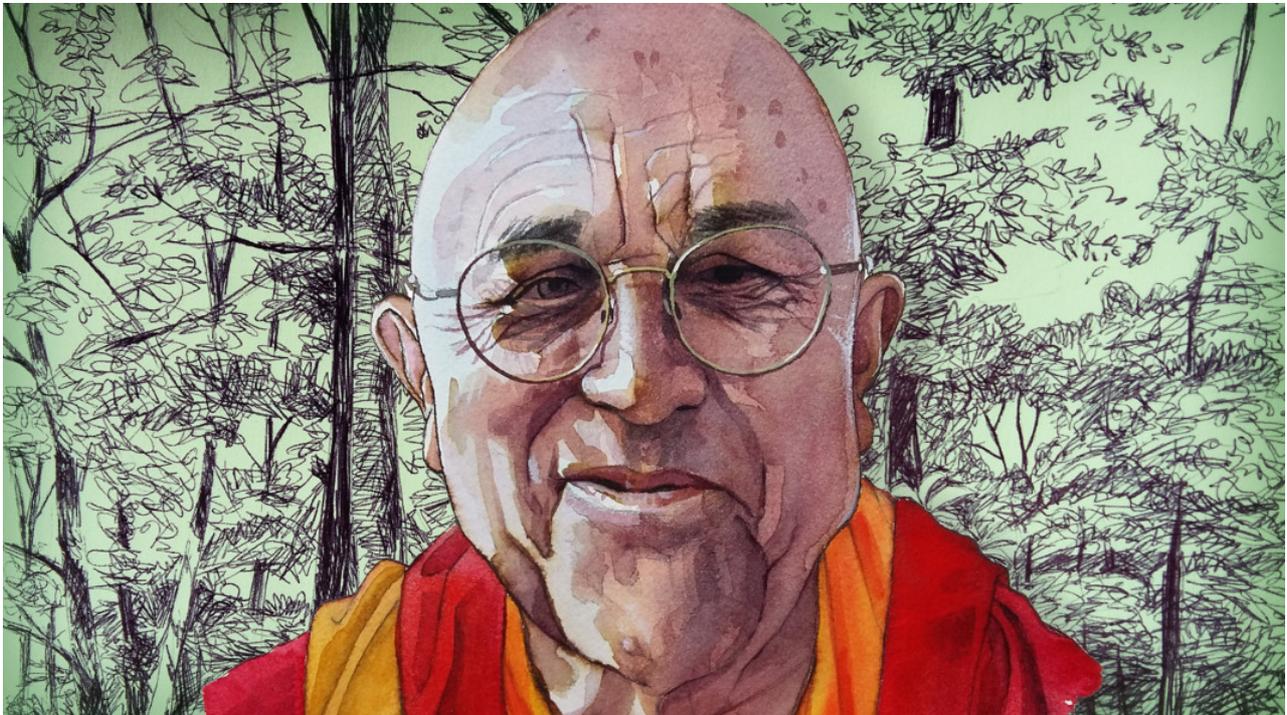


Matthieu Ricard: ‘Eternity is awfully long, especially near the end’

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After so long under lockdown, what better lunch companion than the “happiest man in the world”? Matthieu Ricard pops up on my iPhone screen, instantly recognisable by his warm smile and dark red and orange monastic robes.

The 74-year-old biologist-turned-Buddhist, the French interpreter to the Dalai Lama, gained the epithet — which, by the way, he thinks absurd — in the 2000s, after taking part in a 12-year study on the long-term impact of meditation. Through decades of training, he was found to have significantly altered the structure of his brain. The results sent camera crews rushing to the Himalayas to discover his secret (spoiler alert: there isn’t one — it’s a lifetime of hard work). And it later led the media to christen him “the world’s happiest man”.

Ricard is the ideal guest for these anxious times. He has an intimate know ledge of solitude, having spent a total of five years of his life in contemplative retreat. He’s the first to admit that “confinement, of course, for me it’s a wonderful thing”. His advice for the rest of us? “Make peace with your own mind . . . and then the time will not feel so heavy and so difficult.”

In a nod to Ricard’s stints in retreat, I have come to a remote sanctuary of my own: a small hut in the hills near my home in south-west Scotland. It is roughly the same size as the three-metre-square refuge in Nepal where he spends months on end.

We begin with a virtual tour of our respective surroundings. “I always wanted to go to Scotland to take photographs,” says Ricard, who has travelled to the likes of Patagonia, Iceland and Yukon in north-west Canada to photograph their wild landscapes, with his images praised by Cartier-Bresson.

Ricard eyes the little hut where I have laid a small wooden table for lunch. “It looks like a hermitage,” he says approvingly. A cuckoo calls in the distance; closer by is the sound of bleating lambs on the hillside.

“If this had been last week, I could have shown you the entire Himalayan mountain range with four 8,000-metre peaks,” he adds. “But now it’s mostly French forest, which is beautiful, but doesn’t have the same dimensions.”

