

Matthieu Ricard
Christophe André
Alexandre Jollien

in
search
of
wisdom

A Monk, a Philosopher, and a
Psychiatrist on What Matters Most

Translated by Sherab Chödzin Kohn

Trois amis en quête de sagesse



sounds true
BOULDER, COLORADO

Contents

Preface . . . ix

Introduction . . . 1

Our Motivation for This Book
Our Paths

1 What Are Our Deepest Aspirations? . . . 21

What Motivates Us
The Path and the Goal
What Inspires Us

2 The Ego, Friend or Impostor? . . . 39

The Diseases of Ego
Genuine Self-Confidence
The I, the Person, and the Ego
Forgetting the Self—the Silence of Ego
Shower of Gratitude
Our Advice for Working with Ego

3 Learning to Live with Our Emotions . . . 59

The Afflictive Emotions
When Modern Psychology and Buddhism Come Together
The Role of Emotions
The Importance of States of Mind
Is It Possible to Liberate Ourselves from Negative Emotions?
Is There Such a Thing as Addiction to Painful Emotions?
The Myth of Emotional Apathy
How to Cultivate Benevolence
Happiness and Joy
Our Advice for the Good Use of the Emotions

4 The Art of Listening . . . 93

The Characteristics of True Listening
What Exactly Does Listening Without Judging Mean?
The Face of Listening
Parasites on Listening
Daring to Be Silent
Being There, Present
Our Advice about Listening

- 5 The Body: Burden or Idol? . . . 115**
Inhabiting the Body
The Body Made Me a Doctor
The Body in Buddhism
The Body and Meditation
The Body-Mind Connection
Our Advice for Working with Your Body
- 6 The Origins of Suffering . . . 131**
The Cartography of Suffering
Self-Inflicted Suffering
Analyzing Unhappiness: The Causes of Suffering
The Looks of Others Can Kill or Cure
Can We Get Away from Unhappiness?
The Remedies for Suffering and Some Pitfalls
Acceptance Is Not Resignation
The Practice of Acceptance in Everyday Life
Persevering After Suffering
Our Advice for Times of Trial
- 7 Consistency: A Question of Fidelity . . . 175**
High-Fidelity People
Should We Play a Role in the Social Theater or Tell the Whole Truth?
The Ravages of Intolerance
Embodying an Ethic
Our Advice on Consistency
- 8 Altruism: Everybody Wins . . . 187**
The Joy of Altruism
Where Does Concern for Others Come From?
Altruism, Empathy, Compassion
Extending Our Capacity for Compassion
True Altruism
Altruism Without Labels
How to Be Compassionate Toward Difficult People
The Courage of Altruism and Nonviolence
Fatigue, Helplessness, Discouragement
Practicing Compassion
Compassion Toward Oneself
Our Advice for a More Altruistic Life
- 9 The School of Simplicity . . . 233**
The Diogenes Syndrome
Detachment and Opening to Others
Being Content with Simplicity
The Freedom of Nonattachment

Lightening Up That Pacifies
 Stripping Away in Daily Life
 Teaching Simplicity to Children
 Our Advice for Traveling Light

10 Guilt and Forgiveness . . . 257

An End to Guilt
 Intimate and Painful Feelings
 Regrets—the Replay Button
 What It Means to Forgive
 Small Pardons
 Our Advice on Daring to Forgive

11 True Freedom: What Can I Liberate Myself From? . . . 277

Urgency Without Haste
 Disobeying a Frivolous Ego
 Liberating Ourselves from What Ruins Our Daily Lives, or the CCL File
 Freedom Inseparable from Responsibility
 The Proper Exercise of Freedom
 The Ultimate Freedom: Liberating Oneself from the Causes of Suffering
 Compassion as a Compass
 Our Advice for Exercising Freedom in Everyday Situations

12 Our Daily Practice . . . 295

Turning Daily Life into a Practice Ground
 Obstacles to Practice
 What I Find Helpful
 A Typical Day
 Looking at the Big Picture
 Listening, Studying, and Assimilating Through Practice
 The Infinite Transforming Power of Mind
 My Personal Practice
 Advice for a Daily Practice

Epilogue . . . 315

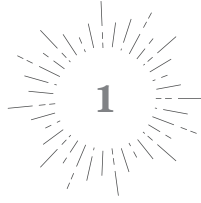
A Final Aspiration

Acknowledgments:

Three Authors and Some Inspiring Friends . . . 317

Notes . . . 319

About the Authors . . . 321



What Are Our Deepest Aspirations?

