

Interviews: Collective Intelligence — Mathieu Ricard

Present: Mathieu Ricard, Caroline Pfohl-Ho, David Ulrich, and Christian Rhomberg, at the Rhomberg home in Hong Kong on September 15, 2005.

A Patch of Blue Sky

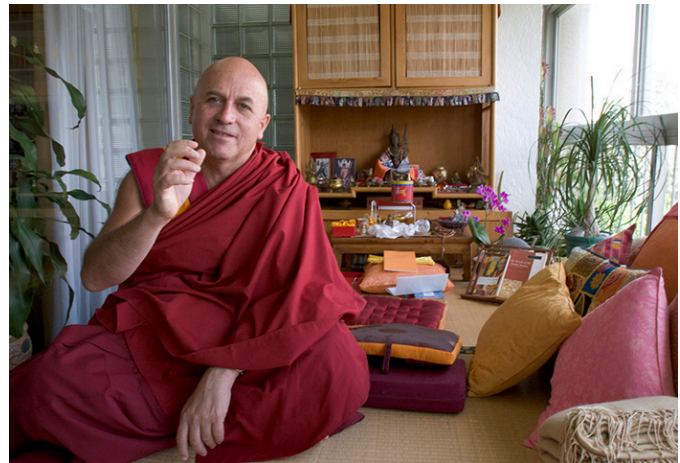
DU: Mathieu, thank you for offering us time in your busy schedule. We are trying to understand how a larger intelligence is available to us, and how we can come together to contact this intelligence.

Philosopher Jacob Needleman has written a question. He says, “How to come together and think and hear each other in order to touch, or be touched by, the intelligence we need?”

He talks about people coming together to “share their perceptions and attention, and through that sharing to become a conduit for the appearance of a spiritual intelligence.”

MR: You see, first of all, there are many understandings of even the word intelligence, so usually, in education — there are mostly two parts in Western education. One is the acquisition of as much information as possible, of geography, science, and this and that, and the so called development of intelligence, which is basically posited as the faculty of reasoning, of understanding, that typically those famous IQ tests are supposed to show you. Those basically . . . they are trying to develop a tool of reasoning, of making associations, of analyzing situations, which is really only a tool. And a tool, like a hammer, can be used for building or can be used for destroying. And, as the Dalai Lama often says, a typical example of that is 9/11 — an extremely smart use of intelligence, with the means to create enormous human devastation. An intelligence that did not hesitate to use human beings as bullets to destroy other human beings, So that’s a typical example of a sharp intelligence which, without the proper motivation, can be an enormous tool of destruction. So intelligence itself is just like strength, skill, or energy or money or whatever and can be used to destroy or to build. So that kind of intelligence, if it is not accompanied especially in education with the development of human values, acquisition of the crucial importance of the motivation that underlies every of our actions. And even we cannot predict the outcome of many of our actions, because there is a limitation in what we know — how things are going to unfold, to happen, and the consequences — yet even the most dumb person can check his or her motivations. I am doing this just for myself, out of selfishness or to actually harm others, or I am doing it for the double welfare for myself and others.

So the idea of the total need of actually first developing human values and the right motivation, which is loving kindness and also love including oneself. We are part of others in a way, so we cultivate love for



everybody including oneself. But everybody are many and oneself. So that's a very important component of life, of education. And so that kind of intelligence alone, you know it's great to have it. But without the values, it can't be anything.

Now there is another aspect of intelligence which is probably what you refer to which is a deeper understanding which is linked with wisdom and relating to the deeper nature of mind, and also of understanding of the nature of phenomena, because those are interdependent. That kind of intelligence is more like a type of wisdom, which has a clear insight into the nature of reality and of your own mind and consequently of the minds of others. Your own mind, how positive and negative emotion unfold, if you clearly understand that in your own mind,

If you clearly identify in your own mind the wish to be safe, the wish to be happy, the wish to be flourishing, then you can also appreciate that and understand that in others' minds. That kind of insight, I would say more than maybe intelligence. Insight is deeply linked with values, with the distinction between destructive and constructive emotions and states of mind. And also a correct perception of reality is very important. If we superimpose our mental constructs onto reality and say, for instance, things are permanent and I want things to last and I want myself, my dear one, my possessions ... Whereas in the constant dynamic flow of transformation, I mean that all of our perceptions of reality are going to suffer from that attitude. All of a sudden we are confronted with sudden change and then your superimposition will collapse and cause suffering. So insight is broader into the nature of things, and also the quality of things in terms of consequences in terms of happiness and suffering. So that is true intelligence, or true insight, or true wisdom.

