Matthieu Ricard
Christophe André
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in search of wisdom

A Monk, a Philosopher, and a Psychiatrist on What Matters Most

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Trois amis en quête de sagesse

SOUNDS TRUE
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Preface

The house where we worked on this book is in the middle of a forest in the Dordogne. Not far away is a small road where we often went for walks between our discussion sessions. At a fork in the road is a wooden road sign indicating the direction of the nearby village, with these words on it, painted by hand: *Coeurjoie, voie sans issue* (literally in English, "Heartjoy: Dead End"). But we weren't swayed by this message. During the two weeks of work and camaraderie we shared, the joy in our hearts was far from being a dead end!

This is not intended to be a book of moral lessons but rather an opportunity to share our views and our experience with you. It seemed to us that our very different paths in life, our three "trades" — philosopher, monk, and psychiatrist — might perhaps lead to a fertile exchange of ideas on the big subjects that we human beings all must reflect on in considering how to lead our lives.

The three of us have known each other for a long time. Before meeting in person and eventually becoming friends, we were introduced to each other through our writings. Occasionally reuniting over a period of time, publicly or privately, we began to notice our common values and shared views, and the idea of doing a book together was born.

Each of us has a role in this book. Matthieu is the elder brother, generous and solid, who travels the world advocating for the causes he really cares about (humanitarian projects, Tibet, altruism). His intellectual and physical vigor and strength compel the admiration of his two mates. Alexandre is the younger brother, joyful and affectionate, with a brilliant, creative, poetic mind. He loves to laugh and make others laugh; he adores being pampered and is very loving. Christophe is the middle brother, calm. He is always trying to be helpful, to explain, to comfort his patients and his readers, and always happy to be in the company of the "companions for good," as we nicknamed ourselves.

The days of discussion and personal exchange that this book is made of took place in a very simple house on the valley of the Vézère. From there we could admire the rising winter sun as it emerged slowly from the mist and gradually

illuminated the countryside. It was a house where we were treated like princes. Our meals were taken care of — we were provided with succulent vegetarian cuisine — and so we had nothing to do but reflect and sit together by the fireside and have our discussions. To clear our heads, we took long walks in the natural surroundings, shared chatty meals with visiting friends, and visited the Buddhist community at the Chanteloube Study Center, whose temples, stupas, and retreat huts surrounded us.

We had a lot of laughs trying to hit on a title for this book. Here are some of the titles you escaped (though we hope you can catch a glimpse of what prompted them in the chapters that follow): The Three Men in a Hamlet; The Cobblers of Compassion; The Ego Terminators; The Lumberjacks of Altruism; The Plumbers of Gratitude; The Chatterboxes of Perigord; The Garbage Collectors of Me, Me, Me; The Earthworms Who Could Listen; The SWAT Team for the Optimization of Compassionate Activities.

During these days of work, we were surrounded by well-wishing friends, long term or of the moment, without whom we could not have carried out this project. Our three names are on the cover, but an entire band of fairies and angels bent kindly over the cradle of this book. At the end of the book, we express our thanks to these traveling companions of ours.

This book is made up of exchanges concerning the experiences and views of three friends whose life paths, personalities, and professions have led them to think about and work on what benefits human beings. But we don't pretend to be experts on the subject matter or models in accomplishing the work or overcoming the obstacles involved in it. Our discussions were on the themes we had chosen before our time together, and we decided each evening on the particular subject for the following day so we could sleep on it. Our wide-ranging discussions were recorded in their entirety, then transcribed. We and our editors worked on the transcriptions in order to give some form to these many hours of conversation and debate. We hope you will find in these pages something of the thoughtful and joyous atmosphere of our discussions and of their spontaneous spirit, but also a sense of the care we took to be coherent and communicative.

Now come and take your place beside us, in a regular chair or, more like us, on a well-worn and comfy couch. Other friends are here with us in the room who a little later on will regale us with their valuable comments on the discussion we've just had. The fire is crackling on the hearth, the breadth of the valley can be seen out the window, the winter sun is gradually fading, the tea steaming in our cups warms our hands and stimulates our brains. Alexandre takes on his impish air and tells a joke. Matthieu adjusts his glasses and claps his hands to bring the session to order, and Christophe has a last look at the notes he took last night in his little notebook (he knows that his tricky pals often turn to him to get the conversation

started).

So the discussion is about to get under way. You were all that was missing.

Introduction

MATTHIEU Clarifying our motivation here is a little bit like deciding what direction one is going to travel in when one gets up in the morning. Should one go north, south, west? In beginning these discussions, which are meant to supply the content of a book, it might be helpful to spend a little time asking ourselves what direction we want to give our discussions. First, we have to ask ourselves if our purpose is mainly to help other people or to pursue our own personal interests?

Our Motivation for This Book

CHRISTOPHE As far as I'm concerned, it seems to me that my motivation is threefold. First, I want to be helpful. I'm a doctor who writes psychological self-help books and who tries to help people with them. Knowing that I can be useful to other human beings without necessarily meeting them in the flesh gives me a great deal of pleasure. I don't think I've ever written a book with any other motivation than to do that. I think that's true of all three of us. I want to help my readers suffer less and develop further as human beings. Spending a couple of weeks with two friends I love and admire is a second motivation!

But I see a third aim for this book with three voices: to bring the image that people have of us more in line with who we actually are. We are sometimes wrongly perceived as sages, as though we have achieved a kind of knowledge and a way of being that makes us quite different from other people. Obviously, at least in my case, that is an illusion. In talking about our own journeys and the difficulties we have had in becoming better human beings, I think we can help our readers a little more by reminding them that we are not their superiors. It seems to me that it is comforting for readers to know that there are not two categories of people: those who float ten kilometers above their heads and those who are floundering around like themselves in the muck and mire of everyday life. All humans are alike: we have to work hard to be better.

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ALEXANDRE Beginning this exchange, I have the feeling of entering an immense spiritual laboratory to explore life's great areas of endeavor with you. Taking up this heady challenge in the company of you two happiness experts both gives me pleasure and intimidates me a little. Most of all, what is important to me is that our remarks be helpful. There are books that have saved my life. So I would be happy if our discussion — without presenting any recipes, because there aren't any — could encourage those who are struggling and transmit to them the desire we share to engage ever more deeply in the spiritual journey. Even the greatest spiritual progress is meaningless if it does not make us feel more closely connected with each other, if it does not bring us closer to our neighbor. And work on oneself can quickly begin to smell moldy if it does not open into genuine generosity. The ego is so talented and so twisted that it appropriates everything, or almost. There is certainly such a thing as spiritual egotism. If we forget about others, we inevitably end up crashing and burning ourselves; we turn the very means that could save us into a trap. That is why it is of the utmost importance that we stay free from this pitfall along the way. Friendship heals a lot of ills; it gives us wings and it comforts us. Friendship is what initiated our coming together. It is what makes ever deeper the bonds that unite us, which nothing can demolish. It is essential never to forget that we are all shipmates, sailing on the same ship. To cross the ocean of suffering we have to work together. It is to this dynamic of solidarity that I would like to dedicate this book.

MATTHIEU This book was born, to begin with, from our friendship and our recurrent desire to spend a few days together in open conversation about the subjects that we hold most dear. The idea here is not simply to lump our mental fabrications together in one place in order to produce yet another book. There are people who get a kick out of inventing new concepts and then promoting them as much as possible. But our aim here is to share what we have learned from our masters, spiritual and otherwise; from our studies; and from our practice, meditative or therapeutic.

As far as I'm concerned, it is only due to the wisdom and kindness of my spiritual masters that I have been able to transform myself even a little bit and place myself at the service of others. Now it is my turn to attempt to share what they have taught me, doing my very best always not to betray, distort, or dilute their message.

