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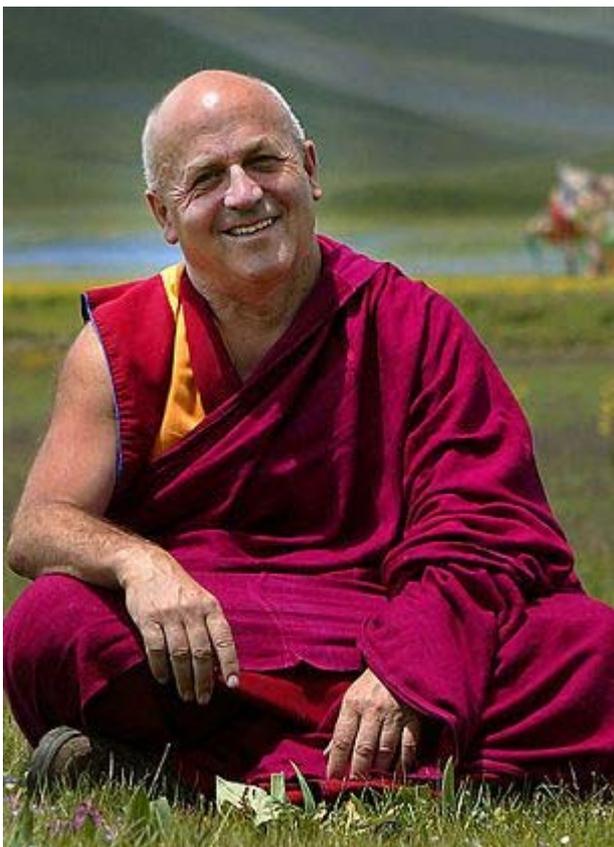
MailOnline

Is this the world's happiest man? Brain scans reveal French monk has 'abnormally large capacity' for joy - thanks to meditation

- Brain scans reveal Buddhist monk Matthieu Ricard has largest capacity for happiness ever recorded
- Meditation 'completely changes your brain and therefore changes what you are', says 66-year-old

By [Claire Bates](#)

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Ricard: 'Meditation is not just blissing out under a mango tree but it completely changes your brain'

A French genetic scientist may seem like an unusual person to hold the title - but Matthieu Ricard is the world's happiest man, according to researchers.

The 66-year-old turned his back on Parisian intellectual life 40 years ago and moved to India to study Buddhism. He is now a close confidante of the Dalai Lama and respected western scholar of religion.

Now it seems daily meditation has had other benefits - enhancing Mr Ricard's capacity for joy.

Neuroscientist Richard Davidson wired up the monk's skull with 256 sensors at the University of Wisconsin as part of research on hundreds of advanced practitioners of meditation.

The scans showed that when meditating on compassion, Ricard's brain produces a level of gamma waves - those linked to consciousness, attention, learning and memory - 'never reported before in the neuroscience literature', Davidson said.

The scans also showed excessive activity in his brain's left prefrontal cortex compared to its right counterpart, giving him an abnormally large capacity for happiness and a reduced propensity towards negativity, researchers believe.

