



Mind & Life Podcast Transcript

Matthieu Ricard – Compassion and Care

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Opening Quote – Matthieu Ricard (00:00:04): *When we started to study empathy and compassion, we came to the conclusion that if you're only in the empathetic mode, you can easily fall into empathetic distress. Empathy is necessary to know the state of the other. So empathy is the effect that the suffering of others has on you, while compassion is completely turned to the other—you're just completely a stream of love and compassion that goes to the person who is suffering. So actually we found that compassion was the antidote to empathic distress that leads to emotional exhaustion, while compassion is actually replenishing your strength.*

Intro – Wendy Hasenkamp (00:00:49): Welcome to Mind & Life. I'm Wendy Hasenkamp. It's great to be back and starting off season six of the show! Today I'm speaking with renowned Buddhist practitioner, author, photographer, humanitarian, Matthieu Ricard. Matthieu bridges many worlds. He got his PhD in molecular genetics, and then he became a Buddhist monk, studying and practicing in the Himalayas for more than 50 years with some of the greatest Tibetan masters. As we'll hear, his life has taken many other turns, and he was also integral to the development of contemplative science—serving as both a participant and a co-investigator, and bringing his deep expertise in compassion and awareness to the scientific world.

(00:01:37) I spoke with Matthieu just last month. We start off with his own story and he shares some parallels between science and Buddhism, and how both gave him an appreciation for rigorous inquiry. We talk about his role as one of the first participants in contemplative research, and the importance of scientists collaborating with experienced meditators in these studies.

(00:02:02) Then Matthieu share some lessons from his experience being engaged in this research, distinguishing compassion from empathy. And we get into an interesting discussion of how the self shows up—or doesn't—in compassionate states. That takes us to Matthieu's reflections on altruism and our current crises. And he describes how excessive self-focus can leave us vulnerable, while focusing on others can bring courage, effective action in the world, and also deeper happiness for ourselves. Matthieu also brings in here a framework around three time scales of concern: short-term, mid-term, and long-term. And he reflects on how altruism can help us unite those timescales to address our global challenges. We also talk about life and living systems and what determines sentience, and the need to care for our entire interconnected planet. And Matthieu shares about the practice and experience of awe, and his use of photography to share basic human goodness.

(00:03:08) It's always a joy to speak with Matthieu. He carries such extraordinary wisdom and he really embodies a kind of lightness, ease, and love while also speaking deep truths and calling for action and

change. This conversation felt like a teaching for me and I hope it does for you too. It's my great pleasure to share with you Matthieu Ricard.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:03:35) Well, it is such an honor and a pleasure to welcome Matthieu Ricard to the show. Thank you so much, Matthieu. It's great to see you.

Matthieu Ricard (00:03:42) Pleasure to see you again and to come back to the family of Mind & Life, which I never left from my heart, but I have been a little "at a distance" in terms of miles and kilometers.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:03:55): Well, it's wonderful to be with you. So you've been such an integral part in the development and evolution of contemplative science, and this conversation between science and philosophy and Buddhism. But I'm really curious for you, it strikes me that those elements have all been woven into your life from an early time. So I'd love to hear a little bit about your initial interest in science, I know you got a PhD in molecular genetics, and then how that transitioned into Buddhism for you personally.

Matthieu Ricard (00:04:26): Sure. Well, yes, I was interested in science. Actually I wanted to become a doctor, but my father said, "Biology is the science of the future. That's what you should do." And that's the only time I think I listened to him. *[laughter]* So I went to university, I did all the equivalent, I guess, of a Master's or whatever. And then I was accepted in the lab of Francois Jacob who just two, three years before, with Jacques Monod and Andre Lwoff, had received the Nobel Prize in Medicine for the RNA messenger, how the genetic code is being translated and regulated, and so forth. So I was quite lucky in a way because he had only two doctoral students. I was one of the two. So I don't know why he took me, but he took me.

(00:05:18) So for six years I did a PhD, and it was very formative. Francois Jacob, like my father, Jean-Francois Revel, the French philosopher, they both gave me the taste for rigorous inquiry, what in Buddhism we call "pramana", valid cognition. So no, kind of, mirrors and smoke. So that was a very important aspect of my training, which I think I kept throughout my life.

(00:05:53) But before even entering Pasteur Institute, I was interested in spirituality at large, and not particularly Buddhism because there were not so many Buddhist texts translated at the time, especially in Tibetan Buddhism. But in 1967, a friend of my mother, called Arnaud Desjardins, was coming back from having spent six months on the Indian side of the Himalayas, filming (with the blessing of the Dalai Lama who sent an interpreter), all the great masters, men and women of wisdom and compassion, who had fled the communist invasion of Tibet and were scattered all along the Himalayas. So I had the good fortune to see that as he was editing the documentary. And I had six months between university and doing the last thing before entering the Pasteur Institute. And I wanted to travel—you know, maybe go to do martial arts in Japan, anything. When I saw those documentaries, suddenly it really inspired [me] and impressed on my mind. The documentary end up being called *The Message of the Tibetans: Part One and Two*. Now it's available even in English on YouTube.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:07:11): Oh, great. We'll link to it.

Matthieu Ricard (00:07:13): It's a very precious historical document because most of those great masters, probably (except His Holiness the Dalai Lama) are no more in this world. So when I saw that, and at some point there was a series of silent sequences with different faces—sometimes of great masters like the Karmapa, Dalai Lama, or of hermits in their cave—and one after the other. And it was so

impressive, like seeing 20 Socrates, 20 Saint Francis of Assisi, alive in our times. So I told myself, "I am going there."