ALEXANDRE There is only one really urgent thing, and that is to engage fully in

one's practice, to cultivate in oneself a burning desire to make progress, and to realize that we are capable of escaping from the prison of our conceptual mind. People can theorize all they want about practice, but what really counts is living it day by day. I was attending a conference for members of a popular movement that protests the social injustice prevailing in today's world. But I soon found myself protesting against the protesters. After all the beautiful speeches, I found myself standing alone in the pouring rain and had to make my way home on foot. It is meaningless to condemn the system, to blame everything on the world. What really matters is deeds, actually doing something to help. We shouldn't hesitate to follow Nietzsche's advice for the best way to start our day. The moment we wake up we should ask ourselves if we can make "at least one person happy" today. Everything begins with one's "neighbor," with "the first person who comes along," as Christian Bobin puts it. How can I be wholeheartedly open toward the person I run into on the street or the people I rub shoulders with every day? How can I genuinely love a person who gets on my nerves?

CHRISTOPHE We might all be like those protesters who make speeches about altruism and don't help you get to the station, because we're caught up in our concepts, because as soon as the conference is over we're right back into our own problems and concerns. Fundamentally, the essential message is not "Altruism is a beautiful thing" but rather "What can I do for other people right now, today?" A concept by itself doesn't cure anything. It might be comforting, illuminating, satisfying, but sooner or later the cure always has to come through action; it has to come through the body. It's through trial and error in real circumstances that we finally find out if an idea has power and meaning. It's when we put it into practice that we can learn what the consequences are for ourselves and other people.

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MATTHIEU The point you are making is right at the heart of Buddhism. We say that the value and sense of any teaching is measured by the extent to which it becomes an integral part of oneself. All the rest is just pointless. Getting a lot of prescriptions from the doctor without following the treatment he prescribes does nothing for your health. Ideas are useful for clarifying our thinking, for helping us know where we're going, for determining the principles of our actions, but if we don't put them into practice, they're not good for anything.

There's another important question that is worth clarifying. It again has to do with our motivation here and the possible use of this book. It's about the ambiguity of what is known as *personal development* or *self-help*. If this development takes place solely within the bubble of our ego, it will feed the ego, polish it, ornament it with reassuring ideas, and so on. But all this will be within a very limited and narrow framework, and it will totally miss what we are aiming for — because the only way to achieve fulfillment is through compassion and openness toward others. At all costs, we must avoid having the exercises of mindfulness and meditation become havens where we can hang out full-time in the world of ego. As Alexandre often says, "The inside of the bubble of ego, it feels rather stuffy." Either you try to transform yourself for the sake of serving others and everybody wins, or you stay inside the bubble of ego and everybody loses. Because by desperately trying to be happy just for your own sake, you don't help others or yourself.

CHRISTOPHE I have the sense that the dimension in which my development is happening is a little different from the one you two are working in. I'm a caregiver who has to deal with the expectations and problems of my patients, who often lack self-esteem. As a result, I tend to have a less critical view on this question of ego. In my work, I find that the first step often consists in comforting the ego, restoring it, reinforcing it. Many people have a relationship with themselves that is characterized by self-hate. It seems to me I have to take a two-step approach. If I start by encouraging them to be concerned for others, that will certainly do them some good but I won't have done my work in the right order. I do know that eventually you have to let go of the focus on self, or at least you have to let go of the excessive aspect of this self-centered interest. But you mustn't do this too fast. I see it this way all the more because in my own development, this is the way I was able to make progress.

There's something else that has always obsessed me in my practice. What is known as "the self-disclosure of the therapist" occurs at the moment where the caregiver, in coming face-to-face with the suffering of the other, speaks a little of his own suffering. And by the way, this is the approach we are taking in this book. This phenomenon has been studied and theorized about because it's a powerful factor, like a condiment in cooking. Without it, a therapeutic relationship is too dull and bland, but with it, a sense of complicity and humanity comes into play. What does self-disclosure consist of in a therapeutic relationship? At a certain point, the caregiver hears in his patient a suffering that echoes a suffering he has experienced himself. And he decides to talk to his patient about some of what he has gone through himself because that might help the patient. The patient realizes that he or she is not alone. This self-disclosure has to be dispensed in very small

doses. There can be no question of filling the whole space of the consultation with our own story, no question of trying to "relativize" the patient, because you don't want to devalue the patient's right to suffer. You just want to allow the patient, through his suffering, to join the vast group of humans around him. Which reminds me of another phrase of Christian Bobin's, in his book *The Ruins of Heaven*: "Whoever you're looking at, know that that person has been through hell several times." When they come to see us, patients are in the midst of going through hell. They feel alone and lost. Knowing that others have also been down the road of suffering can sometimes bring them solace and relief.

Our Paths

ALEXANDRE The idea of a calling is very liberating. It can serve as a compass on days where everything is going badly, as an encouragement to respond once more to the deepest summons of our lives. In times of trial as in times of joy, one must continually ask oneself, "What is my existence calling me to, here and now?" As for me, I think life has entrusted me with three vocations. First, my disability, which I have to experience fully. Infirmity, far from being a burden, can become a fabulous practice ground. If I consider it purely as an onerous load, I might as well put a bullet in my head. From that point of view, I'm better off looking at it as a possible path to wisdom. But be careful — it's not suffering that makes us grow but rather what we make of it. I distrust like the plague any talk that is too quick to justify suffering. Such talk forgets that pain can bring bitterness; it can kill a heart. Although it doesn't mean that I accept my disability entirely, once and for all, nonetheless, some days I discover in this calamity a chance to become more joyful and more free. And I see clearly that without a spiritual practice, I'm a lost cause. In short, my disability makes me feel the urgent need to convert on the spot and take refuge in the fundamental ground of all grounds, far beyond labels and appearances, and enter a new learning situation every day.

The profession of writer is also a path, an answer to a summons. This passion, this need, made itself felt very early on. In my time of struggle, I realized that one day I would have to bear witness to the legacy bequeathed to me by my comrades in misfortune. They transmitted to me a taste for what is essential: the desire to improve, the thirst for unconditional joy, and the experience of solidarity with others. At the institution for the disabled where I grew up and spent seventeen years of my life, the path of bearing witness was born. Without doubt it was a survival mechanism, but a very fertile and creative one. In my suffering I felt with all my being that I had to make something of it.

In times of trial as in times of joy, one must continually ask oneself, "What is my existence calling me to, here and now?"

Lastly, the path of being a father and a husband calls on me to unlearn a great deal, to heal from fear, from reflexive responses, from deficiencies, and always to move forward and improve.

These three life paths are with me constantly, hour by hour, particularly when things are difficult — that is to say, often. They go beyond the notion of a personal objective that ego should be trying desperately to accomplish. Here there is no promotion in rank to be won — it's just a matter of going forward and loving ever more deeply, without clinging to any fixed reference point. Someone who confines himself to a particular identity will never know an end to suffering. If, for example, I persuade myself that my happiness depends on being a writer, the day that I can't write anymore, I will lose my joy.

At present I draw my nourishment from the great spiritual traditions, in particular from the practice of Zen and from a life of prayer. These enable me to experience more profoundly the three challenges to which life has summoned me.

Everything began from being disabled at birth. All it took was a misplaced umbilical cord to make me cerebrally motor-incapacitated for life. From the age of three, I grew up in a special institution, a rough and raw school of life. The main thing I discovered there — and it was a very heavy direct impression — was how precarious our condition is. Since then, I have been saddled with a feeling of insecurity and a fear of being abandoned, no doubt because of the wee-bit overdramatic beginning of my career in life and because of being separated from my parents. What this institutional life left me with was a sense of wonder with regard to the world and the need to keep moving forward.

Along with my companions in misfortune, some of whom were very seriously disabled, I also had to deal with death. One of my best friends, Trissia, was a hydrocephalic. When I was eight, one of my teachers took me aside and said, "Go take a look at Trissia. She's down at the end of the hall; look and see how beautiful she is." I went into the dimly lit room and saw my comrade lying in a coffin. I hadn't even known she was sick. This premature encounter with death and suffering both made me grow up and traumatized me. I will never forget this little girl lying there with her arms crossed as though she was praying. In that gloomy room I experienced a very basic call, which oriented me toward the spiritual life. I felt in my flesh that without an inner quest, I would be a total loss, finished.