MATTHIEU What really counts in life? What can we identify in our deepest selves that is essential? There must be something within us, something that motivates us, a direction that manifests and gives meaning to each step we take. Living is not being content with roaming around aimlessly at the whim of chance encounters and circumstances, just getting through each day as best we can. I don't mean that we have to decide when we get up in the morning that we are going to change the world, but it seems we need to see a certain continuity, a line of progress toward what we want to accomplish in our lives. Some people don't like the idea of perpetual self-development. Nonetheless, it is possible to work on ourselves month after month, year after year, not to satisfy our ego but to become a better person, a more altruistic and wiser person. You can't make a decision all at once to become 100 percent devoted to the service of others. You have to take the time that is needed to acquire the capacity to achieve this ideal.

What Motivates Us

ALEXANDRE Along with the wholesome aspirations that invite us to go forward and constantly improve, we have a whole host of egotistical ambitions that alienate us from ourselves and make us suffer. In his *Ethics*, Spinoza speaks of suitable desires (those which arise from the

fundamental ground of things, that flow from our basic nature) and unsuitable desires, which we import from *outside* of us. Advertising, which arouses a thousand cravings, provides the perfect example. Distinguishing within oneself what is connected with suitable desire from what is not is a very liberating exercise. If I look at the expectations that

Every moment of life can become the occasion for liberation—because we are not born free, we become free.

shape our lives, I immediately flush out of its hiding place a fierce need to fit into the mold, to do everything possible, to the point of exhaustion, to imitate others. Thanks to a certain

asceticism, to spiritual exercises, I am beginning to glimpse the influences, the mechanisms, that weigh on me. It's more or less a game of considering every desire that goes through one's mind and seeing what its origin is. Freedom can be found in this exercise, and every moment of life can become the occasion for liberation—because we are not born free, we become free.

CHRISTOPHE At the moment, the question of my deepest aspiration makes me feel a bit ill at ease. For a long time it seemed to me that I was more or less on a path aimed at survival, trying to go in the direction that meant the least suffering for me, while at the same time trying hard not to make others suffer either. It was more an intuitive principle that guided my way of being than an aspiration or a conscious ideal. That being the case, it is rather logical that I became a doctor, since, fundamentally, this business of lessening the suffering of others put me in a kind of social position that corresponded with what I unconsciously was after. With time, I am becoming capable of more discernment. For a long time my life was a quest for security. I wanted my family not to be in material need, a fear I probably inherited from my parents, who came from poor circumstances. I wanted to protect those close to me and probably to protect myself. But these were not very noble aspirations, and doubtless the profession of doctor helped me go beyond this

sole motivation. Today it is very difficult for me to say that my profound aspiration is really and only to help others suffer less. I don't have the ability to see whether this motivation comes from myself or from the outside, but it's important to me that I don't pass myself off as some kind of a pseudosaint.

ALEXANDRE Humans have a mysterious ability to deceive themselves and supply the necessary delusions. It is super-honest to recognize that our desires are not always very clear-cut, and sometimes, with the pretext of saving others, we are mainly seeking recognition and gratitude, something to bind our wounds with. A whole host of influences shape our actions and our behavior, and even the way we view the world. If I look back over the path I've traveled, I see many moments in which, while thinking myself completely free, I was only deluding myself. Looking more closely at my interest in the spiritual life, the main thing I discover is an immense fear of suffering. In the beginning I was a bit like a shipwreck survivor trying to get hold of a life preserver. Over the course of time, this mainly self-centered motivation has become more diffuse, and I am beginning to open myself toward others.

MATTHIEU When I was at the Pasteur Institute, I had a classmate, Ben Shapiro, with whom I shared a desk, and from time to time we'd talk about life. We didn't know what we really wanted to do in life, but we knew what we didn't want: a lukewarm existence that was without meaning or use.