(00:07:52) So the rest of the story... Actually, I just finished writing a testimony about all that, how I met my teacher, how I spent almost 50 years in the Himalayas. So it's a testimony about them, about the remarkable men and women I met who inspired my life, and living 10 years in Bhutan, going 21 times to Tibet. So it's called *Notebooks of a Wandering Monk*, and it's going to come out this fall at MIT press. So it is basically an homage, and a testimony.

(00:08:29) So when I came back, I started my PhD. And then every year during the summer holidays, instead of going to the beach, I would go to Darjeeling, where I met my main teacher who was known as Kangyur Rinpoche. And he had also very much impressed Arnaud Desjardins. He said, "Among all the teachers, please by all means go and meet this teacher." So he became very spontaneously and naturally my root teacher. I went seven times back and forth, and the last time, in late '72 was a one-way ticket. [laughter] Then basically I spent 25 years there, completely unknown, living with the equivalent of, I don't know, something like \$50 a month, which was perfectly enough to live in a small hermitage without electricity, without running water, without anything, but so happily so, near my teacher.

(00:09:25) I spent a number of years in retreat. And when he passed away in 1975, I became closely attached to Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, another great master who was one of the teachers to His Holiness the Dalai Lama. And I spent 13 years non-stop with his great master, going three times to Tibet with him. He went back after 30 years in exile. During that time I spent with him 10 years in Bhutan... Just to say that I was very, very fortunate to live intimately with these great masters. And even though I'm not gifted for anything, but I was soaked in their wisdom, compassion, blessing. And so that's the life I had.

(00:10:08) And just to complete the introduction, so that decision to leave Pasteur Institute was of course the right time—like a fruit that is ripe, it just falls in your hand. Or you cross the mountain pass, and the last few meters is effortless, because just the last bit where you go to a new valley, it's just... you are not abandoning anything, you are just discovering something new.

(00:10:31) But something else happened in 1997—which I didn't expect, didn't look for, but happened in my life—is that someone proposed that I do a dialogue with my father, the French philosopher Jean-Francois Revel. I thought he would never accept to speak with a Buddhist monk, even if that was his son, because he was a well-known agnostic and quite a polemic thinker. But he accepted. So he came to Nepal and we had a dialogue for 10 days. And the book that came out, *The Monk and the Philosopher*, was a huge splash in France.

(00:11:06) I went back for that. And for three weeks, there was non-stop TV, radio [interviews]... And from one day to the next, people recognize you in the street, which is good because it shows you how superficial this is. Because it's all because of the media. You are exactly the same person, which nobody heard ever about, and it would have continued like that. And suddenly because your face appears a little bit here and there, you become some kind of a public figure. So you don't get a big head, because you didn't change. It's simply that some funny light of the projector went on you.

(00:11:44) But it changed my life a lot, because then things happen and people call me here and there, and new dialogues. And it's also in that context that I joined Mind & Life. Three years after *The Monk and the Philosopher*, I was a friend of Francisco Varela, who had come to meet my teacher. Daniel Goldman came also at that time. And when they did the 2000 Mind & Life [Dialogue] on Destructive Emotions, then they thought to ask me to come to present, as someone will always do, sort of the

Buddhist aspect of how to deal with destructive emotions. Normally, His Holiness the Dalai Lama intervenes, but there's always a Buddhist contemplative (or so-called scholar, which I was not) who does that. So that's was my first exposure to Mind & Life.

(00:12:33) And I remember very well that halfway through the five days—in those days it was five full days, a whole morning there was two presentations, and the whole afternoon [there was] discussion with His Holiness, so it was a really fortunate time. You know it started on a Monday, ended on a Friday afternoon. So on something like Wednesday, the Dalai Lama said, "That's all fine. But what can we contribute to society?"

(00:13:00) So at lunchtime, all the great luminaries were there—Francisco was there, Richard Davidson, Paul Ekman, Jon Kabat-Zinn... there were many wonderful people, Alan Wallace. So there was a kind of brainstorming, and everyone came up with the idea: OK there has been some so-so research on mind training—training the mind, which sometimes people call meditation—but it was not always at the top scientific criteria. So they said, "Let's propose to do top top-notch research, first with long-term meditators." Because suppose there's someone who did 50,000 hours of meditation, and with the best of our capacities in terms of investigation through encephalogram (EEG) or fMRI or whatever, we don't see any difference. Then there's no need to bother about people who did two weeks of meditation. But if we do find something interesting in those guys, then we'll see about how it [the change] came there. Did it wait for 30 years before coming up all of a sudden, or was it a gradual progression? Or do they get everything from three months and nothing more after? We didn't know.

(00:14:15) So since I had this scientific background, and I was really inspired by this meeting... Like Paul Ekman himself, it was the first time he attended. He was not sure he wanted to come; his daughter wanted him very much to come. But he said he found in His Holiness the elder brother which he didn't have, and there was an immediate sort of [connection], it was wonderful. So I volunteered, a little bit thoughtlessly, to go to the lab. *[laughter]*

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:14:41): You didn't know what you were getting into!

Matthieu Ricard (00:14:43): I didn't know I would end up spending, I don't know, 120 hours in the fMRI machine, all over the place. And for 20 years sort of collaborating—not only as a guinea pig or a subject, but sometimes co-conceiving the protocol. Because you know, you study meditation. Then what? Do you need half an hour to get into unconditional compassion, or can you get into whatever capacity you are able to (at your own level) within 30 seconds? Who knows? So this needed to be tested.

