

The antidote to these afflictive mental states is to learn not to identify ourselves with this negative mental state. You know, if we have the flu or we have a fever, we say, "I have the flu" or "I suffer from the flu." You don't say, "I am the flu." But when we are filled with anxiety or jealousy or craving, it seems that we are the craving, so we identify with it. There are ways, with mindfulness, not to identify with craving. You can have the gaze of mindfulness, of awareness, looking at anxiety or envy or craving, and what is aware of craving is not craving. It's just aware. If you create that space of awareness, it has a tendency to grow, and at the same time the craving has a tendency to vanish.

There's a whole skill that you can achieve by a minimum of mind training. It's not that complicated. It doesn't require years and years and years of practice. It simply requires that you take a little more care of that spoiled brat of your mind!

TS: Now what do you mean, "it doesn't require years and years and years of practice"?

MR: Well, I mean the more you do it, of course the more you become skillful, like someone who learns how to walk on a tightrope, and then after some time you can dance, you can do all kinds of fancy things [on the tightrope]. But at least a minimum of training allows you to have some of the beginning skill. It's a huge difference! Even though you are not a huge champion on the bicycle, an Olympic champion, it's a huge difference between knowing how to go on the bicycle and being unable to ride the bicycle. Once you know how to ride the bicycle, you can do a lot of things, and that doesn't require that much of the training.

TS: When you speak of mind training, you're speaking specifically about meditation? Is that what you mean?

MR: It's the same word, actually. "Meditation" is considered to be an Oriental, exotic word, but if you look at the words in the Eastern languages about meditation that we translate into Western languages, at least in the present context, there are words like bhavana in Sanskrit, which means "to cultivate," precisely. There's a word in Tibetan, gum, which means "to become familiar" with something. You can become familiar with a new way of experiencing the world. You can become familiar with or cultivate compassion. You can become more familiar with the notion of impermanence, that everything changes every instant, although you are not so familiar because you were sort of grasping at things as being permanent before. All of those are familiarizations: on one side, to be more attuned to reality as it is, not to just constantly distort reality, superimpose on reality; and on the other side, to become more familiar with the skills that at the beginning are quite feeble and difficult and require a lot of effort and attention.

With time, they become natural and stronger and better. You know, when you see a consummate skier or horse rider, he does difficult things with great ease, and without being tired. That's the sign of a skill. In the beginning, everything is difficult and you're getting tired, and you're always sort of nervous about it. That's precisely the state of the

beginner.

TS: It seems that when you talk about something like the destructive emotion of feeling envious of what other people have, and then you see how this makes you feel inside, that you're applying a kind of analysis to that, like "Just look, investigate, see what actually comes from that," and then "Drop it." Like once you can analyze it properly, you can just walk away. Is that what you're saying?

MR: Well, in the beginning, you need to, because it's analysis, but it's a very pragmatic analysis. You know, there's nothing like a moral judgment in this: "Oh, this is bad, to be craving!" or "It's bad to be jealous!" [It's not an] absolute. There's just the good and bad it does in terms of happiness and suffering. So you see?

People say, "I have to have a powerful, triumphant me!" And I say, "Go for it! If it really feels good, then why not?" But if you cultivate "me, me, me" all the time, then what will you receive? You'll feel miserable in the end! So then you just have to experience it, just by yourself. If you think that jealousy is so great, then just go for it! Think of it all day long, and see what happens.

Now compare that with cultivating, for a few hours, altruistic love or generosity or some kind of freedom from this chain reaction of thoughts, and see how you feel. You have to experience those, otherwise it's not a dogma. Nobody is going to force you to change your mind. It has to come from the genuine enthusiasm that comes from appreciating the positive effect of something, or the benefit of something. Or else why should you do it? You don't have to obey anyone's order. You're not trying to do that to please anyone, or to get some kind of reward here, or in some afterlife or whatever.

If you really want to clearly understand the mechanism of happiness and suffering, it's by trial and error first. Just look honestly at the effect of strong craving, of malevolent anger or hatred, seeing just the effect it has on yourself, on others. With the opposite, see what some of those positive emotions, what they bring to others in terms of happiness, what they bring for you yourself. You'll have that twofold confirmation that the benefit for others and yourself is in a way a "win-win" situation, and why the pursuit of selfish happiness is a "lose-lose" situation: You're miserable, and you make others miserable. You just have to see! There's nothing mysterious about that.