The struggle to get into a so-called normal school was a long one. I had flunked the psychomotor tests. I wasn't fast enough. But thanks to my parents' perseverance, I was finally able to get a place in a school. The reason I insist on everyone's right to be included is precisely because I escaped being excluded by

the skin of my teeth. When I was allowed to leave the institution, it was like landing on another planet. I knew nothing of the social codes: who I should kiss, who I should shake hands with. I'm still learning this social game.

From my childhood I've retained a certain sense of the tragic as well as a persistent naiveté. Through being in the company of people who couldn't talk, I learned the sweetness of a friendly gesture, a smile, a glance. It took me a long time to find my ground in society and to reconcile myself to adapt to it. I hugged the first girl I fell in love with so hard that her reaction still upsets me today: "Hey, what's your problem!" This first contact came very close to condemning me to a life of holding back. What brought us joy at the institute was just the opposite of that — point-blank transparency. When we were happy, we said so. When we were sad, we also made that clear. But in the outer world, I soon discovered, we frequently have to mask our feelings, disguise our intentions. Lesson number one was not to let everything show.

From a very young age, being in the company of helpless people transmitted to me a sense of solidarity. Some people say that human beings are bad, selfish, that they think of nothing but themselves. That is exactly the opposite of what I experienced with my comrades in misfortune. What we had together was natural solidarity, spontaneous compassion, a wish to find our way forward together. In a word, it was a living altruism. Face to face with a merciless destiny, we stood shoulder to shoulder. I want to take this idea that humans are selfish by nature and wring its neck. In your book *Altruism*, Matthieu, you quote a passage from the correspondence of the father of psychoanalysis that makes me laugh. In that passage he says that he has found very little "goodness" in people, that for the most part they're pretty much scum. But what I've found is the opposite. I've found naked goodness, devoid of self-interest, in the heart of many practitioners and especially in children. Why have we let ourselves unlearn this innocence?

It's true that the spectacle of everyday life and the most rudimentary self-observation reveal a thousand faults, such as jealousy, bad-mouthing, mockery. These are defects that are hard to root out. But all of that isn't enough to make me lose my belief in the grandeur of being human. That just means that we must double our efforts to reunite with the fundamental ground of all grounds, the profound nature of our being that is beyond these emotional mechanisms.

As I went along my way, one encounter, one lucky bump in the road, gave me a decisive shock and made me leave the beaten path. One day I asked the priest at the institute, "Why are there disabled people? Why, if God exists, does he abandon us here, far from our parents?" Father Morand had the decency not to try to placate me with some pat explanation where there really wasn't any. The goodness of this man, who had devoted his life to others, blew my mind and won me over. I remember his words to me: "You are a philosopher; you are like

Socrates." That started me off. Even though nobody at the school took much interest in the nature of the mind, I ran out and bought books on Plato and Socrates. I found in them an endless supply of healing content and, more than anything, an invitation to live better rather than to live perfectly. The adventure could begin. A defenseless teenager started out on the road to improvement and dared to explore the depths of the inner dimension. Before that, I sought happiness only on the outside. I took refuge in the hope of a better life but without changing the way I looked at the world. The barefoot philosopher of Athens brought me a cure, spurred me on, gave me a therapy for the soul. From then on I had the desire to enter into philosophy the way one enters priestly orders. That was the only step I could take.

Along with being disabled, it was the lack of affection that had the heaviest lasting effects. Too many teachers have seen as their duty to preserve a supposedly therapeutic distance that seems to preclude all human warmth. I found myself surrounded by nuns who were rather on the cold side. They smelled idolatry everywhere, and when I said that I adored cake, they dryly replied, "One adores only God." Fortunately Father Morand made up for that. His extreme goodness and his great erudition gave me a taste for the spiritual life. His good sense, his unreserved generosity, and his wisdom touched me deeply.

He preached by example, and thus he converted me to the way of philosophy. During the war, he had provided shelter to a Jewish family. One day he told me this story. In the distance he saw coming a car belonging to the gestapo. Without hesitating, he turned his house upside down. He broke the plates, tore the clothes out of the wardrobes, and more. When the SS people arrived, he simply told them, "Your colleagues have just been here. They ransacked everything. Just look at the mess they made."

In short, this was a man of God, and it is to him that I owe my passion for philosophy. It took me quite a while to realize that wisdom is rooted in an art of living, in spiritual exercises that are practiced in the midst of daily life. Very soon I experienced the rather bitter fact that philosophy doesn't heal everything, at least not in my case. No matter how much I read and reread Aristotle, Leibniz, Spinoza, Nietzsche, and the rest, my negative emotions still gave me no peace. Along the way, I met the Zen master Jacques Castermane. Thanks to him, I experienced the peace that was already there in the fundamental ground of all grounds, and I learned that the body, far from being an obstacle to it, could lead you there.

At that point it became absolutely necessary for me to have a spiritual father who was both a Zen master and a Catholic priest — to explore further the faith in God that had always been with me as well as meditation. Thus my wife and I, and our three children, moved to Seoul to be initiated into the school of detachment

and liberation. The diagnosis had become clear: I had lost the joy of my childhood, that simplicity, the spontaneity I had had then. My apprenticeship in South Korea pretty well stripped me to the bone. Far from the protective super-papa that my psyche was craving, what I found was an authentic spiritual master who showed me day after day that unconditional love was beyond anything I could imagine. He taught me to love more freely — basically, to leave my prison. Since then, I have been committed to meditating an hour a day. Devoting body and soul to practice is what really saves us. We are masters of very little in our lives, and that is why it is necessary to give ourselves over without reservation to the spiritual life that sets us free, one step at a time.

> Wisdom is rooted in an art of living, in spiritual exercises that are practiced in the midst of daily life.

Every day I rediscover with joy what really liberates us: contact with others and devotion to spiritual practice. Thanks to my master and my family, along with Bernard Campan, Joachim, Romina, Christophe, Matthieu, and so many others, I can give myself over to my vocations and make progress in the job of being human. Oh yes, a thousand helping hands reaching out to me every day enable me to live with my wounds. In the end, I am the opposite of the so-called self-made man. Without my companions in the good, I wouldn't be able to get around in Seoul. From moment to moment, I have to die and be reborn, and unlearn a great deal.

When I come to the point of cursing my disability, I remember the infinitely compassionate words of my master, which wake me up on the spot: "Bless obstacles; without this disability and these repeated tortures, you would probably be the king of imbeciles." Such electric shocks teach me to stop demonizing that which at first glance seems to hinder me.

> From moment to moment, I have to die and be reborn, and unlearn a great deal.

CHRISTOPHE I very much like the three vocations you talked about — father, disabled person, and author. For me too, being a father has been a revelation and a motivation for further development. I wanted to provide the best possible example for my daughters, and I saw right away that that was going to take a lot of work! My disability is simply being structurally and psychologically an anxious person, very much inclined toward unhappiness. My efforts not to slide down that slippery slope are a constant factor in my everyday life. As for the vocation of

author, basically it is an extension of my vocation as caregiver. I very much like to help, to comfort, and to heal. When I read other people's books — yours, Alexandre, Matthieu's, Christian Bobin's, and those of many other authors — I find that I am very sensitive to whether or not they have a therapeutic or enlightening aspect. I assess in my head the amount of good this is going to do the reader. As I see it, there are two kinds of books: those that provide help and those that are only there to entertain.

My path? I was not born completely equipped to be a caregiver or to talk about suffering. I encountered all kinds of obstacles — infinitely smaller ones than yours, Alex. For a whole slew of reasons, I am a person who is profoundly ill at ease, pessimistic, and introverted as well. I really only feel capable of thinking when I am by myself. At the same time, I need other people. I often say that I am a gregarious loner. Whenever I have been able to talk about this dimension of fragility in my books and make clear how important it is for me to work on it, I think it has brought some comfort to my readers, because it has made them see that having to work on this dimension is the lot of every human being. My big fear is to be idealized by my readers. Although the people I'm close to might like me, occasionally admire some of the ways I do things, they are also aware of my limitations. That is why I often talk about myself in my books. It's not narcissism; it's something I do to expose the efforts I have to make in life.

