

# The Future Doesn't Hurt. Yet



By MATTHIEU RICARD

An article from the summer 2011 issue of the International Herald Tribune Magazine ([Source](#))

Published: June 23, 2011

When, in the early morning, I sit in the little meadow in front of my hermitage on a quiet hilltop, two hours' drive from Katmandu in Nepal, my eyes take in hundreds of miles of lofty Himalayan peaks glowing in the rising sun. The serenity of the scenery blends naturally and seamlessly with the peace within. It is a long way indeed from the frantic city life I once lived.

But the peace I know is no escape from the world below — or the science I once studied. I work with the toughest problems of the real world in the 30 clinics and schools that Karuna-Shechen, the foundation I created with a few dedicated friends and benefactors, runs in Tibet, Nepal and India. And now, after 40 years among these majestic mountains, I have become acutely aware of the ravages of climate change in the Himalayas and on the Tibetan plateau. From where I sit in my little meadow, it is especially sad to witness the Himalayan peaks becoming grayer and grayer as glaciers melt and snows recede.

The debate about climate change is mostly conducted by people who live in cities, where everything is artificial. They don't actually experience the changes that are taking place in the real world. The vast majority of Tibetans, Nepalese and Bhutanese who live on both sides of the Himalayas have never heard of global warming, as they have little or no access to the news media. Yet they all say that the ice is not forming as thickly as before on lakes and rivers, that winter temperatures are getting warmer and the spring blossoms are coming earlier. What they may not know is that these are symptoms of far greater dangers.

In the beautiful kingdom of Bhutan, where I spent nine years, recent investigations by the only glaciologist in the country, Kharma Thoeb, have shown that a natural moraine dam that separates two glacial lakes in the Lunana area is today only 31 meters deep, in comparison to 74 meters in 2003. If this wall gives way, some 53 million cubic meters of water will rush down the valley of Punakha and Wangdi, causing immense damage and loss of life. Altogether there are 400 glacial lakes in Nepal and Bhutan that may break their natural dams and flood populated areas lower in the valleys. If these floods occur, the glaciers will increasingly shrink. This will cause drought, since the streams and rivers will not be fed by melting snow.

Chinese climatologists have called the Himalayan glaciers and other major mountains located in the Tibetan plateau the "third pole" of our ailing planet. There are 40,000 large and small glaciers on the Tibetan plateau and this area is melting at a rate three to four times faster than the North and South Poles. The melting is particularly accelerated in the Himalayas by the pollution that settles on the snow and darkens the glaciers, making them more absorbent to light.

According to international development agencies, about half of the populations of China, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, India and Pakistan depend on the watershed from the rivers of the Tibetan plateau for their agriculture, general water supply, and, therefore, survival. The consequences of the drying up of these great rivers will be catastrophic.

When I was 20, I was hired as a researcher in the cellular genetics lab of François Jacob, who had just been awarded the Nobel Prize for medicine. There, I worked for six years toward my doctorate. Life was far from dull, but something essential was missing.

Everything changed in Darjeeling in northern India in 1967, when I met several remarkable human beings who, for me, exemplified what a fulfilled human life can be. These Tibetan masters, all of whom had just fled the Communist invasion of Tibet, radiated inner goodness, serenity and compassion. Returning from this first journey, I became aware that I'd found a reality that could inspire my whole life and give it direction and meaning. In 1972, I decided to move to Darjeeling, in the shadow of the Himalayas, to study with the great Tibetan masters Kangyur Rinpoche and Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche.

In India and then in Bhutan, I lived a beautiful and simple life. I came to understand that while some people may be naturally happier than others, their happiness is still vulnerable and incomplete; that achieving durable happiness as a way of being requires sustained effort in training the mind and developing qualities like inner peace, mindfulness and altruistic love.

