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The happiest man in the world?

... and you can learn how he does it, says academic-turned-Buddhist monk

By **Anthony Barnes**

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To scientists, he is the world's happiest man. His level of mind control is astonishing and the upbeat impulses in his brain are off the scale.

Now Matthieu Ricard, 60, a French academic-turned-Buddhist monk, is to share his secrets to make the world a happier place. The trick, he reckons, is to put some effort into it. In essence, happiness is a "skill" to be learned.

His advice could not be more timely as tomorrow Britain will reach what, according to a scientific formula, is the most miserable day of the year. Tattered new year resolutions, the faded buzz of Christmas, debt, a lack of motivation and the winter weather conspire to create a peak of misery and gloom.

But studies have shown that the mind can rise above it all to increase almost everyone's happiness. Mr Ricard, who is the French interpreter for Tibet's spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama, took part in trials to show that brain training in the form of meditation can cause an overwhelming change in levels of happiness.

MRI scans showed that he and other long-term meditators - who had completed more than 10,000 hours each - experienced a huge level of "positive emotions" in the left pre-frontal cortex of the brain, which is associated with happiness. The right-hand side, which handles negative thoughts, is suppressed.

Further studies have shown that even novices who have done only a little meditation have increased levels of happiness. But Mr Ricard's abilities were head and shoulders above the others involved in the trials.

"The mind is malleable," Mr Ricard told The Independent on Sunday yesterday. "Our life can be greatly transformed by even a minimal change in how we manage our thoughts and perceive and interpret the world. Happiness is a skill. It requires effort and time."

Mr Ricard was brought up among Paris's intellectual elite in the 1960s, but after working for a PhD in biochemistry he abandoned his distinguished academic career to study Tibetan Buddhism in the Himalayas.

A book of philosophical conversations he conducted with his father Jean-François Revel, *The Monk and the Philosopher*, became

an unlikely publishing phenomenon when it came out in France in the late 1990s.

Mr Ricard is to publish his book Happiness for the first time in the UK next month.

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