TS: Mm-hmm. Now I know, Matthieu, that you were one of the meditators that has been studied in a laboratory context, and that your brain has been studied, hooked up to wires, MRIs, and EEGs. What did they discover about your brain in the laboratory?

MR: Well, they've discovered that I still have a brain, which is temporarily very nice!

You know, I was in Delhi with a group of scientists, and Alicia Davidson was the head of the research group in Madison, Wisconsin, and also here in Nepal until the day before yesterday. It's a very long-term and wonderful collaboration, I would say. It was inspired by something said by the Dalai Lama, who has always been very keenly interested in science, because he sees science as an honest, rigorous investigation of reality, very empirical and pragmatic. He was interested in all areas of science, but especially neuroscience and psychology, which of course relate particularly closely with what we call contemplative science, which is the training of mind, meditation, understanding the nature of mind, training of those wholesome qualities. So it was very natural that a collaboration would ensue.

It began seriously about seven years ago, following the Mind & Life Institute meeting in 2000, [which took place] in Dharamsala, the city where the Dalai Lama lives in India, on destructive emotions. The Mind & Life Institute, now almost 25 years old, was founded by Francisco Varela, a great scientist, and Adam Engle, an American businessman and lawyer who is still now the chairman of Mind & Life. The idea was to bring together scientists and the Dalai Lama, but then in 2000, it took another turn in terms of serious research. They began by looking at long-term meditators, because obviously if there were some change to be found in the brain, you would expect to find it with them. If you don't find anything, then there is no point in studying people who have done it for a few weeks!

So they studied a group of people who had done between 20,000 and 50,000 hours of meditation. Those were absolutely not only monks, there were also laypeople. There was an equal number of men and women who did sometimes retreats, sometimes nine years of retreat, so they were experienced meditators.

Now they've found very remarkable results. Whether they engaged in focused attention, or compassion and loving-kindness meditation, or mindfulness meditation, they could activate, very powerfully, specific areas of the brain that were related to positive emotions, to attention, to whatever. That showed that there are clearly functional changes in the brain due to training, because if you compare that with age-matched novices who have tried this for a week, there is a huge difference! That was very interesting, but of course of limited use to society, because very few people are going to go off and have meditation for 30,000 hours!

But now the second wave of studies—I mean, the first one is still going on, the fundamental research, and there are a lot of publications in scientific journals, but the second wave of studies has to do with “What are the effects of eight weeks of meditation or mindfulness and loving-kindness, and what are the clinical applications of such training?” There are many studies now that have also shown that even eight weeks of the mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) techniques of Jon Kabat-Zinn or loving-kindness meditation brings enormous change, not only in your faculty of mindfulness or your pro-social behavior, but also physically—in your immune system, in your mood, in all kinds of things! The way you are reacting to inflammation, your general level of anxiety, your vulnerability to depression. All kinds of things have been studied, and I think there you could really conceive that, in a circular way, those techniques can definitely make a very beneficial contribution to society.

TS: In talking about the number of hours, as you've said, most people won't have the opportunity in their life to meditate for 20,000 to 50,000 hours, but do you believe this statistic that's now being thrown around, that 10,000 hours is some kind of passage point, that past 10,000 hours is when real mastery happens of certain skills, including, potentially, the skill of happiness?

MR: When we look at the experienced meditators in certain parameters, like the amplitude of gamma waves that they generate when engaging in compassion meditation, it precisely showed that the more hours they have of meditation, the more powerful that is. It's extremely apparent that the more you meditate, the better you get at it, and that's for your life long.

But if you just consider what is, in other fields—let's say music—it's the kind of statistics that when a musician plays the first public concert, they usually have about 10,000 hours behind them. It's more in those fields that those numbers have come, but they don't constitute a threshold. It's just like you could say that person has mastered something,

but definitely—I don't know about music, but with meditation it seems that the more you do it, the more you improve.

This being said, there is a strong change right from the beginning. From not doing any mind training to engaging in eight weeks of mind training, that already makes a huge difference. And that's what is wonderful, because there you see that could benefit so many people!