In that sense I think is probably what you mean,

DU: It's entering a larger flow. We enter a larger connection with other people and with the world at large.

MR: Well, larger in the sense that you begin to realize what it is. Not that you are making it larger than what it is. But you realize that for instance loving kindness, happiness cannot be a self-enclosed phenomenon. Selfish happiness is a contradiction. If you are suspended in space, love and kindness and compassion would have no meaning. Real happiness can only occur through and with others. Precisely because your understanding of interdependence and cultivation of living kindness is a fundamental component of happiness. That is why selfish happiness does not work. That is also why a fundamental understanding of reality is important. Because interdependence and loving kindness are closely connected. Why? If you realize that you cannot have happiness without the happiness of others, because of fundamental interdependence between self and others and between you and the world. Then you understand the value and the essential need for developing loving kindness and compassion — because of understanding interdependence. So its not just an abstract notion, developing loving kindness; it is also at core of yours

and others happiness. So a larger perspective and deeper perspective means actually understanding things as they are. It does not mean sort of fabricating a sort of wishy washy cosmic consciousness. It's just understanding that the real fabric of reality is interdependence -- for phenomena, for living beings, for the environment. And hence the Dalai Lama often emphasizes the concept of non-violence: to human beings, to animals, and the environment, because they are totally linked,. And you cannot disassociate them. If you disassociate them, you run into trouble.

DU: Yes, I feel that the concept of interdependence is very much in line with what we are thinking about — and especially the recognition of our interdependence and the coming together. When we come together, when we recognize compassion and genuine connection with each other, it seems to bring greater insight, it seems to bring greater realizations. When, for example, Caroline and I go out photographing together, I find that something is more available to me than when I go out alone. It's a strange thing but it seems true. And I am artist, I work individually — but I find that when I collaborate with others and I really open to the insight and energy of others it brings something greater to the moment.

MR: Sure. I see. That makes sense. And you see interdependence also then comes with the notion of what we call universal responsibility. It's a win win, lose lose situation. I was listening to Kofi Annan (UN Secretary-General) this morning when he was trying to push those reforms, which everybody is trying to cut down, especially John Borton. And he said, you know, “now, either we raise together or we fall together.” That's a different way of expressing the notion of universal responsibility. He just mentioned interdependence. In the time of tribes, you could consider one tribe wins the hunting grounds; there is a winner and loser. Nowadays, If you harm a situation, the ecology, or a group of people you harm everybody and you harm yourself in the end. So that's now the time when precisely those notions of interdependence and universal responsibility, which is based on genuine loving kindness towards each other-- it's the time when those values should triumph over. . . again, just selfish, very narrow-minded, immediate reward — filling your pockets now and you don't care about the environment or the next generations.

But you see that has to start with changing your own mind, so I think the ultimate... I always think that the real nutshell is transforming yourself to better transform the world. it's a sort of formula. It's the epitome of all that. You cannot really do humanitarian works, change your psyche, do something constructive without first eliminating some kind of mental toxins from your mind that makes you individually work in selfish ways, Consider others when the ??? messed up all over the place.

So in that sense independence and the change of your mind to loving-kindness, openness and so forth is how universal responsibility can be applied.

DU: How does interdependence take place in the teacher/student relationship? Is there, a passage of knowledge, a passing of intelligence? In Buddhism certainly there is the connection to the wisdom of the lineage and would that represent a kind of intelligence?

MR: Sure. Well you know one of the many obstacles to learning is pride. I know enough or I am smart or I don't need you. So humility we say is like the water: the water of qualities always gather in the lowest place. Not on the top of the peak. The peak is pride. And your place is humility – a genuine humility that gathers all the waters of quality you receive. You can also see the example of the fruit tree. When it branches out, loaded with fruit, it tends towards the ground.. When there is no fruit, it can sort of raise to the sky. So likewise, humility means not a self-depreciation. I am zero. I know nothing. Everyone is smarter than me. That is stupid. That's not how you do anything. Humility is a sense of knowing how much you still have to learn and appreciate the qualities of those who know better. The teacher, in turn, is someone who has developed this quality of the knowledge of the path. And has nothing to gain or lose in having or not having disciples. But is natural, spontaneously, like a mother who would like to help a child to know that if you put your hand on a burning plate, you're going to get burned. And if you don't want to get burned, but as long as you keep your hand there, you'll get burned. So, a spontaneous outflow of wishing to share for the benefit -- in a beneficial way. Not because there is something to be gained from it. It's simply natural genuine concern. And so If you know something, then you don't have to show off, you want to share it. It comes natural.

