

## Tomorrow's Life

Government hands can't hold back Taiwan's festival season **Gigs**

Think global, eat local: Ethical produce is all about taste without the waste **Food**



How groovy newcomers gave an ancient Italian town a second life **C7**

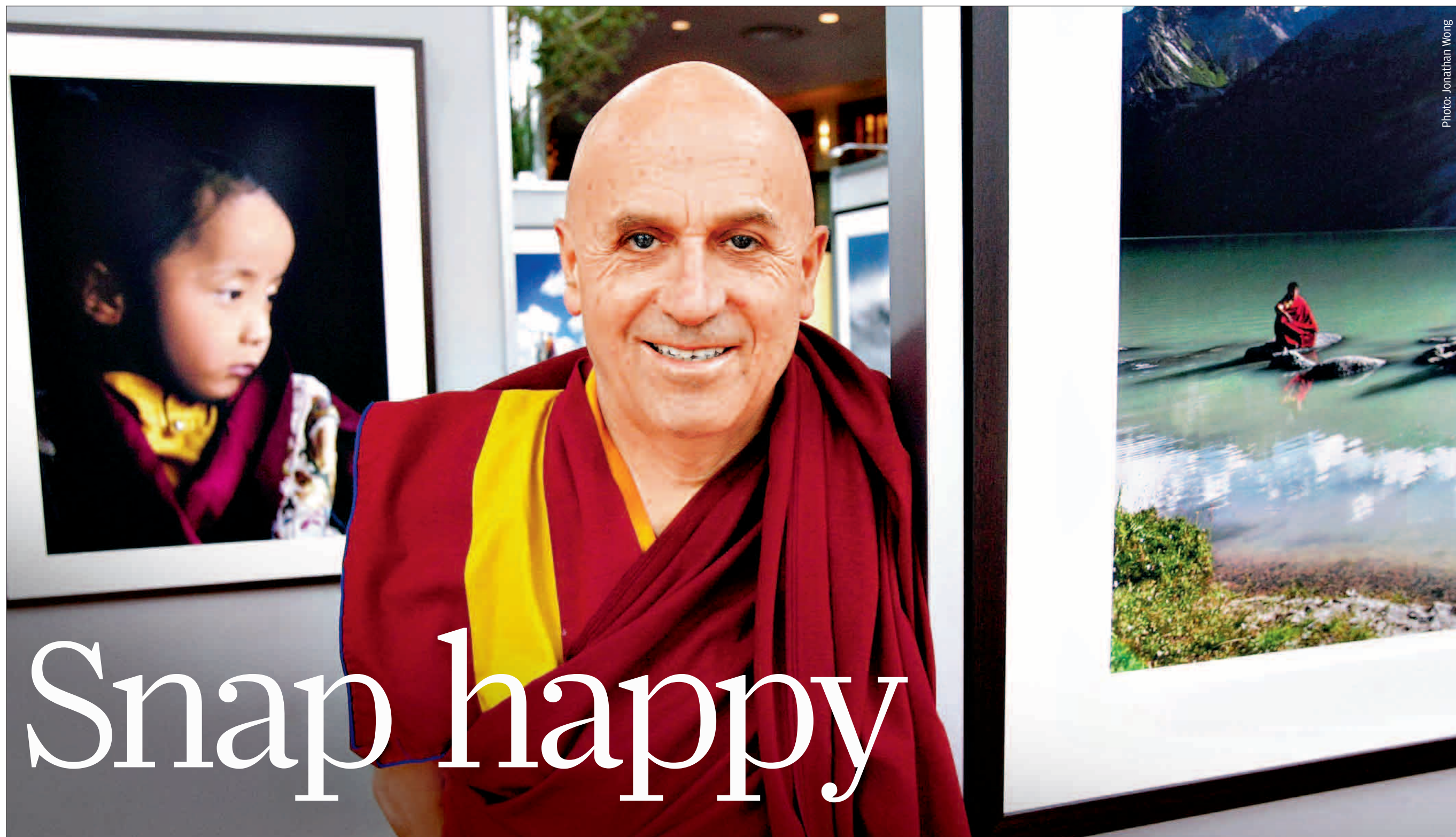


**FASHION TRAVEL TIME OUT DIVERSIONS ON AIR**

# Life

SOUTH CHINA MORNING POST WEDNESDAY, MARCH 28, 2007

scmp.com



# Snap happy

## Photographer and monk Matthieu Ricard shares the secret of inner peace with **Jade Lee-Duffy**

It's official: Matthieu Ricard is the happiest man in the world. The Tibetan Buddhist monk picked up that title recently when American neuroscientists announced he recorded the highest score in a study measuring brainwave activity related to positive emotions.

The 61-year-old Frenchman, who was in town last week to open his new photo exhibition, *A Compassionate Eye*, laughs off the label as media hyperbole. But he says we can learn to achieve that state of mind.

"Happiness is a skill – you aren't born like that," he says. "Some are born happier, others are kinder, but basically you can magnify these differences through mind training." Does Ricard feel happy all the time? "More or less," he says with a smile. "I can't complain."