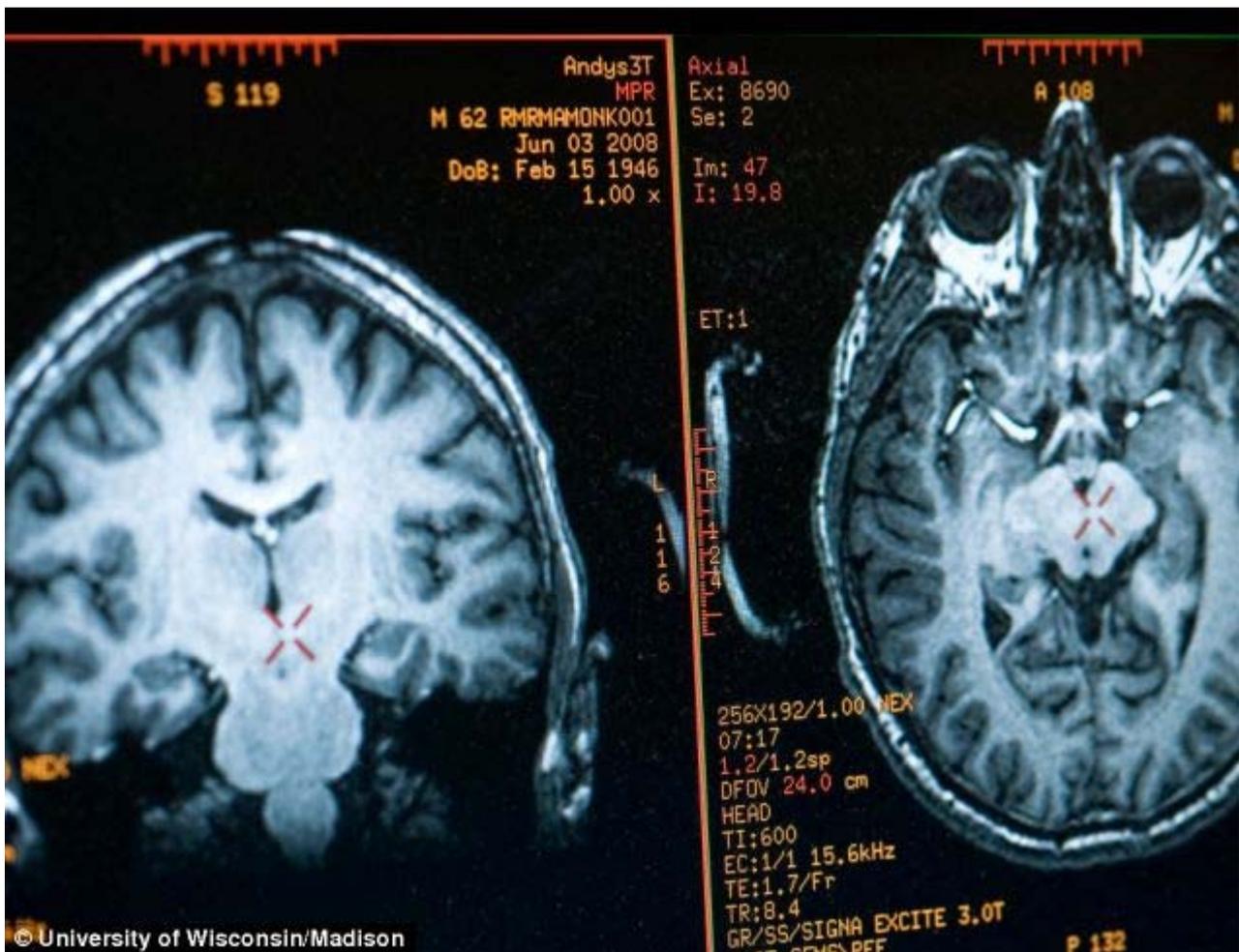
Research into the phenomenon, known as "neuroplasticity", is in its infancy and Ricard has been at the forefront of ground-breaking experiments along with other leading scientists across the world.

'We have been looking for 12 years at the effect of short and long-term mind-training through meditation on attention, on compassion, on emotional balance,' he said.

'We've found remarkable results with long-term practitioners who did 50,000 rounds of meditation, but also with three weeks of 20 minutes a day, which of course is more applicable to our modern times.'



Andy Francis (left) and associate scientist and Antoine Lutz (right) outfit Matthieu Ricard with a net of 128 sensors



A computer monitor displays graphic renderings of Matthieu Ricard's brain during an MRI test at the University of Wisconsin-Madison

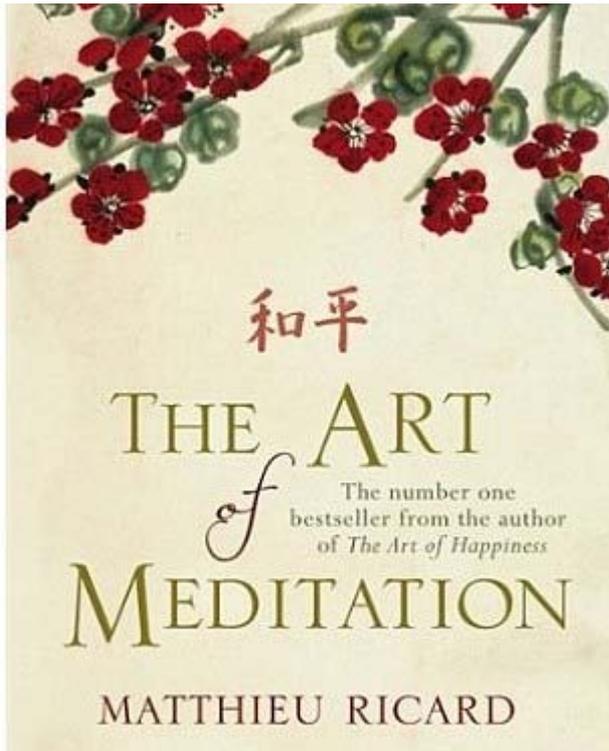
He added to AFP: 'It's a wonderful area of research because it shows that meditation is not just blissing out under a mango tree but it completely changes your brain and therefore changes what you are.'

He believes meditation can alter the brain and improve people's happiness in the same way that lifting weights puts on muscle.

The son of philosopher Jean-Francois Revel and abstract watercolour painter Yahne Le Toumelin, became something of a celebrity after writing 'The Monk And The Philosopher' with his father. This was a dialogue on the meaning of life.

He followed up with a practical guide in 2011 called 'The Art Of Meditation' making the case for why others should follow the same path.