It was a matter of good luck that I ended up studying medicine and not becoming an engineer. When I was little, since I was a good student, I was directed toward scientific studies. And like all my friends from that time, I dreamed of building rockets or big buildings. At the last minute, I read Freud, who was part of the philosophy program. His writings completely carried me away, and I decided to become a psychiatrist. Not a psychologist, but a psychiatrist — which resulted in my studying medicine and coming to the realization that I really enjoyed being a caregiver. Being able to help and comfort people brought me great happiness. This was all the more a revelation for me because in my student days, I had without doubt reached the height of egotism. I had never been taught to be altruistic, and all I wanted to do was chase girls and party. Studying medicine little by little brought me in contact with real suffering, awful things. It taught me the importance of being there for people who are suffering. I realized that I had chosen the right profession because, along with the sadness I felt at the woes of my patients, being able to give them some relief made me happy and gave a meaning to my life that my other activities failed to bring. Giving care and comfort made me feel really good. Were my altruistic motivations ultimately selfish because they made me feel good? I thought so for a long time, and I was ashamed of this cloaked selfishness. Much later, Matthieu came along and opened my eyes. He showed me that the sense of well-being that comes from caring for

others was one of the benefits of altruism, one that comes as a bonus. It is a fringe benefit of altruism that isn't necessarily the primary motivation for it.

After studying medicine, I continued on to psychiatry. I saw right away that psychoanalysis, which at that time was the dominant force in our discipline, was not for me. It required assuming a posture of detachment with which I was unhappy and uncomfortable. It made me feel limited in my spontaneity, constrained to assuming a distance that seemed to me inadequate in the face of people's suffering. As with the caregivers in your institute, Alexandre, who took it to be their duty to refrain from having an emotional relationship with the children under their supervision, it was then thought that psychiatric treatment was more effective if it was contained, marked by a sense of therapeutic distance. We were denied the immense power of emotion, compassion, empathy. We ignored emotion or tamped it down. I was tremendously uneasy with this approach of being distant with patients, not holding their hands, not giving them advice. I said to myself, "You're not meant to be a psychiatrist." I turned instead to surgery, emergency medicine, and obstetrics. I liked those disciplines too, but psychiatry continued to attract me. I came back to it by another route. I left the academic scene. I gave up any ambition to land a career position in the hospital hierarchy, and I began to explore my interests. I trained in hypnosis and in family therapy. I met my master in psychiatry, Lucien Millet, who was what was known as a humanist psychiatrist. With him and with an alternative approach to the discipline, I felt like a fish in water. He was kind to his patients; he called them by their first names, took an interest in their lives, and tried to involve patients' families rather than keep them at a distance. He practiced psychiatry the way I felt it should be practiced — with compassion and care for others. I began to feel at home. I acquired training in the behavioral approach to psychiatry that was the countercurrent to Lacanian psychoanalysis. In the behavioral approach, we teach and offer friendship. We explain to our patients how their problems are produced and what they have to do to counter them. We are warm toward them and we take an interest. We also ask difficult things of them. We ask them to confront their fears and anxieties. Everything I did with my patients I drew from myself — my own problems, anxieties, timidity.

When I discovered positive psychology, again I took full advantage of it to counter my tendencies toward negativity, pessimism, and unhappiness. Then I encountered meditation, and this was a whole new thing for me once again.

In working with my patients, I was rowing along with them in the same boat. They never knew this, but often I felt tremendous gratitude after these sessions. Bringing them to an understanding about something in themselves made it possible for me to understand something in myself. The patients were my teachers. I remember roughly ten of them who transformed my life without their

knowing it.

When you and I met, Alexandre, you shared with me the idea of *progredientes*, a Latin word referring to people who are working on themselves. You even had a group at one time with that name, "The Progredientes." This is the process I am engaged in with my whole life — to improve, develop, and progress — and part of my work is to explain this approach to my patients and encourage them to adopt it.

It took me a long time to understand what Matthieu has been talking about all along: the supreme importance of altruistic motivation as opposed to self-centered motivation. I was so shaky that if it hadn't been for my medical career, my life probably would have taken a bad turn. I might have become a good engineer but a bad human being. And I think I could never have taken in this altruistic message in any kind of deep and meaningful way unless I had become a father and a doctor and been tenderized by my children and my patients. Since that took a fair amount of time for me, I am always careful to feel where my patients are with regard to this possibility and to show them this direction as something in the distance they can aspire to, without pressuring them to do anything they are not yet fully capable of. I encourage them to see, for example, that small acts of altruism can allow them to think less about their own suffering. But I never present this to them as a saving grace. I always forgive my patients for being too attached to their battered egos, and I push them to forgive themselves for their mistakes and their slowness. That is the path I have traveled myself.

MATTHIEU What can I say after all those beautiful words?

As a boy and as a teenager, I was neither better nor worse than the others. I had the reputation of being a little cold — as Alexandre also said of me at the beginning of our relationship. I was not very outgoing. Starting in my adolescence, I became involved in writings on spirituality under the influence of my mother Yahne Le Toumelin, and her brother Jacques-Yves Le Toumelin, a solo sailor who during his sea voyages read a lot about Sufism, Vedanta, and the other spiritual paths, especially through the books of René Guénon. We had a circle of friends who talked a lot about those things. I also read a number of books on spirituality — nothing very practical. I was raised in a secular environment. I wanted to be a doctor, even a surgeon. But I listened to the advice of my dear father, who said, "The world is full of doctors. Research is the future." I was rather good in physics, so I chose to study physics. I wasn't a very good student. Then my father told me, "Biology is the future." So I studied biology. Through a fortunate turn of circumstances, I got into the Pasteur Institute, in François Jacob's lab, and I wrote a thesis on cell division.

It so happened that just before I started at the Pasteur Institute, I saw some

documentary films, while they were still in the process of being made, by Arnaud Desjardins about great Tibetan masters who had fled from the Chinese invasion. I was twenty years old, and suddenly everything changed. I realized that this was something more than the mere writings of Meister Eckhart, Ibn Arabi, Ramana Maharshi, the Desert Fathers, or other people who were long gone. These people were still alive. Over there, there were still living beings like Socrates or Francis of Assisi, and there seemed to be something exceptional about them compared to the people I had met up to that point. Arnaud Desjardins and another friend, Dr. Frédéric Leboyer, who had just seen them in person, showed me photos. They told me, "The one who made the biggest impression on us is that one — Kangyur Rinpoche, who lives in Darjeeling." I decided to go meet him.

My father had had the excellent idea of having me taught classical Greek, Latin, and German. He said I would end up learning English anyway. So I set out for Darjeeling armed with a pocket English dictionary. When I got there, I was immediately able to see Kangyur Rinpoche. He became my teacher, not just because he was the first one I met, but because he was the one who touched me most deeply. During the same trip, I met other teachers, but I spent most of my time with Kangyur Rinpoche. I spent three weeks sitting at his feet without saying much. I couldn't speak English and still less Tibetan. But I had before me the exemplar, not of a particular kind of knowledge nor of an exceptional skill — for example, that of a piano virtuoso — but simply of the best thing that could happen to a human being. He was nothing like people I'd known before. It was his way of being, his presence, his kindness, his wisdom, that inspired me the most deeply.

I returned to France, where I continued with my thesis. But every year between 1967 and 1972 I went back to Darjeeling — seven times altogether. At some point I said to myself, "When I'm at the Pasteur Institute, I mainly think about being in the Himalayas; and when I'm in the Himalayas, I don't think about the Pasteur Institute at all. I have to make up my mind!" So instead of going to the United States to do postdoctoral work as François Jacob wanted me to, I studied Buddhism in the Himalayas! I stayed there pretty much without a break from 1972 to 1997. I had almost no contact with the West. I didn't read a single book in French during this whole period. No newspapers and no radio either. Moreover, there is still a gap in my knowledge regarding the international events that took place during that time. And because I neglected the French language a bit too much, I was hindered when it came to writing books. For twenty-five years I worked on my Tibetan and practiced the Buddhist path.