(00:15:17) And I remember very well the first time that Richard Davidson put me in the fMRI. He'd made a protocol. And as we were actually starting, [inside the machine] with the mic, I said, "Look, Richie, I think this is... probably we can modify a little bit the time, and this and that." And I suggested a few things. So we started again—because that was a constant interaction, giving suggestions for the protocol, what we could look for from the perspective of the contemplative, and also to make sense of the results. Because of course some areas of the brain were activated, which were well known for some function, but not necessarily relating to your first-person experience as a meditator. For instance, I remember one thing—when they saw that the pre-motor area was activated during compassion meditation. So I'm wondering why, because you're not doing anything.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:16:15): You're not moving, yeah.

Matthieu Ricard (00:16:16): Then in my mind it came the idea, well, it's the readiness! Being completely available and ready to act out of compassion, that's probably part of that compassion. So you see the perspective of the meditator is sort of indispensable, what Francisco called the "first-person experience" compared to the third-person experience of what investigators are looking through, what they see in the data.

(00:16:43) So then it went on and on. That first trip to Madison, I went also to Paul Ekman and Robert Levinson's lab and they put me through the startle [testing]. And then I went to so many labs, I started knowing all the fMRIs, different types, with or without light. I went to Princeton, I went to Leipzig, and to Maastricht with Tania Singer, to Zurich. I went all over the place, yes. "Flying guinea pig!" [laughter]

(00:17:11) And not only that, but also since I came back with some data and nice graphs, I showed [them] to my friends there in Nepal and Bhutan. I said, "Look, those scientists, they can see something different when you practice. So why don't you come?" So I recruited about 10 long-term meditators, I convinced them to come and sometimes accompanied them. So about, I don't know, 10 of them who had done say between 30,000 to approximately 50,000 hours of meditation... It's very hard to calculate. Nobody keeps a count. But if they had done three, four years retreat where they practice all day long, and if they practice two hours a day all their life, you can make a rough estimate.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:17:57): And I'm remembering too, from those days, some of those early studies got you the moniker, "the happiest man in the world" or something like that, which I know you've always resisted that label.

Matthieu Ricard (00:18:08): Well, it's not my fault. [laughter]

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:18:10): I know. So can you share what that was about?

Matthieu Ricard (00:18:13): Well, it is a funny story. It started in Madison actually. There was this ABC, Australian network. They had done something on different emotions, like anger, fear, and they did something on happiness. So they came to Richie's lab and then they decided they wanted to come to Nepal to continue to interview me. And at the end, I sort of come down from the mountain and you see me disappearing in the mountains and they say, "Maybe that is the happiest person in the world."

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:18:43): Ah, I see.

Matthieu Ricard (00:18:44): So nothing happened for a few years, which was good. But then one evening I got—it was in Nepal—I got a call, a frantic call, "The BBC is looking for you." I said, "What's going on?" News Hour. And then I was put on live and they say, "A newspaper this morning said, 'We found the happiest person in the world' and we want to know." I thought, oh, what do they mean? I said, "Anyone can be the happiest woman or man in the world if we look for happiness in the right place." So I spoke a little bit, and then I looked at that article... "Meet Mr. Happy." I thought, okay, too bad, but it will disappear. But that next few days, it was in the Bangkok Morning Post, in Chile, the Colombian Express. So I apologized to Richie and others, I said it's nothing of my doing. And I thought it would go away, but it comes back by waves; every few years it comes back. And any amount of disclaimer doesn't work. So I thought, okay, let's leave it like that. [laughter]

(00:19:42) – musical interlude –

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:19:42): That's so interesting to hear how, after all of your time living in a hermitage and really devoting yourself to practice, and then how science came back into your life, and you were able to engage in all these really wonderful ways with the very beginning of contemplative science. I'm wondering how, now, all of your (20 years or so, you said) engagement with science in this domain around meditation, has that influenced or changed your view of practice, or your experience of practice? I'm just curious.

Matthieu Ricard (00:20:44): Yeah, I mean, *[laughter]* many of the scientists, which were my collaborators, some of them asked me that. And I remember Stephen Kosslyn—he was a very enthusiastic scientist, he was the chair of the psychology of Harvard—and he asked me that question. I said, of course it's extremely, I mean, I enjoy immensely collaborating with scientists. It's really wonderful to have this new sort of sangha of contemplative scientist friends, and it's been very enriching in my life. But when I go back to hermitage, I just do what I've always done, and probably better than in the fMRI. *[laughter]* And so far, I don't think it changed much, I said. So he was very disappointed. He said, "Well, it must have brought you something." Well you know, you just do what you do. And when you do it in the fMRI, you do the same thing.

(00:21:44) So that changed a little bit when we started to study empathy and compassion. I remember sitting with Paul Ekman by the bay in San Francisco and he said, "When you have compassion, do you suffer from the suffering of the other?" I didn't know much about empathy at that time in detail. So I said, well, sometimes yes, you feel of course something. In the teaching it says you must visualize very vividly the suffering of sentient beings until it becomes unbearable, and then you unleash the full extent of your compassion. But at the same time, if you are in this unconditional compassion, objectless compassion, which is pervading everything, you don't feel suffering. And when I think of my great teachers, who are the infinite compassion, they didn't seem tormented by feeling that compassion. So I was bit puzzled.

(00:22:42) But it became very clear, and that's one thing definitely I discovered in the collaboration (not that it was less interesting in other labs, but it brought me more insight on certain aspects of what I was doing) when I started collaborated with Tania Singer, because she was, and she is, one world specialists of empathy. So she asked me to come to her lab. So first we went to Masstricht because there was someone, Rainer Goebel, who had a "real-time fMRI." That means you can see on the screen within a few seconds, not immediately, there's a lag, but you don't have to wait for two weeks. So you can feedback in a way, here you are, this is what you do, and so forth, push that up and push that down.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:23:32): Yeah, so just in case listeners aren't familiar, you're basically in the scanner doing a task, and the scanner is measuring your brain activity, and it's actually processing that data in real time, which isn't normally how it's done. So it's able to feed back to you while you're in the scanner, not necessarily a picture of your brain with activity, but some kind of graph or some metric that shows you a particular region or a particular network is more or less active. And like you said, there's a few seconds delay, but it's really interesting because you can get some information while you're doing, it and then start to make adjustments. Yeah.