It goes without saying that the primary goal of every person is to stay alive. There are moments or particular places in the world where this is even the absolute priority, because people have to face war, famine, epidemics, and natural catastrophes. But when we don't feel immediately threatened, even though the fact of impermanence is always there and we never know what is going to happen tomorrow, we have to make up our minds to not just kill time and waste our lives. We must have some growth, some form of accomplishment in our sights. Personally, my own thoughts were something like,

“Being happy, what’s that? Having pleasurable experiences? Finding more profound satisfaction? Understanding how my mind works? Learning how to relate with other people better?” For me it comes down to asking myself, “What matters the most in my life?” Also, like Alexandre, I believe in asking which desires come from the deepest part of me and which come to me from the outside, which are imposed on me or insidiously suggested, as is the case with the glittering come-ons of consumer society. I remember one of my Tibetan teachers saying to me one day in Times Square in New York, in the midst of the neon signs constantly demanding to be looked at, “They’re trying to steal my mind!”

At any given moment, independent of any external influence, we have to be able to ask ourselves, “What is really worthwhile? What will make it possible for me to think at the end of the year that I didn’t waste my time?” We can ask ourselves this question regularly. And when twenty years later we look back, we should have the same feeling as a farmer who has done his best to cultivate his fields. Even if things don’t always happen as we hope they will, we should still be able to say, “I have no regrets, because I did my best within the limits of my ability.”

CHRISTOPHE When Patrick Modiano received the Nobel Prize in Literature, in his acceptance speech, he said in effect, “I was quite surprised, in reading the articles about me, that people outside me saw some coherence in my work; whereas as the author, I was like someone driving his car at night who doesn’t see beyond the beams of his headlights. His goal is just to stay on the road, not to go over the speed limit, and not to run over any deer that might cross the road.” That’s pretty much the way I see the way I function myself—do the best you can for others and do them and yourself the least possible harm. Beyond that, it seems to me that at certain crossroads I have made deliberate choices about which way to go: It was not just chance that made me turn left or right; for me it had nothing to do with some ancient vision or any worked-out and structured life plan.

The Path and the Goal

MATTHIEU I remember meeting in Canada a group of young people who were just graduating from university. For six months they had been seeing professional counselors and filling out questionnaires. No stone had been left unturned to help them find their direction. But how can you find direction in your life by filling out questionnaires and following the advice of people you hardly know? My own advice to them was, “Why not go sit by some lakeside by yourself or with someone you really like? Stop filling out questionnaires, turn off your computer, and ask yourself what you really want to do in this life; let the answer come from deep inside you.”

The length of the journey and its difficulties are not a problem. When you travel in the Himalayas, things are not always easy. Sometimes the weather is beautiful; sometimes it's horrid. The landscapes might be sublime, but you could also find your way blocked by a ravine, or you could find yourself wading through a marshy jungle at the bottom of a tropical valley. Nevertheless, every step brings us closer to the place we want to go, and that is an inspiration. By the way, the definition of perseverance, one of the six “perfections” of Buddhism, or *paramitas*, that you are studying in Korea, Alexandre, is “the joy of doing good.” “Good” here is not simply a good action; it is something that inspires us deeply. It is joy in the form of effort. Even if the journey is sometimes hard, our enthusiasm lasts if we keep making progress toward the place where we really want to go. On the other hand, if we stray and lose our reference point, we lose courage. Disorientation and a feeling of helplessness are added to fatigue. We lose our will to keep walking and we just sit there, beaten and in despair. That is why the direction we choose in life plays such an important role.

Psychologists of happiness, such as Daniel Gilbert, say that effort itself is what brings satisfaction. Once we have attained the goal, we are a little bit disappointed. In a discussion I was having with him, I put it this way: “If, for example, I want a Maserati, I’m going to be very

The length of the journey
and its difficulties are
not a problem.

excited about it and basically ‘happy’ while I make a thousand efforts to make the money I need for it. But once I have my car, I’ll be afraid it’s going to get scratched or stolen, and in the end it won’t bring me the happiness I was counting on.” As long as there is confusion about what ultimately brings happiness, it’s a fact that you’re going to be disappointed once you achieve your goal. But if the goal is a worthwhile one, such as, for example, if I want to cultivate wisdom or altruistic love, both the path *and* the goal will be satisfying. The trouble is that we often delude ourselves by pursuing illusory goals, such as wealth, fame, physical beauty, more possessions—all of which is just smoke and mirrors and does not truly contribute to our development.