So that -- a genuine earnest interest and wish to learn, openness, humility, confidence. If you ever go mountain climbing, then you know at some point you have to rely on what the guide says. If you tell him you're too smart, and resist him, its not going to work. At some point, like with a sailor or with a mountain climber, you have to trust. Once you have chosen your guide, you cannot change your mind halfway. First... that's why it is important to choose properly your guide, If you choose a crook, then you're both in trouble. (laughter)

DU: That reminds me of the wonderful little book, Mount Analogue by Rene Daumal.

MR: Oh yes, Rene Daumal was a friend of my mother's (Painter, watercolorist, Mme. Yahne Le Toumelin).

DU: Was he? Yes. He talks about mountain climbing and how we depend upon our guides and we depend upon each other.

MR: So that's why also it is very important if you can in any way learn spiritually from someone else, who is authentic, really someone who knows more than you, not the blind leading/guiding the blind. Then of course it is a matter of confidence. If you don't trust, It's not blind faith, but confidence in someone who knows more than you when you have recognized as much as you can that it is authentic. Then trust at some point, because it helps you to grow. You have to be confident, that with this person, I can progress on the path. That's all you really need, not a blind devotion or submission or this or that.

DU: Do you think that a community of seekers helps us in our search for intelligence? I find that when I am meditating with others, again I feel that something more is available then when I am meditating alone.

MR: Well, you know there are different things to that. And It's not like there are some vibes going around all over the place like that, which I think is a bit spooky. It's more like — we have a saying — community simply reinforces your sense of commitment, of engagement, of discipline almost. When I'm meditating otherwise I just may want to do something else. Like lie down, like this. So if you are in a group, there is a kind of common discipline. We have an image for that that is very nice. You know that in India they use the Pusha grass. It is used for making brooms. You have a thousand fibers of pusha grass. Separated they cannot make a broom. Individually, even if you have a thousand of them. they cannot make a broom. If you gather them together you have an efficient broom. So this notion of sangha , of community, actually companions traveling together on the path. And they help each other when someone is weak, even not always going ...? Presence. Otherwise you see their strength of their commitment, their practice, or you see their weakness. Somehow the whole thing helps you together — its better to be ten companions traveling in the forest than just alone. . Someone knows some pitfalls, some other ones. Someone is weak in the way, someone is strong in the head. The whole thing works better together. So I think the notion of community, as friends, of companions, is certainly most helpful.

This notion of emergence also. A crowd does not behave the same way as one hundred separate individuals. So there is something more coming up than the simple sum of each individual capacity. That is what we call an emergent phenomenon When what emerges from a hundred persons or elements is more than just one plus one plus one, etc. equals 100. You have one plus one plus one equals 120. Because there is something more that emerges. That's a very important concept also.

DU: Yes, could you talk more about this idea of emergent phenomena?

MR: So the emergent phenomena usually is dependent upon its basis or cause. Without its basis it is not an emergent phenomena. It has a quality of a life of its own, but again its not a weird entity. It's simply that there is a quality that is more than the arithmetical sum of each element. In biology it is very clear, a single neuron doesn't do anything. Suddenly when you have 20 billion neurons, and that there is the basis of what we call at least the normal action or activity; the overview of intelligence, and the brain faculty of consciousness, and all that. Which is not intrinsically present in the neurons. In the same way in physics that the quality of one single element has specific qualities that change or transform when related with others or when placed under the lens of observation. A particle, for instance, can become a wave when subjected to our methods of observation. When alone, it goes back to its intrinsic state of being a particle.

In physics, When two particles, let's say photons, are spinning together in a synchronized way, and are then separated, even by a large distance, and one changes the polarity of its spin, the other will change instantaneously, and does so faster than the speed of light. The two together are inseparable, interdependent.

In other words, elements on a lower level combine to produce something that is more than the intrinsic quality of the element, new qualities appear, and that is an emergent phenomena — and also an element on a higher level can influence the elements on the lower level. We call this downward causality, which implies that consciousness can influence the mind, or the body, and brain function or intelligence affects the individual neurons. So we might say that emergent phenomena tends upward to form a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts, but is informed by its basis, which is the consciousness and intelligence that guides it. Causality is not one way. If we say that in upward causality, elements on a lower level combine to form something on a higher level, then downward causality implies that something on a higher level influences the lower level. You can call this a reciprocal causality. Thus causality is mutual, both upward and downward, and intelligence shapes reality as reality shapes intelligence. Human beings both are formed by, and form their environment. On the ascendant or emergent side, the environment and body influences the mind, and on the descendent side, consciousness influences both the mind and the body.