Visiting at the invitation of the Robert H.N. Ho Foundation, he also held a sold-out meditation workshop and gave a talk entitled *How to Transform Oneself to Better Transform the World*.

Although he lives at the Shechen Monastery in Nepal and spends months at a time in solitary retreat, Ricard is engaged in many pursuits. Not only is he an internationally published photographer, best-

selling author and translator, but he also supervises a large number of humanitarian projects.

For the past six years, Ricard has also been working with top neuroscientists in the US studying the long-term effects of meditation. During a test conducted by the University of Wisconsin-Madison, he and hundreds of other volunteers were hooked up to 256 sensors for three hours of continuous MRI scanning. With most of the readings taken from the volunteers' brains ranging from +0.3 for the depressed to -0.3 for the blissful, the monk's was off the scale at -0.45.

Ricard attributes his unusually high score to 10,000 hours or more of meditation, adding that other long-term meditators have since achieved even more impressive results.

He says the brain can be trained to set aside such "mental toxins" as anger to achieve an inner calm that allows compassion to grow.

"The feeling of compassion is wonderful compared with anger or jealousy, but having that feeling isn't enough, unfortunately," he says. "You have to use compassion in daily life and with this you can be inspired to help people."

Much of Ricard's time is spent doing just that. Proceeds from his photography and books (his latest, *Happiness*, was named one of the 10 best Asian books of last year by *Time* magazine) go towards 30 humanitarian projects that he helps run on the Indian subcontinent. They include building bridges and opening clinics, orphanages, homes for the elderly and schools.

He says modern education neglects the teaching of human values and compassion. "In education we emphasise intelligence... The guys that did 9/11 were very smart. They managed with only a few razor blades and lots of planning to be extremely destructive. You should use it to benefit others, not destroy them."

Born in Paris, Ricard was raised among the city's intellectual elite. His father, the late Jean-François Revel, was one of France's most celebrated philosophers. His mother is abstract artist Yahne Le Toumelin.

As a young man, he had a promising career in molecular biology, conducting research at the Institut Pasteur under the supervision of Nobel laureate François Jacob. But his life took a

turn in the mid-1960s when he saw several documentaries about great Tibetan Buddhist teachers who had fled to India. "I was so impressed by them, the look they had on their faces, I wanted to meet them," he says. "It was like having 20 Socrates alive in one place."

He made several visits to India and, after completing his doctorate in biochemistry, abandoned his life in France to study Tibetan Buddhism in Darjeeling. As a monk, he learned from such masters as Khyentse Rinpoche and Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche.

Along the way, he developed a passion for photography and his images of Tibetan life have been exhibited at the Rubin Museum of Art in New York and the International Festival of Photojournalism in Perpignan, France, and published in books including *Journey to Enlightenment* (1996), *Buddhist Himalayas* (2002) and *Tibet – An Inner Journey* (2007).

"I can't take a photograph of misery and degradation because there is so much of that. I could take photos of beggars in the street every day," he says. "We've seen that, we know it exists, but why don't we show inner strength, courage, even in the face of suffering – show something that gives hope?" Ricard's career in photography

started by chance. During a trip to New York in 1995, a friend suggested he show his pictures of Tibet to photography publisher Aperture. Although the editor was ready to send him away because they had many such images, a secretary was so impressed with Ricard's portfolio that she persuaded her boss to take a look. He was offered a book deal straight away.

"After that meeting, I became a

**Happiness is a skill – you aren't born like that ... but you can magnify [it] through mind training**

photographer," Ricard says with a laugh.

His Hong Kong exhibition includes images of monks jumping for joy at the sight of the sea in France, horses on the Kailash plains in Tibet, his Buddhist teacher and ordinary village folk in the Himalayas.

Foundation president Caroline Pfohl-Ho says: "He's able to link

Buddhism, science and art in a message that's simple, but not simplistic.

"I found his message true," she says, "that once you are able to free yourself from being self-conscious and protective, you will be open to other people and completely present in the moment."

That's not to say Ricard is free of negative emotions.

"I feel sad sometimes when I see someone suffering, but it's not the kind of sadness that leads to despair, seeing that life has no meaning," he says. "No, I don't experience that. We can develop the courage to do something about it so you don't have to feel hopeless, stressed or in despair."

So what makes him happiest? "There isn't something that makes me happy. Basically, it's the freshness of every moment."

"If you think of pure happiness, freedom of mind, freedom of peace, it is now, all the time. Being free from the mental poisons of hatred, jealousy, pride and obsession – that's happiness."

**A Compassionate Eye: Photographs by the Venerable Matthieu Ricard. Mon-Sat, 9.30am-6pm; Sun, 1.30pm-5.30pm, University Museum and Art Gallery, 94 Bonham Rd, Pok Fu Lam. Inquiries: 2241 5512. Ends May 6**



*Flying Monks* (left) and *Tibetan Boy 1*, from the exhibition *A Compassionate Eye*. Photos: Matthieu Ricard

Photo: Jonathan Wong