Regarding the three situations you mentioned — being a father, a disabled person, and an author — a father I have never been. Nevertheless, I have taken an interest in children through Karuna-Shechen, a humanitarian organization I founded with a group of friends. At present, it is responsible for educating more

than 25,000 children in schools; and every year it cares for 140,000 patients in the health centers it has had built.

As for being disabled, without wishing to stretch the meaning inappropriately, it is clear to me that any person who is not completely enlightened is disabled. As long as one still has a trace of malice, greed, or jealousy, and one does not feel boundless compassion toward others, one is disabled. Whether the goal is the happiness you talked about or the altruism to which I aspire, I am perfectly aware of the mixture of shadow and light that still exists in me and of the immense progress I still have to make. I know that sometimes I am far from being perfectly compassionate. I have thoughts and I say things that I can only regard reproachfully when I measure them against the yardstick of altruism. But I keep with me the profound wish to remedy this and to transform myself a lot further still. That's what counts, and that's the direction I want to go in.

My return to the West was triggered by the dialogue I had with my father, which we turned into a book, *The Monk and the Philosopher*. I have no vocation to be an author. I have translated Tibetan texts, but I am not particularly talented as a writer. When that dialogue was proposed, I went to see the abbot of the monastery I live in, Rabjam Rinpoche (the grandson of Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, my second master, who died in 1991). I said to him, "Here's what I'm being asked to do. Frankly I can't see what benefit there could be in spending ten days in idle talk." To my surprise, he replied, "Oh yes, yes, you should do it." So it was partly because of his advice that I accepted. Without that, I would have continued on the same track. I would have stayed in the Himalayas practicing and translating texts. Obviously this brought about a big change. One day I was a total unknown, the next, having appeared over and again on television, people were coming up to me in the street wanting to offer me a lift or chat for a few minutes. On top of that, dressed as I am in a monk's habit, I can be spotted very easily. That outfit is like a walking flag.

Without wishing to stretch the meaning inappropriately, it is clear to me that any person who is not completely enlightened is disabled.

So why should I have gone on like that? Wouldn't it have been better to stay in my retreat and try to become a better human being so that later on I could put myself at the service of others once and for all? That being the ideal, it shouldn't have seemed like a good idea to fiddle around and harvest the wheat while it was still just grass. However, circumstances led to my getting involved in all kinds of activities, notably with the Karuna-Shechen Association, which up to the present day has completed over two hundred humanitarian projects. I think the book we are working on here will be helpful. People tell us that our books help them in life.

That's always somewhat surprising, but at the same time it's comforting.

I travel back and forth between the East and the West, between a purely traditional contemplative life and a life of interaction with the modern world with all the challenges that that involves. I try to find friends who want to do good, the people who are most likely to advance the cause of altruism that is dear to me. As for science, I have returned to that through my collaboration with neuroscientists. I never could have imagined that I would find myself in a laboratory again thirty-five years after having left the Pasteur Institute. There are numerous other areas — politics, economics, the environment — where we can attempt to find common ground, with the idea that a hundred blades of grass, each by itself, cannot accomplish much, but if you put them together to make a broom, you can do some housekeeping. By housekeeping, I mean trying to remove the obstacles to a better world, to a more just humanity, doing away with inequalities, progressing toward a more altruistic view of the world, helping people find meaning in their lives, contributing to the welfare of society. When you meet people with whom you feel you share a common outlook and with whom you can knit the bonds of friendship, as has happened with you two, you cannot help but think that together we can do more than we each could alone. We can learn from each other, enrich our thought, and find better ways to help others.

Now as to being a writer, I really am not one. Mainly what inspires me is ideas. I am sometimes asked if I have a mission in the West. None whatsoever. No particular agenda. When I'm asked on television, "So, in the end, what are you doing here?" My answer is, "You asked me to come, so I came. But if you don't invite me, I won't have lost or gained a thing." If I can share some ideas, I am happy to do so. If not, there's nothing I would like better than to stay in retreat. I'm not going to keep saying to myself, "So what is your next book going to be?" Time is precious, and I have explored the subjects that interest me the most. After altruism, there is no other big subject matter that has to be dealt with. However, if together we can produce something that brings a further dimension, something beyond what each of us could do on his own, I will be very happy about it.

1

What Are Our Deepest Aspirations?

MATTHIEU What really counts in life? What can we identify in our deepest selves that is essential? There must be something within us, something that motivates us, a direction that manifests and gives meaning to each step we take. Living is not being content with roaming around aimlessly at the whim of chance encounters and circumstances, just getting through each day as best we can. I don't mean that we have to decide when we get up in the morning that we are going to change the world, but it seems we need to see a certain continuity, a line of progress toward what we want to accomplish in our lives. Some people don't like the idea of perpetual self-development. Nonetheless, it is possible to work on ourselves month after month, year after year, not to satisfy our ego but to become a better person, a more altruistic and wiser person. You can't make a decision all at once to become 100 percent devoted to the service of others. You have to take the time that is needed to acquire the capacity to achieve this ideal.

What Motivates Us

ALEXANDRE Along with the wholesome aspirations that invite us to go forward and constantly improve, we have a whole host of egotistical ambitions that alienate us from ourselves and make us suffer. In his *Ethics*, Spinoza speaks of suitable desires (those which arise from the fundamental ground of things, that flow from our basic nature) and unsuitable desires, which we import from *outside* of us. Advertising, which arouses a thousand cravings, provides the perfect example. Distinguishing within oneself what is connected with suitable desire from what is not is a very liberating exercise. If I look at the expectations that shape our lives, I immediately flush out of its hiding place a fierce need to fit into the mold, to do everything possible, to the point of exhaustion, to imitate others.

Thanks to a certain ascesis, to spiritual exercises, I am beginning to glimpse the influences, the mechanisms, that weigh on me. It's more or less a game of considering every desire that goes through one's mind and seeing what its origin is. Freedom can be found in this exercise, and every moment of life can become the occasion for liberation — because we are not born free, we become free.

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CHRISTOPHE At the moment, the question of my deepest aspiration makes me feel a bit ill at ease. For a long time it seemed to me that I was more or less on a path aimed at survival, trying to go in the direction that meant the least suffering for me, while at the same time trying hard not to make others suffer either. It was more an intuitive principle that guided my way of being than an aspiration or a conscious ideal. That being the case, it is rather logical that I became a doctor, since, fundamentally, this business of lessening the suffering of others put me in a kind of social position that corresponded with what I unconsciously was after. With time, I am becoming capable of more discernment. For a long time my life was a quest for security. I wanted my family not to be in material need, a fear I probably inherited from my parents, who came from poor circumstances. I wanted to protect those close to me and probably to protect myself. But these were not very noble aspirations, and doubtless the profession of doctor helped me go beyond this sole motivation. Today it is very difficult for me to say that my profound aspiration is really and only to help others suffer less. I don't have the ability to see whether this motivation comes from myself or from the outside, but it's important to me that I don't pass myself off as some kind of a pseudosaint.

ALEXANDRE Humans have a mysterious ability to deceive themselves and supply the necessary delusions. It is super-honest to recognize that our desires are not always very clear-cut, and sometimes, with the pretext of saving others, we are mainly seeking recognition and gratitude, something to bind our wounds with. A whole host of influences shape our actions and our behavior, and even the way we view the world. If I look back over the path I've traveled, I see many moments in which, while thinking myself completely free, I was only deluding myself. Looking more closely at my interest in the spiritual life, the main thing I discover is an immense fear of suffering. In the beginning I was a bit like a shipwreck survivor trying to get hold of a life preserver. Over the course of time, this mainly self-centered motivation has become more diffuse, and I am beginning to open myself toward others.