CPH: How is devotion understood in Buddhism?

MR: It is a kind of conviction, yes, a conviction that the qualities of compassion and loving-kindness can be developed, that you can know the nature of the mind, and that the luminosity that you recognize in spiritual masters can be attained. Its simply that you begin with an appreciation of what your guide, your teacher has to offer. It is a kind of respect and a keen interest. You recognize and trust in their authenticity. You recognize that they embody a kind of luminosity, a clarity, a wisdom. And that is something that you want. So it follows that you develop a yearning and an aspiration for that kind of clarity and luminosity. There is something here that you want – to put the teaching into practice yourself. Through training the mind, they have eliminated some of what we call the toxins of anger, self-interest and so forth. There is a clarity and alertness, and you know it is authentic. So you develop a faith that turns into a conviction to follow the path. Once you put the teaching into practice and verify for yourself the effectiveness of what is taught, you develop a deep conviction to the path. That is devotion.

And there is another side to devotion. When you are in contact with a person who radiates loving-kindness and compassion, you are drawn to follow the path, to learn to embody those qualities in yourself. In Buddhism, the lineage is like a series of small candles, each one representing a person on the path. Some candles are strong, some weak and are easily blown out in the wind and so on. But the candles are lit, one to another and the flame stays alive and strong. And you know it is not any one single candle that carries the flame, but the sort of ongoing succession of them. The ultimate goal is personal transformation. The candles stay lit through the transformation of the individuals on the path. This becomes a sort of luminosity of the mind, an awareness that can be shared.

Tibetan masters have been known to say that if the student does not surpass the teacher, then it is the teacher that has failed.

DU: (Mathieu notices my book on the table, *The Widening Stream; the Seven Stages of Creativity*, and comments on it.) And yes, one final question, you are an artist, a photographer. What role does creativity play in the formation of intelligence?

MR: Creativity is all too often just a manifestation of your emerging tendencies. You are this way or you are that way. And these emerging tendencies come out through your creativity. Very often creativity is confused with a spontaneous expression of one's habitual tendencies and conditioning. The artists says, 'look at me.' It is selfish and narrow-minded and can be confused with knowing the nature of your own mind. It does not free us from our conditioning or from ignorance, nor does it help develop loving-kindness and compassion. Really looking at these emerging tendencies, Looking at the tendencies of your own mind is very exciting, more interesting than going to the movies. Learning to shed the skin of one's habitual tendencies, conditioning, and negative emotions — and discover the real nature of your mind — is true creativity. But now, you see, there is another side to what we call intuition or inspiration. And there is nothing mysterious about it. Sometimes with nature or with art, you experience greater insight, a real moment of enlightenment, or a luminosity that connects you with the world or nature or others. By understanding the nature of your own mind, you naturally come to what we call intuition and insight. These moments come from your practice, from developing loving kindness and compassion, and they are moments of what I would all genuine wisdom. Consciousness is an experience. It goes deeper and deeper into the experience, behind mental constructs and behind the veil of your emerging tendencies. You come to your natural wisdom. So intuition or inspiration is really the experience of your own wisdom. It is like seeing a small patch of blue sky amidst the clouds – and you try to widen that patch through personal transformation.

Matthieu Ricard is a Buddhist monk at Shechen Monastery in Kathmandu and French interpreter since 1989 for His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Born in France in 1946, he received a Ph.D. in Cellular Genetics at the Institut Pasteur under Nobel Laureate Francois Jacob. As a hobby, he wrote Animal Migrations (Hill and Wang, 1969). He first traveled to the Himalayas in 1967 and has lived there since 1972. For fifteen years he studied with Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, one of the most eminent Tibetan teachers of our times.

With his father, the French thinker Jean-François Revel, he is the author of "The Monk and the Philosopher" (Schocken, New York, 1999), and "The Quantum and the Lotus" with the astrophysicist Trinh Xuan Thuan (Crown, New York, 2001). He has translated several books from Tibetan into English and French. As a photographer, he has published several albums, including "The Spirit of Tibet" (Aperture, New York) and "Buddhist Himalayas" (Abrams, New York).