MATTHIEU RICARD ON WHY YOU SHOULD MEDITATE AND HOW YOU CAN DO IT



The Art of Meditation is published by Atlantic Books

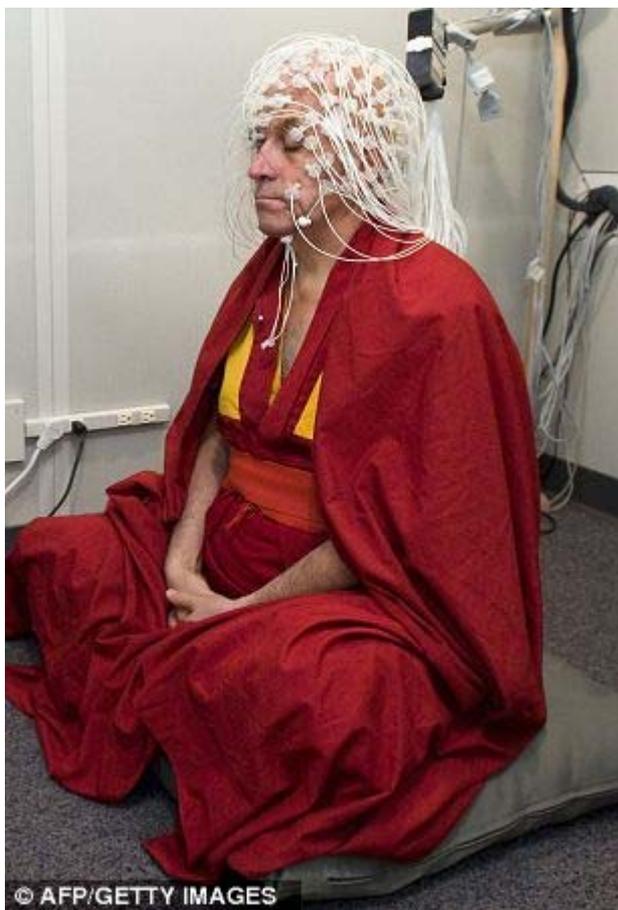
Matthieu Ricard has spoken about *The Art of Meditation* in a video hosted by the charity RSA. Here are some hints and tips...

- From a contemplative perspective the healthy mind should act like a mirror. Many faces can be reflected in a glass but none of them stick. In the same way thoughts should be allowed to pass through the mind but not held on to.
- Usually we are affected and swayed by thoughts and have no control over the mind. When you meditate you notice this process as you become aware of all the thoughts.
- It's impossible to stop thoughts from coming. Meditating on a sound or the breathe going in and out calms the mind giving greater clarity. Controlling the mind is not about reducing your freedom, it's about not being a slave to your thoughts. You are directing your mind like a boat rather than drifting.
- You can spend time noticing the sensations of the natural process of the breath and if you notice your mind wandering simply bringing it back to the breath. This is known as mindfulness. You can apply it to other sensations to bring you into the 'now' rather than dwelling on the past or future. Examples are heat and cold and sounds that you hear.
- Once you've achieved some skill in this you can use that to cultivate qualities such as kindness, or dealing with disturbing emotions. He says everyone has felt all-consuming love but usually it lasts for about 15 seconds, but you can hold on and nurture this vivid feeling by focusing on it in meditation. If you feel it becoming vague you can consciously revive it.
- Like when playing the piano, practising the feeling for 20minutes has a far greater impact over time than a few seconds. Regular practise is also needed like watering a plant.
- You can then use meditation to gain some space from negative emotions. Ricard says: 'You can look at your experience like a fire that burns. If you are aware of anger you are not angry you are aware. Being aware of anxiety is not being anxious it is

being aware.' By being aware of these emotions you are no longer adding fuel to their fire and they will burn down.

- **You will see benefits in stress levels and general wellbeing as well as brain changes with regular practise in a month. Those who say they don't have enough time to meditate should look at the benefits: 'If it gives you the resources to deal with everything else during the other 23 hours and 30minutes, it seems a worthy way of spending 20 minutes,' Ricard says.**





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Mr Ricard has undergone a battery of tests, including an MRI (left) to reveal how his 'enlightened' mind works



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A computer monitor displays data being recorded during an EEG test conducted with Mr Ricard



Matthieu Ricard is a close confidante of the Dalai Lama

Ricard said: 'That was the end of my quiet time because it was a bestseller. Suddenly I was projected into the western world. Then I did more dialogues with scientists and the whole thing started to spin off out of control.

'I got really involved in science research and the science of meditation.'

A prominent monk in Kathmandu's Shechen Monastery, Ricard divides his year between isolated meditation, scientific research and accompanying the Dalai Lama as his adviser on trips to French-speaking countries and science conferences.

He addressed the World Economic Forum in Davos at the height of the financial crisis in 2009 to tell gathered heads of state and business leaders it was time to give up greed in favour of "enlightened altruism".

He was awarded the French National Order of Merit for his work in preserving Himalayan culture but it is his work on the science of happiness which perhaps defines him best.

Ricard sees living a good life, and showing compassion, not as a religious edict revealed from on high, but as a practical route to happiness.

'Try sincerely to check, to investigate,' he said.

'That's what Buddhism has been trying to unravel - the mechanism of happiness and suffering. It is a science of the mind.'