ALEXANDRE Progressing without being bound to a particular goal, that’s the challenge. What helps me is to ask myself what life is calling me to, here and now. When I am passing through zones of turbulence, this question invites me to take action but without haste. It helps me focus, to find my way through confusion. In the Gospels,

Jesus says, “The Son of Man has no place to rest his head.”

I am not reduced to appearances; my basic being lies beyond the sight of the people looking at me.

Similarly in Buddhist practice, the practitioner must dwell nowhere. As soon as there is fixation, suffering appears. In a sense, mockery and trials

can be liberating for us when they have the effect of jarring us loose and preventing us from fixating ourselves on one emotion or one projection. In the subway, when people snigger as I go by, I take advantage of the occasion to remember that I am not reduced to appearances; my basic being lies beyond the sight of the people looking at me.

I prefer the idea of vocation to that of goal, which reminds me that it is not me who makes the ultimate decision. Call it the will of God or the call of life or any number of other things—let’s simply note that my little ego is not the master of the ship. An infinitely deeper reality has control of the rudder. That doesn’t mean, however, that one should not be engaged, that one should not take action. Let’s

always go forward, without either falling into fatalism or giving up on our goals. The teaching of Zen on this subject is clear: do everything impeccably and remain detached from the result.

MATTHIEU The goal that I'm talking about is that which inspires me. I'm not talking about a goal that obsesses me and that I attach all my clingings to. The idea of a direction or an aspiration is more satisfying and is not something that is subject to limits. In Buddhism we mistrust all fixations, including fixation on a noble goal, because such fixations produce effects contrary to the ones we are seeking. We can certainly say that we aspire to liberate ourselves from the causes of suffering—from selfishness, ignorance, jealousy, pride, and such—but the idea is not to score points. The idea is to define what we want to strive for, and decide if that is worthwhile.

ALEXANDRE I am fascinated by the distinction between the social ego—that is, the set of roles that we play every day—and the fundamental ground of all grounds, our most intimate nature, which unfolds beyond all labels and remains indefinable. All asceticism, spiritual practice, ultimately consists in descending into and dwelling in that, instead of stagnating in the superficial ego that is always changing and continually suffering. This distinction goes a long way toward satisfying me. It brings into view an extraordinary path that smashes all labels and can be invoked by very simple questions: What am I really? What are the basic choices in my life? What influences have shaped me up to the present time? I am struck by the extent to which we compensate for our weaknesses and imitate others to build ourselves up. Spinoza supports this view in his *Ethics*, where he urges us to identify all the causes that drive us to act, and often to react. Freedom is born moment by moment from this act of awareness.

MATTHIEU The question of doubt is also important. A few years ago I translated from Tibetan the autobiography of Shabkar, a yogi who lived more than two centuries ago. It so happened that a biography of St. Thérèse of Lisieux appeared at the same time as my translation. *Le Monde* published an article on the two works. It basically said that the

life of Shabkar was not very interesting because the path of this great Tibetan yogi seemed so clearly delineated in advance. He went from ignorance to enlightenment just like taking a walk through the woods. He did undergo certain physical trials, but no “dark nights of the soul,” no agonizing doubts. In the life of St. Thérèse of Lisieux or that of St. John of the Cross, however, there were moments of total faith, and then the next day that was replaced by complete nothingness; God seemed to have disappeared.

Asking myself what the difference was between the two paths, I came to the conclusion that for the Christian mystics what matters most is one’s relationship to God, since they have abandoned all worldly concerns. Thus everything depends on their intense communion with God, and therefore on the existence of this God. Now this existence is a mystery, forever inaccessible. The idea of this mystery is magnificent. It is as though there is a huge mountain that is perpetually hidden behind clouds but which is the inspiration for our whole lives. There are moments in which one is intimately convinced that it is there, that one is in communion with it, and other moments in which one is preyed upon by doubt. Hence these great mystic flights followed by nights of darkness.