Then one day in 1979, shortly after our monastery in Nepal had been equipped with a phone line, someone called me from France to ask if I would like to engage in a dialogue with my father, the philosopher Jean-François Revel. I said “of course,” but thought that I would never hear from the person again, as I did not believe that my father, a renowned agnostic, would ever want to dialogue with a Buddhist monk, even one who was his son. But to my surprise, he readily accepted and we spent a wonderful 10 days in Nepal, discussing many issues about the meaning of life. That was the end of my quiet, anonymous life and the beginning of a different way of interacting with the world. The book that followed, *The Monk and the Philosopher*, became a bestseller in France and was translated into 21 languages.

It dawned on me that much more money than I had ever envisioned having would be coming my way. Since I could not see myself acquiring an estate in France or somewhere else, it seemed to me that the most natural thing to do would be to donate all the proceedings and rights of that and subsequent books to helping others. The foundation I created for that purpose is now called Karuna-Shechen, and it implements and maintains humanitarian and educational projects throughout Asia.

Humanitarian projects have since become a central focus of my life and, with a few dedicated volunteer friends and generous benefactors, and under the inspiration of the abbot of my monastery, Rabjam Rinpoche, we have built and run clinics and schools in Tibet, Nepal and India where we treat about 100,000 patients a year and provide education to nearly 10,000 children. We have managed to do this spending barely 4 percent of our budget on overhead expenses.

My life has definitely become more hectic, but I have also discovered over the years that trying to transform oneself to better transform the world brings lasting fulfillment and, above all, the irreplaceable boon of altruism and compassion.

Imagine a ship that is sinking and needs all the available power to run the pumps to drain out the rising waters. The first class passengers refuse to cooperate because they feel hot and want to use the air-conditioner and other electrical appliances. The second-class passengers spend all their time trying to be upgraded to first-class status. The boat sinks and the passengers all drown. That is where the present approach to climate change is leading.

Whether people realize it or not, their actions can have disastrous effects — as the environmental changes in the Himalayas, the Arctic circle and many other places are showing us. The unbridled consumerism of our planet’s richest 5 percent is the greatest contributor to the climate change that will bring the greatest suffering to the

most destitute 25 percent, who will face the worst consequences. According to the U.S. Department of Energy, on average an Afghan produces 0.02 tons of CO<sub>2</sub> per year, a Nepalese and a Tanzanian 0.1, a Briton 10 tons, an American 19 and a Qatari 51 tons, which is 2,500 times more than an Afghan.

Unchecked consumerism operates on the premise that others are only instruments to be used and that the environment is a commodity. This attitude fosters unhappiness, selfishness and contempt upon other living beings and upon our environment. People are rarely motivated to change on behalf of something for their future and that of the next generation. They imagine, "Well, we'll deal with that when it comes." They resist the idea of giving up what they enjoy just for the sake of avoiding disastrous long-term effects. The future doesn't hurt – yet.

An altruistic society is one in which we do not care only for ourselves and our close relatives, but for the quality of life of all present members of society, while being mindfully concerned as well by the fate of coming generations.

In particular, we need to make significant progress concerning the way we treat animals, as objects of consumption and industrial products, not as living beings who strive for well-being and want to avoid suffering. Every year, more than 150 billion land animals are killed in the world for human consumption, as well as some 1.5 trillion sea animals. In rich countries, 99 percent of these land animals are raised and killed in industrial farms and live only a fraction of their life expectancy. In addition, according to United Nations and FAO reports on climate change, livestock production is responsible for a greater proportion of emissions (18 percent) of greenhouse gases than the entire global transportation sector. One solution may be to eat less meat!

As the Dalai Lama has often pointed out, interdependence is a central Buddhist idea that leads to a profound understanding of the nature of reality and to an awareness of global responsibility. Since all beings are interrelated and all, without exception, want to avoid suffering and achieve happiness, this understanding becomes the basis for altruism and compassion. This in turn naturally leads to the attitude and practice of nonviolence toward human beings and animals – and toward the environment.

*[Matthieu Ricard](#) was a scientist in cell genetics 40 years ago when he decided to live in the Himalayas and become a Buddhist monk. He is a photographer and the author of several books, including "Happiness: How to Cultivate Life's Most Important Skill." He lives in Nepal and has been involved in more than 100 humanitarian projects.*