Matthieu Ricard (00:24:06): Yes. So then she asked me, "Do what you do, the compassion meditation." She also didn't think it would be different.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:24:14): Right—than empathy.

Matthieu Ricard (00:24:16): Yes. So I engage in compassion meditation and she was not used to seeing what she saw. She said, "Well, that's not what we see usually. What are you doing?" I said, "Well, I'm doing compassion meditation." So we say, "Okay, let's stop for a while." So I came out of the MRI, "Let's discuss." So I explained to her [what I was doing]. And then she explained to me what she meant by empathy, which is emotional resonance—you know, if you smile and you're happy, I feel happy and smile. It's different from emotional contagion that is passive. Here you know that are happy because the other person is happy, or you suffer because the other person suffers. And you know that, and you know what is the cause. And then cognitive empathy, which is to put yourself in other's shoes cognitively, but you may not feel what they feel at all. If I'm sitting next to someone who is very scared in an airplane and I enjoy it, I can help and take care of that person because I know she's suffering, but I don't feel that.

(00:25:14) But in terms of emotional empathy, Tania thought that that component should be there. She has studied that, in the anterior insular and all these areas of the brain. So then she said, "Well, can you try to just do empathic resonance with suffering?" So I just happened to have seen the night before at the hotel, a documentary on Romanian orphans who were almost abandoned to their own fate. There was an incredible state of... they were so thin and some of them were breaking their legs just by walking. They were hardly fed and washed. It was like heart-rending. On top of that, in the course of our humanitarian projects in Tibet with Karuna-Shechen, there were the earthquake in Tibet in Yushu and all that. So anyway, I had lot of images of suffering. And so I said, "Okay, I will try that." So we did 40 minutes of that, alternating as we do normally a resting state of 30 seconds, and engaging in intense empathic resonance with the suffering—and nothing else. She said, "Don't do your compassion stuff."

(00:26:29) So I did that, and after 40 minutes I burned out basically, which I didn't know before. So then I felt overwhelmed. I didn't know what to do. Visualizing those children in Romania, I mean I didn't know how to handle them. There was this kind of not knowing what to do, a little bit of distancing.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:26:50): Yeah. So because normally you would've always just gone right into the compassion state?

Matthieu Ricard (00:26:56): Well, when I mentioned that to the Dalai Lama, he said, "How can you stop compassion?" I said, "Well, I tried." [laughter] Okay, anyway. So then at the end of that, I mean I really tried only to focus on resonating and resonating. So at the end of that, Tania said, "Okay, normally we should break after 45 minutes, but do you want to go on, or we take a break?" I said, "Please let me go on, because I want to find an antidote for that state of burnout." So then I said, "Now I'm going to shift to compassion." All-embracing love and compassion that every single atom of suffering is pervaded by an atom of compassion and love—which is the same, altruistic love is wishing others to find happiness and the cause of happiness. And if they happen to suffer, then the altruistic love is called compassion, but it's the same thing, it's simply confronted with suffering and applied to suffering.

(00:27:53) So I did that, and it completely changed my perception. It's like you shut down some areas and opened up some other ones—and in fact it was the same in the brain, a complete readjustment of the activation of the areas of the brain. So that was the beginning of an adventure that Tania pursued later on in their different studies with more subjects. And we came to the conclusion that you can easily fall into empathic distress if you're only in the empathic mode. Empathy is necessary to know the state of the other. Now, if you are not empathic like psychopaths, then they don't feel anything of the other's suffering. That's why they can cut people into pieces and think it's great. They don't feel that. So it's necessary that you know, "Oh, that person is suffering because there's an impact on me."

(00:28:46) So empathy is the effect that the suffering of others has on you, while compassion is completely turned to the other. You forget about your sense of self. You're just completely a stream of love and compassion that goes to the person who is suffering. So it's very different. So therefore the more suffering in a way, the more courage. Like a doctor on the battlefield is not going to cry, he's going to do it again and again to the end of his strength. So actually we found that compassion was the antidote to empathic distress. And that standalone empathy is like a water pump, that without water, it burns, so that leads to burnout and emotional exhaustion. While compassion is actually replenishing your strength. So we also came up with the idea was there was no such thing as compassion fatigue, as is known in the medical world, but there is an empathy fatigue. So I don't know if that went far and wide, but it was pretty clear, and Tania published a number of papers, some of them I cosigned.

(00:29:56) So that was an insight which I had not investigated. And I remember telling some of my Buddhist friends who did many years of retreat, and when they do the practice of exchanging happiness for suffering, one of them told me, "I felt a little bit this kind of empathetic distress. And I realized that I should have been more in the mode of compassion rather than just empathy." So again, don't take me wrong—there's nothing wrong with empathy. My friend, Frans de Waal would be very upset. *[laughter]* It is absolutely necessary, because without that, you don't know the state of the other. It's like an alarm that tells you. The alarm should not ring all the time. Once you know the state of the other, then you should shift to whatever is next, which in that case of suffering is compassion.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:30:48): Yeah. Oh, that's great. You said something there that is just shifting the way that I'm thinking about compassion, even right now. You said the self is gone, in that state. It's all about the other person and relieving suffering, but it's almost like your concept of self has disappeared. Is that what you meant, or do you want to say more about that?