MATTHIEU When I was at the Pasteur Institute, I had a classmate, Ben Shapiro, with whom I shared a desk, and from time to time we'd talk about life. We didn't know what we really wanted to do in life, but we knew what we didn't want: a lukewarm existence that was without meaning or use.

It goes without saying that the primary goal of every person is to stay alive. There are moments or particular places in the world where this is even the absolute priority, because people have to face war, famine, epidemics, and natural catastrophes. But when we don't feel immediately threatened, even though the fact of impermanence is always there and we never know what is going to happen tomorrow, we have to make up our minds to not just kill time and waste our lives. We must have some growth, some form of accomplishment in our sights. Personally, my own thoughts were something like, "Being happy, what's that? Having pleasurable experiences? Finding more profound satisfaction? Understanding how my mind works? Learning how to relate with other people better?" For me it comes down to asking myself, "What matters the most in my life?" Also, like Alexandre, I believe in asking which desires come from the deepest part of me and which come to me from the outside, which are imposed on me or insidiously suggested, as is the case with the glittering come-ons of consumer society. I remember one of my Tibetan teachers saying to me one day in Times Square in New York, in the midst of the neon signs constantly demanding to be looked at, "They're trying to steal my mind!"

At any given moment, independent of any external influence, we have to be able to ask ourselves, "What is really worthwhile? What will make it possible for me to think at the end of the year that I didn't waste my time?" We can ask ourselves this question regularly. And when twenty years later we look back, we should have the same feeling as a farmer who has done his best to cultivate his fields. Even if things don't always happen as we hope they will, we should still be able to say, "I have no regrets, because I did my best within the limits of my ability."

CHRISTOPHE When Patrick Modiano received the Nobel Prize in Literature, in his acceptance speech, he said in effect, "I was quite surprised, in reading the articles about me, that people outside me saw some coherence in my work; whereas as the author, I was like someone driving his car at night who doesn't see beyond the beams of his headlights. His goal is just to stay on the road, not to go over the speed limit, and not to run over any deer that might cross the road." That's pretty much the way I see the way I function myself — do the best you can for others and do them and yourself the least possible harm. Beyond that, it seems to me that at certain crossroads I have made deliberate choices about which way to go: It was not just chance that made me turn left or right; for me it had nothing

to do with some ancient vision or any worked-out and structured life plan.

The Path and the Goal

MATTHIEU I remember meeting in Canada a group of young people who were just graduating from university. For six months they had been seeing professional counselors and filling out questionnaires. No stone had been left unturned to help them find their direction. But how can you find direction in your life by filling out questionnaires and following the advice of people you hardly know? My own advice to them was, "Why not go sit by some lakeside by yourself or with someone you really like? Stop filling out questionnaires, turn off your computer, and ask yourself what you really want to do in this life; let the answer come from deep inside you."

The length of the journey and its difficulties are not a problem.

The length of the journey and its difficulties are not a problem. When you travel in the Himalayas, things are not always easy. Sometimes the weather is beautiful; sometimes it's horrid. The landscapes might be sublime, but you could also find your way blocked by a ravine, or you could find yourself wading through a marshy jungle at the bottom of a tropical valley. Nevertheless, every step brings us closer to the place we want to go, and that is an inspiration. By the way, the definition of perseverance, one of the six "perfections" of Buddhism, or *paramitas*, that you are studying in Korea, Alexandre, is "the joy of doing good." "Good" here is not simply a good action; it is something that inspires us deeply. It is joy in the form of effort. Even if the journey is sometimes hard, our enthusiasm lasts if we keep making progress toward the place where we really want to go. On the other hand, if we stray and lose our reference point, we lose courage. Disorientation and a feeling of helplessness are added to fatigue. We lose our will to keep walking and we just sit there, beaten and in despair. That is why the direction we choose in life plays such an important role.

Psychologists of happiness, such as Daniel Gilbert, say that effort itself is what brings satisfaction. Once we have attained the goal, we are a little bit disappointed. In a discussion I was having with him, I put it this way: "If, for example, I want a Maserati, I'm going to be very excited about it and basically 'happy' while I make a thousand efforts to make the money I need for it. But once I have my car, I'll be afraid it's going to get scratched or stolen, and in the end it won't bring me the happiness I was counting on." As long as there is confusion about what ultimately brings happiness, it's a fact that you're going to be

disappointed once you achieve your goal. But if the goal is a worthwhile one, such as, for example, if I want to cultivate wisdom or altruistic love, both the path *and* the goal will be satisfying. The trouble is that we often delude ourselves by pursuing illusory goals, such as wealth, fame, physical beauty, more possessions — all of which is just smoke and mirrors and does not truly contribute to our development.

ALEXANDRE Progressing without being bound to a particular goal, that's the challenge. What helps me is to ask myself what life is calling me to, here and now. When I am passing through zones of turbulence, this question invites me to take action but without haste. It helps me focus, to find my way through confusion. In the Gospels, Jesus says, "The Son of Man has no place to rest his head." Similarly in Buddhist practice, the practitioner must dwell nowhere. As soon as there is fixation, suffering appears. In a sense, mockery and trials can be liberating for us when they have the effect of jarring us loose and preventing us from fixating ourselves on one emotion or one projection. In the subway, when people snigger as I go by, I take advantage of the occasion to remember that I am not reduced to appearances; my basic being lies beyond the sight of the people looking at me.

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I prefer the idea of vocation to that of goal, which reminds me that it is not me who makes the ultimate decision. Call it the will of God or the call of life or any number of other things — let's simply note that my little ego is not the master of the ship. An infinitely deeper reality has control of the rudder. That doesn't mean, however, that one should not be engaged, that one should not take action. Let's always go forward, without either falling into fatalism or giving up on our goals. The teaching of Zen on this subject is clear: do everything impeccably and remain detached from the result.

MATTHIEU The goal that I'm talking about is that which inspires me. I'm not talking about a goal that obsesses me and that I attach all my clingings to. The idea of a direction or an aspiration is more satisfying and is not something that is subject to limits. In Buddhism we mistrust all fixations, including fixation on a noble goal, because such fixations produce effects contrary to the ones we are seeking. We can certainly say that we aspire to liberate ourselves from the causes of suffering — from selfishness, ignorance, jealousy, pride, and such — but the idea is not to score points. The idea is to define what we want to strive for, and decide

if that is worthwhile.

ALEXANDRE I am fascinated by the distinction between the social ego — that is, the set of roles that we play every day — and the fundamental ground of all grounds, our most intimate nature, which unfolds beyond all labels and remains indefinable. All ascesis, spiritual practice, ultimately consists in descending into and dwelling in that, instead of stagnating in the superficial ego that is always changing and continually suffering. This distinction goes a long way toward satisfying me. It brings into view an extraordinary path that smashes all labels and can be invoked by very simple questions: What am I really? What are the basic choices in my life? What influences have shaped me up to the present time? I am struck by the extent to which we compensate for our weaknesses and imitate others to build ourselves up. Spinoza supports this view in his *Ethics*, where he urges us to identify all the causes that drive us to act, and often to react. Freedom is born moment by moment from this act of awareness.

MATTHIEU The question of doubt is also important. A few years ago I translated from Tibetan the autobiography of Shabkar, a yogi who lived more than two centuries ago. It so happened that a biography of St. Thérèse of Lisieux appeared at the same time as my translation. *Le Monde* published an article on the two works. It basically said that the life of Shabkar was not very interesting because the path of this great Tibetan yogi seemed so clearly delineated in advance. He went from ignorance to enlightenment just like taking a walk through the woods. He did undergo certain physical trials, but no "dark nights of the soul," no agonizing doubts. In the life of St. Thérèse of Lisieux or that of St. John of the Cross, however, there were moments of total faith, and then the next day that was replaced by complete nothingness; God seemed to have disappeared.