About a week before our encounter in early May, Ricard left the Shechen Tennyi Dargyeling Monastery in Nepal on the last flight out of the country organised by the French embassy there. He returned to Dordogne in south-west France to be with his 97-year-old mother. Now he is sitting on her balcony, avoiding entering the house during a 14-day quarantine period. I catch a glimpse of her inside. “Hello *maman*,” Ricard waves. “*Maman, on t’a dit bonjour de l’Écosse.*”

┆ The Dalai Lama went all around the courtyard to shake hands with the guards, tap them on the shoulder, laugh with them. Mitterrand didn’t know whether to stay or go back in

Lunch does not normally feature prominently in my companion’s routine. His late father wrote an anthology of gastronomy (*Culture and Cuisine: a Journey Through the History of Food*), but, says Ricard, “I am totally the opposite. I do not remember 10 minutes later what I ate. I’m really not interested.”

I reach for my flask and pour a mug of steaming leek and potato soup. Ricard is vegetarian — “I don’t want to live on the suffering and the death of other animals” — and he has in front of him a simple salad starter of lettuce, grated carrot and corn blinis.

What does Ricard make of coronavirus and the global confinements to halt its spread? “I think we should be very humble,” he says. “There are people who have tremendous difficulties, financial difficulties, health difficulties, family difficulties. It would be pretentious to say anything about that because they are facing incredible hardship.” Yet “there is a whole category of people who are doing quite OK materially” but who are still disoriented. A submicroscopic speck has overthrown us, “shattering an illusion that modern man has built up.”

The notion that we can control external conditions is mistaken, he explains, gesticulating with a corn blini on his fork for emphasis. “We have this very arrogant idea that we have extracted ourselves from nature. We are masters of the universe, we can send people to the Moon, we can manipulate genes. It seems that we are invincible.”

He is horrified, too, by the idea of transhumanism, and its adherents' quest to prolong dramatically the human lifespan. "Imagine Donald Trump being elected for the 50th time or Lionel Messi scoring his 50,000th goal. How boring!" I laugh in agreement. He goes on: "I mean, I love my hermitage, but a thousand years? As my mother likes to say, eternity is awfully long, especially near the end."

Ricard's path to Tibetan Buddhism began far from the Himalayas, in Savoie, south-eastern France. He grew up in and near Paris, raised agnostic by parents who were at the centre of French intellectual life. His father, Jean-François Revel, was a political commentator who became famous for his challenges to both communism and Christianity; his mother, Yahne le Toumelin, is an abstractionist painter.

Through his parents' circles, Ricard's upbringing was spent socialising with some of the great artists of the day: André Breton, the father of Surrealism, Russian composer Igor Stravinsky, and Spanish film-maker Luis Buñuel, to name but a few. "I was more interested in watching birds and playing music and football, but I was there at dinner so I saw them, and listened roughly to their discussion," Ricard recalls.

Two monastic meals

Dordogne

Lettuce, grated carrot, corn blinis

Seitan

Scotland

Leek and potato soup

Lettuce, tomato and carrot salad

Homemade hummus

He struggled to find the role model he was looking for. "I realised later, when I tried to figure out why, that there was no correlation between their particular skills or genius and being a good human being." He gives an extreme example: one of his father's best friends was the French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser. "He became crazy and killed his wife."

Ricard was 20 when he watched a documentary about Tibetan Buddhist masters and "saw that there were 20 St Francis of Assisi, 20 Socrates who were alive today." He travelled to Darjeeling, in the Himalayan foothills, where his conversion to Tibetan Buddhism began. Ricard credits his mother with instilling in him an interest in

“spirituality at large” during his childhood. In return he urged her to go to India to experience “a living tradition . . . not just in books.” She followed his advice and, remarkably, also abandoned French bohemia and became a Tibetan Buddhist nun.

While Ricard completed a PhD in cell genetics at the Pasteur Institute in Paris, each summer he would return to the mountains. As soon as he finished his doctorate in the early 1970s, he moved to the Himalayas.

It was through one of his teachers that Ricard first met the Dalai Lama, the spiritual leader of the Tibetan people. After several years of knowing each other, the Dalai Lama asked Ricard — who is fluent in French, English and Tibetan — to become his French interpreter. “It was wonderful because it’s so amazing to be with him intimately. The main thing is that the Dalai Lama is exactly the same with a head of state and with the lady who cleans the hotel,” says Ricard.

He recalls accompanying him to meet the late French president François Mitterrand at the Elysée Palace. “Normally, after the meeting, you get in the car and the president says goodbye and you go. But the Dalai Lama went all around the courtyard to shake hands with the guards, tap them on the shoulder, laugh with them. Mitterrand didn’t know whether to stay or go back in.” The Dalai Lama lives in India, in permanent exile from Tibet. Ricard won’t be drawn on Tibet’s relations with China, saying only: “I really hope I can go back to Tibet before I die.”

By now we have moved on from our starters. My companion is enjoying a plate of seitan, a vegan meat substitute that is made out of hydrated gluten. In keeping with Ricard’s usual regime, I’ve also prepared a simple, vegan main course: a salad of lettuce, tomato and grated carrot, with homemade hummus.