Matthieu Ricard (00:31:07): Yeah, well you see... Well, hopefully it would be nice if it disappeared for good. But the thing is, normally many of the [negative emotions], anguish, anxiety, feelings of vulnerability, come from excessive self-centeredness. Now, if you think, "Me, me, me. How do I feel?" all day long, then you become very vulnerable, because everything becomes a threat, or possibly an instrument to give you pleasure or whatever. But you relate to the world in a completely instrumental way—there's me and the world. And the world can be either a threat or something I can use. So it's a very, very extremely polarized way because it's you who is concerned all the time. You are the center of the universe and basically that's what you feel is what matters most by far. So it makes you especially vulnerable. Now if that sense dissolves and it's not "me, me, me" all the time "looking, looking, looking, looking at how I feel", then suddenly you are free to look around and to look at others. And you can see that you are one; they are infinite numbers. Certainly their faith matters much more than you. You don't have to sacrifice yourself. But clearly if you look at the numbers, they are many are you at one.

(00:32:23) So in any case, it's completely open and oriented to others. While it was a very small bubble of the self where it feels very stuffy inside and everything is like a storm in a glass of water. Well, now you have an immense space of all sentient beings with their values needs, and of course you know that you cannot physically, realistically remove the suffering of everyone. I wish we could do that. But in your mind, in your attitude, there is no reason to limit that aspiration, that compassion, even though you know that realistically you will not be able to put that in action at the same magnitude.

(00:33:04) But what it means by unconditional compassion, that means that you are not excluding anyone from your heart, whether good or bad, whether treating you well or not. This is a different subject. For every sentient being, it's desirable that they have the remedy to ignorance, the remedy to the cause of suffering. Even the most bloodiest dictator—if hatred, indifference, cruelty, greed was out

of that person's mind, the world will be a better place. So you can wish that with your whole heart. It doesn't mean that you wish that person's success in his deadly endeavors. So that's the big difference. And then the self is... of course, you know you are there, you know it's you, but it's not taking the central stage.

[\(00:33:51\)](#) – musical interlude –

Wendy Hasenkamp [\(00:33:51\)](#): I think a lot about the division between self and other, which is the topic of a lot of emphasis in Buddhism, and deconstructing the self or seeing the self as an illusion or construction, those kinds of things, which then blurs the boundaries between self and other in these normal categories that we have. Like normally, we would have compassion just for those that are close to us, but it can help expand towards the state you were describing of this kind of unconditional compassion that is not dependent on the person or the being that it's directed to. So I'm just thinking about a lot of these concepts as they play out on the world stage. And I know you've done a lot of thinking and work also on planetary issues, climate change and other crises that we are facing, that seem like they have a lot to do with that sense of self. So can you reflect a little bit on that, and how you think about those things?

Matthieu Ricard [\(00:35:17\)](#): Well, first, before going to the bigger picture, I'll mention an article that a friend of mine did (and he made me co-sign, but I'm not sure it was necessary). He's called Michael Dambrun. It's in the *Review of General Psychology* and he made a very large theoretical paper showing that the sense of self, how it correlates with happiness in terms of hedonic and eudaimonic happiness.

Wendy Hasenkamp [\(00:35:43\)](#): Maybe it's worth, just for the listeners, distinguishing what those mean.

Matthieu Ricard [\(00:35:47\)](#): Yeah. So hedonic happiness is from pleasures, all the trappings of success, and fame, and status, and your image, and endless succession of pleasant experiences (which is more like a recipe for exhaustion). And the famous treadmill effect, that the more you get used to a certain amount of pleasure, then you want more and more and more, so you can get addicted and so forth. And eudaimonia, which is the same concept as the Buddhist word "sukkha," is more like a sense of flourishing, of fulfillment, a way of being that can give you the inner resources to deal with the ups and downs of life and all the different emotions. Even sadness, you can maintain that sense of deep meaning, well-being, compassion, resilience, fortitude, inner freedom even if there's something sad—because it is sad, we could say it's unpleasant, but it doesn't change your way of being as a person who has found something deep within that makes sense, you can relate to, that is not so dependent on outer circumstances, although it doesn't ignore them. So this is a different continuum in a way. And he found that the more there's a strong sense of self, the more people look for hedonic pleasures or happiness, and they fail. It doesn't work. And the less they have a sense of self, the more you look for eudaimonia, and sort of flourishing.

[\(00:37:18\)](#) So now to go to the big picture, that comes with of course the concept of altruism and care. And we just had a Mind & Life Europe discussion yesterday about care. And we could say compassion. Actually, the book I wrote on altruism has a subtitle called *The Power of Compassion to Change Ourselves and the World*. So it came at as a kind of culmination—of all those years of being exposed to scientists, to great philosophers, to His Holiness the Dalai Lama, who of course is teaching compassion as the main quality we need for the 21st century, and basically a lifelong practice—came to the idea that even more than looking for happiness, if we do cultivate an infinitely altruistic and compassionate mind, then happiness is taken care of. And without that, there's no such thing as selfish happiness; it's not working. So I thought even more and more about that, thanks to also coming back to the West, with *The*

Monk and the Philosopher I got exposed to so many different people, from politicians... and just everywhere. And it became clear that one of the main challenges we are facing today in 21st century, is to reconcile three time scales.

(00:38:49) On the one hand, the short-term, we have extreme poverty. A mother who needs to feed their children for tomorrow. So she has to cut whatever she finds. She cannot think of future generations, she has to survive. So that's the short-term, poverty in the mist of plenty. And there's also short-term of selfish interest, making the maximum profit without any consideration for those who will come after you. So that's also short-term—short-term profit and short-term vision.

(00:39:23) Then there is the mid-term, which is a generation, family, a lifetime. And then what do you wish? Basically some kind of deep sense of satisfaction, that life is worth living. Otherwise, if you live in the most powerful and richest country, or yourself with all that, and you feel completely unhappy, what's the point? So flourishing is, definitely for the mid-term, every single human being and even sentient beings, animals, want to find some kind of well-being and live their full life in the way that matters most for them.