Asking myself what the difference was between the two paths, I came to the conclusion that for the Christian mystics what matters most is one's relationship to God, since they have abandoned all worldly concerns. Thus everything depends on their intense communion with God, and therefore on the existence of this God. Now this existence is a mystery, forever inaccessible. The idea of this mystery is magnificent. It is as though there is a huge mountain that is perpetually hidden behind clouds but which is the inspiration for our whole lives. There are moments in which one is intimately convinced that it is there, that one is in communion with it, and other moments in which one is preyed upon by doubt. Hence these great mystic flights followed by nights of darkness.

In Buddhism, enlightenment is a clearly defined goal, which stands before me a little bit like Mount Everest for somebody who wants to climb it. I have no doubt concerning the existence of this mountain rising majestically before my eyes, but I

am uncertain as to whether I will be able to make the immense efforts it will take to reach its summit, whether it's worth it, and if I might not be better off just sunning myself on the beach. But after I think it over properly, it becomes clear to me that I do aspire to scale this mountain because I know that it is really worthwhile to liberate oneself from ignorance, hate, jealousy, pride, greed, and such, and I hesitate no longer. One might go astray in one's meditation, falsely imagine that one has attained spiritually profound states of realization, succumb to despondency, or fall into the duality of hope and fear. But these obstacles are without a doubt less dramatic than the alternation between total faith and total doubt described, for example, by Mother Teresa in her memoirs.

ALEXANDRE Another reason I went to South Korea was to get deeper into the dialogue between religions. This path of dialogue is not a totally smooth one, even if it does encourage nonfixation and not absolutizing anything. Sometimes Buddhists give me little moral lessons, saying very politely, "Why do you believe in a personal God? This concept of a Creator is total hogwash." And when I turn instead to certain Christians, what I run into is not any better. They reproach me for looking elsewhere: "How can you do Zen when Jesus says in the Gospels, 'I am the way, the truth, and the life'?" But fortunately there are thousands of examples of possible reconciliation. I recently went to a Mass with a Zen master in attendance. And I saw him listening to the words of the priest like a child with infinite openness. As he was reading the psalms I realized that it is in practice that we come together. The crazy thing is that a Buddhist master, by his simple presence, transmitted to me the burning desire to devote myself further to a life of prayer. He was very far from theories and speculation — he was living in the inner heart. I am not denying that there are significant differences between Buddhism and Christianity, but I am happy to note that there are also links between them and experiences we can share. There's nothing worse than church wars, the result of a kind of dogmatism that in the end has very little that's religious about it.

As this dialogue progresses, I see that the notion of grace — that is, of a gift, divine help that comes freely — is essential in the Christian faith. And that is what turned me away when I was going through some really hard times. Giving oneself over, trusting, at a time when your whole situation is shaky and precarious takes enormous boldness, of which I was then incapable. Talking with Matthieu, I have somewhat understood that Buddhism offers a path, a way to attain enlightenment, a way to scale the Mount Everest of happiness. And that a person who wants to follow in Buddha's footsteps is encouraged to take up his pilgrim's stick, to transform his mind and practice the Eightfold Path to get that climb started. Simply put, as Matthieu says, Mount Everest is there, and it's up to us to climb it,

even though the way up is an extremely hard one.

Reading the Gospels, I find a luminous ascesis that leads to a letting go of the self, an inner stripping away and total surrender to divine providence. In brief, to attain the summit of Everest, one must surrender oneself to God, count more on him than on our own strength. By way of a joke, I often say to Matthieu that in Christianity the path consists in taking the spiritual elevator that takes you to union with God. But it takes a whale of a lot of courage to believe, to get on the elevator and leave all self-will behind.

The essential is to move forward on a path without absolutizing it or denigrating the other paths. Living in contact with other religions, it's tempting to tumble into comparisons. As for myself, I find strength in Buddhism, which I think encourages me to become ever more Christian, to enter into a deeper union with Christ and to live the Gospels in everyday life. The wisdom of the Buddha also strips away the mental representations that I project on God. Meister Eckhart takes part in this same ascesis when he addresses the following prayer to the Supreme Being: "God, liberate me from God." How many times have I tried to exploit religion in order to find some kind of consolation in it, a crutch, rather than a source or a motivation? Seeing Christ chase the money changers out of the temple, I understand that there is a tremendous danger of co-opting religion for one's own purposes, of turning it into a market where you can buy peace at the price of sacrifices.

If the Buddha pacifies me, then Christ consoles me by his humanity. For me, believing in God and following Christ above all require faith, an art of living, an inner discipline, an ascesis. We can't help but notice that Jesus is less popular today than Buddha. One day when I shared a quote from the Dalai Lama on Facebook, I got a huge number of likes, but when I posted a video of Pope Francis getting out of his car to hug a disabled person on the side of the road, my post went almost unnoticed. The only comments I got recalled the painful history of the church: the Crusades, the Inquisition, the numerous cases of pedophilia, and so on. I think there ought to be prerequisites for interreligious dialogue: say goodbye to all apologetic partisanship, develop a real interest in the other, and drop the logic of "I'm right, therefore you're wrong."

The Buddha gives me strength every day, as Christ does. So why do I have to choose between them? It's as though I had two children, two friends, or two papas, and I was asked to renounce one or the other. No doubt we have to keep away from the relativism of people who practice spiritual tourism and make a big soup out of all the religions. I'm delighted that the Buddhists bring me closer to Christ. This is a magnificent ray of hope — as opposed to the usual thing of getting hung up on labels.

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MATTHIEU We have talked about vocation, desire, direction, suitability, what is appropriate and what is not. The point is to find out what has meaning for a given individual. If, for example, I'm offered a job that doesn't interest me at all, it can have a meaning for me anyway if I need the money to feed my children. Wealth, power, and fame inspire some people and others not at all. Diogenes supposedly said to Alexander the Great, "I'm greater than you, Lord, for I have spurned more than you have conquered." In connection with finding an appropriate direction, the question is what helps us find meaning in every passing moment, in each effort that we make. Without meaning, life can roll by like an irritating film. As Pierre Rabhi has said, we go from one box to another: first the school box, then the entertainment boxes, then the business boxes, and finally the box we get buried in.

For the contemplatives, what has meaning is not building up a bank account but rather at the end of years of determined effort, liberating themselves from negative emotions such as anger, greed, or arrogance; and from confusion, inner conflicts, and distraction.

ALEXANDRE In your view, what is a contemplative?

MATTHIEU Contemplatives, at least in the Buddhist sense, are those who understand that their mind can be their friend but also their worst enemy, and therefore they have to transform it by meditation. They contemplate the fundamental nature of mind, and this practice has the effect of changing their perception of others, of themselves, and of the world. And when you change your perception of the world, in a certain way, you change the world.

Often we are content with finding little solutions to our daily problems, whereas the contemplatives I'm talking about try to radically change the way they experience the world and the way they translate their life circumstances either into well-being or suffering. They learn not to be trapped anymore by what torments and enslaves them but to free themselves from it. They become less vulnerable and thus more available to others.

They also familiarize themselves with the fundamental constituent of the mind, the primary awareness always present behind the movement of thoughts, and present even in the absence of thoughts, the pure luminous awareness that is never altered by mental constructs.

What Inspires Us

MATTHIEU Whatever we do in life, we always need guides to learn from in order to further our development. When it comes to spirituality, the guide we choose must possess the necessary qualities. The danger is that when we are in a state of confusion or weakness, we might put our trust in a charlatan. A real spiritual master has nothing to gain or to lose. He has everything to give and to share. He couldn't care less about having a few more disciples. He's not looking for glory, power, or wealth. His only desire is to help others attain liberation. He himself must be the living example of this liberation. In my personal case, after meeting my first teacher, Kangyur Rinpoche, I went from confusion and aimlessness to a clear and inspiring vision of what I could accomplish in life.