TS: And just because I want to understand it a little more precisely: When they measured your brain, what exactly did they find that might be different? What parts of the brain were lit up in a different kind of way?

MR: Well, first of all, it's not just my brain! It's not scientific to keep associating people with the subjects. We're the subjects A, B, C, D. But what they found consistently across long-term meditators was that every type of meditation has a specific brain signature. If you train in focused attention, and someone is extremely good at that, the whole network that is known to be related to attention is activated, but it's much more activated than in novices who have not trained.

There are many ways you can test your attention, like sustained vigilance, or maintaining an equal quality of attention, the faculty that you are not distracted by the usual types of distracters—that you can have sounds, unusual noises, and so forth—all kinds of things. There are other ways [to test your attention], like will meditation help you be less sensitive to physical pain, or to be less emotionally shaken by physical pain, or to have less anticipation of the pain that makes you feel pain even before the pain is there? All kinds of things like that. For instance, the meditation on compassion is activating areas of the brain—like the insular, the prefrontal cortex, and others—which are known to be related to empathy, to positive emotions.

All of this slowly builds up a picture. There's still a lot to research, but clearly, so far, everything seems to be building up a very coherent picture showing how those skills can be cultivated, and that they each have a specific signature, so you can continue to study and refine our knowledge of emotions and our knowledge of how those can be cultivated as skills that can benefit people.

TS: Now you mentioned that they can find, through scientific studies, that the more you meditate, that it's a linear, ever-deepening process. I'm curious now, from your own internal experience of happiness, your own subjective experience, how you would track that through your mind-training life. Were there moments when you said, "Oh my God! Now I've discovered something! Oh, I'm even happier now!"? How would you track it internally?

MR: Again, happiness is not one thing. It's like an emerging thing out of all of those different qualities.

TS: Yes.

MR: And also the real progress is a slow progress. Now all of these mystical experiences are like fireworks, fireworks that are characteristically huge and vanish very soon. It's more like watching the arms of a big clock. When you gaze at it, it seems to be not moving. When you look at it from time to time, then you see it has moved.

So if you look back and compare, say, to 10 years ago or 20 years ago, you can see how

much less vulnerable you might be to anger, to reacting with animosity, how much more genuine sense of concern you have for others, like joy of altruism, of compassion, so you are so happy when you give everything you have! You know, it's great; it's not this sacrifice. Why should you mortify, make yourself miserable, to be generous? It's such a wonderful thing! And then you can see, "Oh! You know, I have gone a few steps further in making that quality bloom."

So it's a gradual process, but from time to time you see that it has become more full, deeper, more constant, that it can withstand outer changes and sometimes adverse circumstances. We say that it is very easy to be a good meditator if you are basking in the sun with a full belly, but it's when the circumstances become difficult that we can really judge the meditator. If in the face of difficult circumstances, you keep your strength, your inner peace, your inner freedom, then you can say, "Well, a little progress has been done."

TS: Now you're talking about happiness, and I think you're making a really important point, that it's this combination of these different factors, it's not one thing. Maybe it's the net result of all these different factors put together. I'm curious: in your own life, has one of the factors of happiness been the most challenging for you?

MR: Hmm, not especially. There's some that have been the most helpful, and I think that the more I go, the more inspired I am by the example of the Dalai Lama, who over the last 25 years, I've been fortunate to serve as his disciple and his interpreter. He's put more and more emphasis on altruistic love and compassion. And for me, I feel deeply—especially now that I have also, for the last 10 years, spent most of my time in pursuing some meditating projects—that altruistic love and compassion are the strongest contributing factor to genuine happiness. I'm really deeply convinced of that, and I'm really inspired—though it's very little, for the time being—to continue to develop those, and cultivate those. And I have strong confidence that this is still the right path. I really—sincerely and without any forced humility—consider myself a complete beginner, but at least I feel I am a beginner of the right track.

TS: Now somebody might say, "You're a beginner, and you've meditated somewhere between 20,000 and 50,000 hours?"

MR: Yes! So what? We breathe from birth until death, so why should we be content with just a little bit of meditation? I mean, all the great teachers of the past have said that the duration of your practice should be the duration of your life, so certainly there's a long way to go, but what's the problem? Once you feel you are going in the right direction, it doesn't matter if the road is long or short.