(00:40:04) And then there's a new dimension that we didn't have till 200 years ago, which is, we are now shaping the future of future generations in a way that was not the case until the industrial and scientific revolution, [the long-term]. So now they will say, "You knew, and you did nothing." And we are influencing their happiness and suffering in a massive way, as if after us, there will be nobody. But they will be there, and they will curse us for what we did.

(00:40:32) So now, there are people who take care of extreme poverty. There are investors who try to make a quick profit. There are politicians who make measures for the citizens. There are all kinds of walks of life. And there are scientists who study climate change, loss of biodiversity, environmental upheavals, the tipping points, all these. And they say it's possible to avoid that, yes—because they don't say it's impossible, because it is possible. But they add, "Be careful. It is possible, but only if we make drastic changes." So what the public usually picks up is, it is possible. Scientists are taking care of that. Well they don't, because it's politicians—who are absolutely undecided, because most of the measures they would take, which are necessary to control the environmental degradation, would be probably vastly unpopular for many people. So they want to be reelected. You know, Winston Churchill said, "The statesman is thinking of the next generation, a politician of the next election." So that's the problem.

(00:41:43) Now imagine that you want to put all these people around a table. And it happens sometimes—you get social workers, politicians, investors, scientists sitting around a table. You can imagine that. This happens sometimes. And then they have to find a concept that allows them to... assuming they want a better world, not to destroy the planet. Well, we can assume that's what we want. Even the World Economic Forum in Davos is called Moving Towards a Better World, so even they have this idea.

(00:42:16) Okay, now, we need to know, what concept can allow them to work together? Of course, short-term interest and selfishness will not do the job, because then you will all be focused on the short-term and you will not give a damn for future generations, for instance. You know, if you can make products by employing people for nothing in Bangladesh or somewhere, but make a huge profit in the US or Europe, you will not hesitate if you are selfish. So that doesn't work. And if you don't care for future generation, no hope.

(00:42:47) So the only concept that works is compassion, or let's say altruism—that means having more consideration for others. So if you do that, you will have what we call a "caring economics." And actually Mind & Life had a meeting on caring economics in Zurich some years ago. So that means the economy at the service of society, and not society at the service of 10 people who now own more than a third of the whole humanity. And someone recently, a report of Oxfam calculated that if those 10 richest people were spending \$1 million a day, it will take them 440 years to spend their fortune. This is totally ridiculous and dysfunctional to the core. So, caring economics.

(00:43:38) Then you will do something that favors flourishing in life—at the workplace, the status of the child, or the status of women, conditions at work, of transportation—everything that somehow you can flourish and have a happy life no matter what you do, a decent life with freedom, where you can fulfill your aspirations. And in the long-term, if you have more consideration for others, you cannot jeopardize the fate of future generations who will be there. So they have natural rights. It's not the kind of right that you can ask for, you can reciprocate, because they don't exist. Nevertheless, they have the natural right not to suffer because of our actions.

(00:44:22) So therefore, altruism or consideration for others or care, whatever you call it, is the single concept that can make those people work together, that seamlessly unites the short-term, mid-term, and long-term. So that became a kind of passion for me, and I spent five years researching that subject. I gathered about 1600 references of all kinds. And it became bigger and bigger because evolution came in the picture, economics came in the picture, education came in the picture, genocide, psychopaths, and neuroscience, epigenetics, you name it. *[laughter]* I endlessly plunged into that and tried to bring that all together in that big volume. I didn't invent anything. Nothing is of my doing, nothing is my ideas, but I tried to put together everything that was about altruism and compassion in philosophy, science, and I think it can make a basis for further reflection.

(00:45:25) – *musical interlude* –

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:45:49): I was actually able to attend the meeting that you mentioned of Mind & Life Europe on care and caring for life, which was a really wonderful conversation. And something that you all were discussing and part of it really struck me... there was a discussion about what classifies as life, as if this is will determine where we should place our care, how big is that umbrella, these kinds of things. And somebody brought up, "Why does it even have to be about living systems?" And then I think you mentioned the concept of interdependence, and how, really it's everything. It's the entire system and planet that we're living in, and your care compassion doesn't necessarily need to be only towards even life or living beings. So do you want to share a little bit about what you were saying there?

Matthieu Ricard (00:46:35): Yes. So I think we can distinguish sentience and living, because plants are living. Of course, there are studies that show incredible connections between trees, through the mushroom and whatever.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:46:49): Yes.

Matthieu Ricard (00:46:50): Fantastic. But that's more like a... precisely, one of the best illustrations of interdependence without sentience. I mean it's not like a tree is thinking to delay some decision, or to wait on a decision. It just happens through this incredible magic mesh of interdependence that says that everything is related to each other. So there's a perfect example of interdependence, and life is fundamentally interdependent. But it would be far-fetched to say trees are sentient, or if you speak to your plant it will grow better. I think this is a little bit woo-woo. But there's been lot of interesting work

in that field. And definitely there's a deep interconnection. And the signals can be sent by some trees to others, but it's more like smells and flavor, that provoke a reaction. So evolution can certainly select for that without sentience.