It wasn’t until 1997 that Ricard became a household name in France, when he co-authored a book with his father, *The Monk and the Philosopher: A Father and Son Discuss the Meaning of Life*. It was framed as an east-meets-west discussion on the preoccupations that are as old as humankind: the meaning of life, consciousness, freedom and suffering.

At the time, Revel was a well-known French thinker and journalist, but his son was a relative unknown. The book became a bestseller in Europe and was translated into 23 languages. “That was a big change,” he says. “It was either the beginning of my trouble, or the beginning of an opportunity, I don’t know.

“It shows you how completely artificial celebrity can be because nobody knows anything about you and then suddenly within weeks they stop you in the street. I’m easy to recognise because I’m like a walking flag with this monk dress.”

Looking for hedonic happiness usually ends in failure. It is like a treadmill. You are never satisfied, you always want more. If you have one, you want two

As we finish our starters, we turn to the theme with which he is perhaps most synonymous: happiness. His 2004 TED talk “The habits of happiness” has been viewed more than 9m times. In it, he makes the distinction between happiness as something that can be learnt and cultivated, and pleasure, which is anchored in time and place, and exhausts itself as you experience it.

“There is a tendency today to look for hedonic happiness,” he tells me, pointing to obsessions with status, wealth and image; and the growth of social media, which he describes as a “window for narcissism”.

Hedonic happiness “usually ends up in failure. It is like a treadmill. You are never satisfied, you always want more. If you have one, you want two.”

Ricard advocates cultivating mental resilience and happiness — or what Aristotle called *eudaemonia*, the condition of human flourishing — by mind training through meditation. He took part in a study led by Richard Davidson, a neuroscientist at the University of Wisconsin-Madison that showed how meditation can, over time, alter networks in the brain and improve emotional and physical wellbeing. Researchers hooked up Ricard’s head to 128 sensors and found that when he meditated on compassion, he produced levels of brain gamma waves far outside the normal range, in areas of the brain associated with positive emotions, benevolence and wellbeing.

What does Ricard make of the “world’s happiest man” moniker? “It’s the biggest joke in the world,” he says. “How can scientists know about 7bn human beings’ level of happiness? This is crazy. And there’s no way you can compare people.” He adds: “I suppose it’s better to be called that than the unhappiest person in the world, but it still doesn’t make sense.”

He is often asked what is the “secret” to meditation. “There is nothing highly mysterious about it, but it requires practice,” says Ricard. “Any solution that is fast and easy, achievable in five points and in three weeks, forget it. It’s like learning the piano, you have to practise . . . There’s no secret. It’s a whole life, but it’s worth doing.”

As lockdowns start to be eased, policymakers face the challenge of trying to rebuild fractured economies. Some see this as an opportunity to promote a green economic recovery; others maintain that carbon taxes and policies harm growth and jobs, and call for putting the climate transition on hold.

Ricard is unequivocal: we have to address climate change — “the major challenge of the 21st century” — now. The benefits of quick and decisive action to tackle it far outweigh the economic costs of not acting.

It has clouded over outside the hut; a pair of mallard ducks land on the loch below. Inside, my lunch guest is becoming animated, as he outlines how the response to the public health emergency has shown that “governments and leaders can take quite drastic measures and that people are ready to follow”. He adds: “So why can’t they use

the same amount of determination to address even greater issues like the environment, climate change, global warming and loss of biodiversity? All of this is potentially a much greater cause of suffering.”

His plea is for immediate action. “The future doesn’t hurt, not yet. The problem with the environment is that when it hits us badly, it’s too late.”

The moment is broken by the beep of Ricard’s mobile, signalling that his battery is running low. “Oh wow, I’ve been heavy in consumption today,” he laughs.

Conversation turns to the months ahead. Ricard has spent decades photographing and cataloguing Himalayan texts and paintings, and plans to return to the mountains in the autumn. He has stepped back from the day-to-day running of his 20-year-old humanitarian foundation, which provides healthcare, education and social services in India, Nepal and Tibet. Now he is writing “a testimony of what it is to spend years with the great Buddhist teachers”.

“I don’t have huge plans,” says Ricard. “I’m 74 so it’s time to go back to the hermitage. I don’t want to die on an aeroplane, I want to have a few years of peaceful life. It’s time to rejoice and prepare for death in peace and joy. A good death is the crowning of a good life, hopefully.”

The composure with which he faces his next chapter reflects the Buddhist belief in death as a natural part of the life cycle. Many people in modern western societies are unprepared for death because “they have not pondered the fragility of human life too much,” says Ricard. “And they are not used to cultivating those inner qualities that make you face death with serenity.

“In Buddhism, we think about death all the time. It is not morbid; it is simply to give value to every moment that passes by. Why do so many people who have been given a year left to live because of a terminal illness often say that it was the richest year of their life?” Because it draws into sharp relief all they hold precious, I suggest. “You can appreciate that all your life,” says Ricard. “That is the best way. Thinking of death is just to appreciate every moment.”

Harriet Agnew is an FT news editor and former Paris correspondent

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