

“A Buddhist View of Happiness” by Matthieu Ricard explores how authentic happiness can be cultivated through mental training in accordance with Buddhist ideology. Ricard is a Buddhist monk, humanitarian, and author, as well a member of the Mind and Life Institute, which seeks to deepen scientific research and Buddhist perspectives on the mind. This review will focus on Ricard’s views on the core concepts of suffering and happiness, to assess how applicable his teachings are to modern life.

A fundamental aspect of Buddhism is embracing both the joys and sorrows that come your way. Ricard states that authentic happiness comes from an exceptionally healthy state of mind. Modern society equates happiness to the continuous maximalization of pleasure. However, this view does not align with reality. To minimize suffering, we must close the gap between reality and our perception of it.

It is important to note that Ricard defines happiness as “inner fulfillment, not the gratification of inexhaustible desires for outwards things.”(1) After defining suffering and its causes, he focuses on outlining the methods and practices which may aid in its reduction. “Every being has the potential for authentic happiness and perfection, just as every sesame seed is permeated with oil.”(2)

He makes his stance clear: every individual has the potential to attain happiness. It is not reliant on external conditions, but rather mental willpower. However, it could be argued that a position which allows one to be able to be in full control over their mind is a privileged one. The practices which are required to achieve inner fulfillment demand time and great focus. This may mean that its highest form may not be truly attainable to those who don’t possess basic needs for life. This perception comes with the presupposition that the hierarchy of needs is linear, as often defined in western ideology. Ricard does mention that one’s environment has an impact on one’s journey, but he does not dwell on this fact. The general consensus in Buddhism is that liberation from suffering is independent of the fulfillment of basic and psychological needs. However, Ricard does not clarify his stance.

Another westernized ideology which alters the way we perceive Buddhist teachings is the concept of individualism. Ricard implies that it may be more difficult to achieve true happiness today, as we lean into individualist culture globally. When discussing the way our happiness is reliant on that of others, he states that “the goal here is a deep state of well being and wisdom at all moments, accompanied by love for every sentient being, and not by that individual love that modern society relentlessly drums into us.”(3) He reiterates the notion of care for the wellbeing of others due to the, once again, individualism-leaning context of the time in which this text was published.

To summarise, Ricard’s views are broadly applicable to modern life, but nuance is necessary, and certain conversations could be expanded on for clarity. Practically, the attainability of inner fulfillment may be constrained by social and economic realities, however, the perceived constraint may be due to the influence of westernised notions.

References

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