(00:47:51): Now, that's life, and life being interdependent, and we are part of life because we are alive. Plus we have a consciousness, so that's a little extra compared to inanimate things. Even stones are part of life, but I'm not into panpsychism, that they have a little bit of consciousness... Of course they have a level of complexity, of organization, of information, but sentience I think is little bit something else. But we are intimately connected with those. When people say, "Oh, now humans could extract themselves from nature." It's so stupid. It's like saying I have extracted myself out of my body. It's impossible. You totally belong to this interdependence of biodiversity and life. So that's why protecting life is also protecting sentient beings who make the difference between happiness and suffering. I think a tree can die, a stone can be broken, but if you throw a computer through the window, it doesn't suffer. And the other computer on my desk is not mourning. *[laughter]* And even Deep Blue who beat Kasparovoff in chess had no clue about beating anyone, and having defeated the world champion, there's no sentience. Okay.

(00:49:12) So yes, there's a difference between life and sentient beings. Sentience being a part of life, but life is more. But since we are interconnected, compassion about life is not about wishing life (as such) not to suffer, to be free from the cause of suffering, and to find happiness and its cause, as we do for sentient beings, but out of benevolence for the whole interdependent system—that includes sentient beings who will feel the consequences of that. We want to be mindful of preserving the integrity and the harmony of that system and not disrupting it, because that will end up in suffering for sentient beings. And they are not disconnected. There's no sentient beings on one side, life on the other side, inanimate things on the other side. The oceans and the water and the sky, everything is deeply interconnected. Therefore, they are associated with our happiness and suffering, even though they're not sentient. So I think this is an important distinction.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:50:16): Yeah, thank you. It feels like this view of interdependence is really intimately connected with compassion and altruism and care like you were just speaking about. Like, if you have that view, it's almost the natural response that you have more care for this entire system that you are also a part of.

Matthieu Ricard (00:50:36): Yeah, because you respect it and therefore you are concerned, and therefore it's a global concern for the whole thing because the whole thing functions together. You cannot separate those two. It broaches another concept, which is awe, or wonderment. And our friend, Dacher Keltner, just wrote a book on awe. I did a photobook on wonderment. And wonderment is also [something where the] sense of self goes away a little bit because it's something bigger than. You can be in awe or wonderment before a fantastic pristine landscape, or the smile of a child, or a newborn, or a toothless elderly who looks at you with kindness. And that's something also that's bigger than yourself. And if you have awe for the environment, then you want to respect it. You are not going to destroy what amazes you, and therefore you are concerned by the state of the environment, and therefore the concern leads to action. So I argued in the photobook I did on wonderment, that wonderment was actually an important factor for being inspired to preserve the environment, other species, and also to take care of human beings.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:51:47): Yeah, thank you. I was going to ask you about photography, because some listeners may not know, but you're also an amazing photographer. And usually if you're giving a talk, you're showing these beautiful photographs that you've taken along with what you're saying, and

it's a really powerful effect. So I was just wondering, it's great to hear you say that inspiring awe in your surroundings will help move towards this... embracing interconnection and feeling compassion and love. So I'm wondering for you, about photography, if you view that as a kind of contemplative practice, or how you engage with the practice of photography.

Matthieu Ricard (00:52:27): Well, I don't want to be too pretentious. *[laughter]* It's something that I love. I started when I was 13 years old. I had a photography teacher who's now 82, who was living in the forest, one of the pioneers of animal and nature photography in France. There was only two or three in the sixties. So he taught me photography, and I kept that all my life. At different times, I've photographed more or less. When I left for India for good, I just had one camera. And I photographed mostly my spiritual masters, which allowed me to do a wonderful book in homage to them, called *Journey to Enlightenment*. But then I went on and photographed people, like I did a book called *108 Smiles* where I did an introduction based on Paul Ekman's work on smiles. And I did this book on wonderment. Now I want to do a book on painting with light. So I would say more that it's my favorite way to get distracted. *[laughter]*

(00:53:31) So I did a book called *Motionless Journey*, which is equivalent of staying two years in my hermitage in Nepal, without moving. So it's motionless. But there was this incredible life, because I see 200 miles of the Himalayas. Then below there's a forest with lot of birds, and sometimes mist and sometimes moonlight. So over two years of staying in my hermitage, I had a book, taking a photo every two weeks. So I called it *Motionless Journey*, and there's a new edition in French 15 years later, because I'm still motionless there but there's more photos. So this is something about wonderment about nature.

(00:54:09) And then wonderment about human beings is to give us confidence in the basic goodness of human beings. Of course, we know we can become dictators, like we have a few active now for the terrible misery of humanity. But deep within, if we don't distort it, there's a kind of basic goodness that can fall in the mud, but somehow it's still like a nugget of gold. Even in the mud, you can pick it up, wash it. And so the fundamental belief is that in human nature there's always something that is untouched—we call it Buddha nature in Buddhism, some scientists say it's the stronger predispositions toward altruism and cooperation than the opposite. But whatever the case might be, we believe that this is still deep within, even if it's covered in many layers. So I think through photography, both portraits of great spiritual masters or of innocent children or very lovely elderly people, I want to give back this confidence in the potential of human beings. That human nature is not fundamentally bad. And so that's why I mostly photograph that aspect of human beings. I've seen a lot of suffering and tragedy, but that's not my cup of tea for photography. I'm not a war photographer. I'm not photographing famine. It's necessary to awake consciousness, definitely, but this is not what I feel to contribute through photography.

(00:55:44) So recently I did a big exhibition in Paris, 150 huge photos in the big arch called the Grande Arche de La Défense. It sat for six months. And it was an Hymn to Beauty, spiritual beauty, human beauty, the beauty of untouched wilderness, and the beauty of compassion.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:56:07): You live such an interesting life, Matthieu. I feel like on one side you have such a quiet, simple life in your hermitage and then you also exist on the world stage with... going to major cities, and all the media, and you just had an art exhibition. And so I'm wondering how that is for you, to go back and forth between those worlds. Is it ever exhausting? Or how do you manage it?