In Buddhism, enlightenment is a clearly defined goal, which stands before me a little bit like Mount Everest for somebody who wants to climb it. I have no doubt concerning the existence of this mountain rising majestically before my eyes, but I am uncertain as to whether I will be able to make the immense efforts it will take to reach its summit, whether it’s worth it, and if I might not be better off just sunning myself on the beach. But after I think it over properly, it becomes clear to me that I do aspire to scale this mountain because I know that it is really worthwhile to liberate oneself from ignorance, hate, jealousy, pride, greed, and such, and I hesitate no longer. One might go astray in one’s meditation, falsely imagine that one has attained spiritually profound states of realization, succumb to despondency, or fall into the duality of hope and fear. But these obstacles are without a doubt less dramatic than the alternation between total faith and total doubt described, for example, by Mother Teresa in her memoirs.

ALEXANDRE Another reason I went to South Korea was to get deeper into the dialogue between religions. This path of dialogue is not a totally smooth one, even if it does encourage nonfixation and not absolutizing anything. Sometimes Buddhists give me little moral lessons, saying very politely, “Why do you believe in a personal God? This concept of a Creator is total hogwash.” And when I turn instead to certain Christians, what I run into is not any better. They reproach me for looking elsewhere: “How can you do Zen when Jesus says in the Gospels, ‘I am the way, the truth, and the life?’” But fortunately there are thousands of examples of possible reconciliation. I recently went to a Mass with a Zen master in attendance. And I saw him listening to the words of the priest like a child with infinite openness. As he was reading the psalms I realized that it is in practice that we come together. The crazy thing is that a Buddhist master, by his simple presence, transmitted to me the burning desire to devote myself further to a life of prayer. He was very far from theories and speculation—he was living in the inner heart. I am not denying that there are significant differences between Buddhism and Christianity, but I am happy to note that there are also links between them and experiences we can share. There’s nothing worse than church wars, the result of a kind of dogmatism that in the end has very little that’s religious about it.

As this dialogue progresses, I see that the notion of grace—that is, of a gift, divine help that comes freely—is essential in the Christian faith. And that is what turned me away when I was going through some really hard times. Giving oneself over, trusting, at a time when your whole situation is shaky and precarious takes enormous boldness, of which I was then incapable. Talking with Matthieu, I have somewhat understood that Buddhism offers a path, a way to attain enlightenment, a way to scale the Mount Everest of happiness. And that a person who wants to follow in Buddha’s footsteps is encouraged to take up his pilgrim’s stick, to transform his mind and practice the Eightfold Path to get that climb started. Simply put, as Matthieu says, Mount Everest is there, and it’s up to us to climb it, even though the way up is an extremely hard one.

Reading the Gospels, I find a luminous ascesis that leads to a letting go of the self, an inner stripping away and total surrender to divine

providence. In brief, to attain the summit of Everest, one must surrender oneself to God, count more on him than on our own strength. By way of a joke, I often say to Matthieu that in Christianity the path consists in taking the spiritual elevator that takes you to union with God. But it takes a whale of a lot of courage to believe, to get on the elevator and leave all self-will behind.

The essential is to move forward on a path without absolutizing it or denigrating the other paths. Living in contact with other religions, it's tempting to tumble into comparisons. As for myself, I find strength in Buddhism, which I think encourages me to become ever more Christian, to enter into a deeper union with Christ and to live the Gospels in everyday life. The wisdom of the Buddha also strips away the mental representations that I project on God. Meister Eckhart takes part in this same ascesis when he addresses the following prayer to the Supreme Being: "God, liberate me from God." How many times have I tried to exploit religion in order to find some kind of consolation in it, a crutch, rather than a source or a motivation? Seeing Christ chase the money changers out of the temple, I understand that there is a tremendous danger of co-opting religion for one's own purposes, of turning it into a market where you can buy peace at the price of sacrifices.

If the Buddha pacifies me, then Christ consoles me by his humanity. For me, believing in God and following Christ above all require faith, an art of living, an inner discipline, an ascesis. We can't help but notice that Jesus is less popular today than Buddha. One day when I shared a quote from the Dalai Lama on Facebook, I got a huge number of likes, but when I posted a video of Pope Francis getting out of his car to hug a disabled person on the side of the road, my post went almost unnoticed. The only comments I got recalled the painful history of the church: the Crusades, the Inquisition, the numerous cases of pedophilia, and so on. I think there ought to be prerequisites for interreligious dialogue: say goodbye to all apologetic partisanship, develop a real interest in the other, and drop the logic of "I'm right, therefore you're wrong."

The Buddha gives me strength every day, as Christ does. So why do I have to choose between them? It's as though I had two children, two