Matthieu Ricard (00:56:34): Well, dear Wendy, except for you I'm not going back and forth anymore. [laughter]

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:56:38): Well, I appreciate you doing this.

Matthieu Ricard (00:56:39): I decided that at 70 years old, it's time to move to a new chapter, just the same way I left the Pasteur Institute to go to India. In '97 when I did *The Monk and the Philosopher*, it was not a deliberate decision, it happened. So I can't say it was bad, because those 25 years, somehow they bore some fruits, we could say. And one of them is the humanitarian organization I co-founded in 2000, Karuna-Shechen, that now helps 400,000 people every year in the fields of extreme poverty, social work, health, education—mostly in India, Nepal, and Tibet, but we do little bit also now in Europe. And we were discussing together going to the lab, which came out of that. So I can't say I regret that, but still 25 years is a long time.

(00:57:33) And now I'm about at the end of my life, I hope it'll still be some years to come. Who knows? Maybe two minutes, maybe 10 years, maybe more. Who knows? My mother's almost a hundred now in a few months, so maybe I have good genes. I'm not betting on that; impermanence may come anytime. But now it's no more the time to clown around. So I decided that I want to go back to my original vocation as a practitioner and as a translator. So now I'm engaged in translating an 800-page text, a book, which is really wonderful, from Tibetan into English and French. And so that's what I do from six in the morning, all day long, and walking in the forest and taking care of my mom and doing some practice. So I really, basically almost all public activities and new projects (except photography, haha), I gave up that. So I'm not doing any more conferences, except you know, when *Notebooks of a Wandering Monk* comes out, I'll do a few. But more now it's the exception, no more like my way of life.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:58:41): Yeah. Well I know our time is running out. This has been so wonderful. I'm just curious of a personal question if I might. You mentioned that you are taking care of your elderly mother who's almost a hundred. And so I know that this phase of life and becoming a caretaker can be a very... I don't know, a very intense period. And I'm just thinking of all of your work on care and compassion and altruism, and has that very personal experience given you any different insights? Or how are you relating to that?

Matthieu Ricard (00:59:13): Well, when I stopped doing all this running around, I thought, "Okay, now I can go to my heritage." [laughter] But my mother in the meantime, she's going strong. Strong but... she can't walk, she lost her memory, so she's totally a hundred percent dependent. But it's quite extraordinary that at the same time she reads aloud four, five hours a day. And she sings a lot. And when some caregivers come, she says, "I love you. You're beautiful." So she's very positive. But she basically recognizes me, that's about all (although not always). So I'm doing mommysitting instead of babysitting. And I didn't expect that, because at 77 I said, "Okay, now I stopped. I can go back to my hermitage." Well, not the case for now. So I'm taking care most of the time. I don't do the main work because I'm not qualified. But there are two wonderful helpers who take turns. So I can go away for some time. But I feel it's nice for me to be there. It's good for her, it's good for the caregivers. So it's just the time to do that. And I'm happy to do so.

(01:00:25) But I understand it can be so challenging. Sometimes they're moment in the daytime where she's a bit more animated and she wants to go somewhere, to Brittany. Or even if I'm two meters away, she calls me at the top of her voice. And so it can be a bit challenging. But most of the time we also have good laughs, what she says. And one time someone ask her, "So what do you really want?" And she said, "Oh, everything. Oh, everything." "Why?" "Because that's what I like." [laughter] But she used to be

very, very, very funny. Now, she doesn't make much joke anymore. But she sings songs that she heard when she was young and we never heard before. She wants to see people that are dead for the last 60 years. So it's quite puzzling. And I wonder what will happen to us when we get ever to that age, yes? But I think in France, many people have to put their parents in an elderly home because they work, they have children, so they have no choice. So I have the choice to keep her at home, because as long as we can take care of her, at least medically, then I feel it's such a blessing that she stays in her home. Yes.

Wendy Hasenkamp ([01:01:42](#)): Well, you are a blessing to her, and to all of us in the world. I've so appreciated this time. Is there anything that you want to share, like closing perspectives or thoughts for the audience, or anything that we haven't touched on that you want to talk about?

Matthieu Ricard ([01:01:56](#)): Well you know, again it was quite unexpected, but Mind & Life played a great role in my life in terms of connecting with these wonderful people I met through Mind & Life. And also being with His Holiness very often and meeting these wonderful people from all kinds of walks of life. So that was a major enrichment for me and I enjoyed it thoroughly. So at some point, I was very engaged, both in the research and also being part of, first the US board [of directors], then Mind & Life Europe. But then now, I'm sort of the elder. Someone told me, "Never required, always welcome." So okay, fine, that's good. *[laughter]* So I cannot be active very much, but from time to time I'm so glad to join. I was also in Dharamsala recently for the 35th anniversary, so it was wonderful to reconnect with everyone, those who could come and those who are still alive. So yes, it has been one of the best things that happened in my having to come back to the West. Yes.

Wendy Hasenkamp ([01:03:03](#)): Well, we're so grateful for everything that you've brought.

Matthieu Ricard ([01:03:05](#)): Thank you so much.

Wendy Hasenkamp ([01:03:06](#)): Thank you so much for chatting with us today and sending you all the best. Thank you, Matthieu.

Matthieu Ricard ([01:03:11](#)): Thank you, Wendy. Lovely to see you again, even from a distance.

Outro – Wendy Hasenkamp ([01:03:19](#)): *This episode was edited and produced by me and Phil Walker, and music on the show is from Blue Dot Sessions and Universal. Show notes and resources for this and other episodes can be found at podcast.mindandlife.org. If you enjoyed this episode, please rate and review us on Apple Podcasts, and share it with a friend. And if something in this conversation sparked insight for you, let us know. You can send an email or voice memo to podcast@mindandlife.org.*

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