ALEXANDRE In trying to move in the direction of freedom, it's worthwhile to ask ourselves who our models, our exemplars are. Is it the victorious sports figure who keeps achieving new feats, the greedy CEO, the star actor? Or is it the neighbor from next door who modestly attempts to help others? Who is my reference point for learning how to live? What are the virtues, the qualities that I would like to have inspire me as I make my way through life? As for me, the people who touch me and help me grow are those who, day by day, radiate kindness and never let suffering make them bitter. There is a discreet heroism of everyday life: getting up in the morning, being generous, facing difficulties without losing one's joy.

There is a discreet heroism of everyday life: getting up in the morning, being generous, facing difficulties without losing one's joy.

MATTHIEU I recall a study done in the United States in which people were asked, "Between the Dalai Lama and Tom Cruise, who is the one you admire the most?" Eighty percent replied the Dalai Lama. The follow-up question was, "Which one of them would you rather be if you had the choice?" This time the majority answered Tom Cruise. I wondered what the reason was. They probably thought that if they already had the physical qualities, the fame, and the wealth of Tom Cruise, they would then be able to acquire the qualities of the Dalai Lama on their own, because that seemed easier to them than the other way around. In truth, it's not easier that way. Inner transformation is a labor that takes one's whole life to achieve. One day a Chilean journalist asked the Dalai Lama, "Thirty thousand people have come to this stadium to hear you — why so many?" He answered, "I don't know. Ask them." Then after thinking for a moment, he added, "Maybe it's because for sixty years I have been meditating on compassion every morning for

four hours."

CHRISTOPHE I have had a problem with models for a long time. I grew up with a certain distrust toward adults. I saw their fragility so clearly that it probably made me develop a kind of caution or even revulsion toward the idea that other human beings could be our masters. I was much more comfortable with taking all human beings for models, but in a passing way. The fact is that I am strongly affected by the lessons I receive from my patients, from my children, and from people I don't know. I have never sought out a master; this kind of dependent relationship always frightened me. A master in passing could be a close friend who tells me a story that makes a strong impression on me because of the intelligence or strength that it portrays. Recently a friend told me about how he provided support for his dying wife. She had cancer, and little by little her physical condition deteriorated. He told me how he washed her, massaged her feet; how he managed to maintain and even enrich their love life. Listening to him, I felt I was dealing with something completely admirable, a model of dignity, of devotion, of altruism. Experiences like that make me think a lot, and when I run into somebody whose conduct is exemplary, I always ask myself, "Would I be able to do that?" and "What could I do right now to get closer to that?"

My daughters are also my masters from time to time. The second, for example, is an enthusiastic, joyous person, whereas I — if I don't make an effort — am a depressive type who can drag his feet and reason in a twisted way in order to justify his way of seeing the world. Before, I use to think that enthusiastic people were endangering themselves by exposing themselves to disappointment. Either they irritated me (I thought they hadn't understood the true nature of life) or they made me feel uneasy (I was afraid for them). I was afraid for my daughter for a long time, afraid of her enthusiasm, of her tendency to be joyful no matter what happened, afraid that she would be hurt or disappointed and that she wouldn't recover from it. And then a few years ago, in a period of renewed self-questioning, I realized that she was the one who was right! For two years she had been in intensive classes preparing for university entrance exams, and she was leading a hard life. She was getting up every morning at six thirty and her morning and evening trips on the subway each took an hour. And every morning I got up with her, made her orange juice, her coffee, her sandwich, thinking it was important for me to be there. She was practically always joyous and had a smile on her face, even in the cold and dark winter, even at exam time. Some mornings she would ask me how I was feeling, and sometimes I wasn't feeling that well but I didn't want her to see it, so I'd say, "Oh, I'm okay, doing okay." And she would scold me, saying, "Okay? Your 'okay' doesn't sound very convincing." Little by little I got the point. And one day it became clear enough for me to articulate: No matter what

happens, you find every reason to be happy in the morning. The way you look at it, you wake up and you live in a democracy, you're going to live another day on this earth, you have people who love you, and even if you have problems, you're alive! So every morning I got a masterful but lighthearted lesson. I was face-to-face with a master of joy, enthusiasm, and confidence toward life, and I was extremely grateful.

ALEXANDRE Following the teaching of a master is very far from meaning that you shouldn't distrust like the plague those gurus whom I consider the very height of insanity if they don't liberate us from our conceptual mind, and if they themselves don't live in a state of profound detachment. Handing over the keys to one's destiny to someone who has not been liberated through ascesis is abdicating one's own freedom, and we know what disastrous results that can bring. How can we avoid falling into idolatry and give up trying to find a super-papa who will pamper us? The vocation of spiritual father or master is precisely to awaken us to our freedom, to relentlessly expose all the tricks of ego, and at the same time to show us unconditional love. You won't find that on every street corner.

I had the good fortune to meet a Catholic priest who was also a Zen master. The instant our eyes met, I realized he was going to be my master. What touches me is that at no time does he lay claim to the title of master — just the opposite. He constantly throws me back on my own freedom. To this day I have never encountered anywhere along the way such kindness, such wisdom, and such faith in God.

A true master is free from ego. He has no desire to please, no need to manipulate others. He lives with flawless consistency. What I have uncovered in myself, thanks to my spiritual father, is my incredible ability always to delude myself. Only an enlightened and infinitely compassionate guide can bring us out of our illusions, which take us further away from what is really good for us. How difficult it is to keep a bit of detachment when from morning till night we are struggling through a jumble of emotions!

CHRISTOPHE I have a nagging fear of adding to somebody's suffering. Nine times out of ten, this restraint is the right thing and it saves me from causing too much suffering. But every now and then, this fear of giving my candid advice is a fetter. I don't have the brass to look the person in the eyes and tell him, in so many words, "Enough! You have to stop making these mistakes!" And like you, I very much admire people who are capable of reminding us of the realities, that everything is not possible, all is not forgiven, you can't go on giving in to yourself indefinitely.

MATTHIEU I'm reminded of when I was living with Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, my second spiritual master. While I could hardly imagine a more compassionate person, he was sometimes very severe with me. But after all, what would be the use of his indulging my faults and my ego?

ALEXANDRE We have to make a distinction between two things. The vocation of the spiritual master is to pull us out of the prison of ego by bringing us closer to enlightenment or to union with God. The vocation of the therapist is to help us get through hard times, help us find the tools to accept and deal with great sufferings. If a psychiatrist tries to play spiritual master and make use of the electric shocks that are used in Zen, he might send his patient right to the graveyard.

MATTHIEU This approach of Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche's was not systematic. In fact, most people who met him would say that they had never seen anyone who was so kind, that he never said one word louder than another. But that did not keep him from being merciless with our faults when he saw that the moment was ripe. And when he also knew that the person he was dealing with had been around him long enough to know that he only wanted what was best for him.

ALEXANDRE What touched you the most in your thirteen years with this master?

MATTHIEU First, at no time during these years was I witness to a single action that could harm others. I reached the point of total certainty that he never had even the shadow of a malicious thought, word, or action; that his sole desire was to guide other beings to inner freedom. I was also never witness to any ups and downs of mood on his part in the course of our everyday life. His way of acting and treating other people was always balanced and suited to the situation. He manifested perfect consistency between inner and outer. Sometimes he was extremely severe, but that had nothing to do with bad temper. I saw again and again that this severity was only there to help others attain liberation from their ignorance. Over time, that aroused total confidence in me.

ALEXANDRE Why total confidence?

MATTHIEU In the course of ordinary human relations, I am obliged to adjust to the dark side and the light side of each person. I know I can have confidence in some people and less in others. A skillful craftsman, an excellent chess player, or a great pianist can give me good advice on their specialty, but I don't expect them to

be able to show me how to be a better human being. I am aware that, apart from the qualities that I look to them for, they might have all kinds of faults.

In the case of this master, experience showed me that I could trust him in everything. The thirteen years I spent continually in his presence only confirmed this. At no time did I see any chinks in his armor. And this confidence was of the essence for me. If I was going to ask him to liberate me from the causes of my suffering, I needed to trust him completely. At no point could I allow myself to doubt his advice.

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The Ego, Friend or Impostor?

ALEXANDRE Let's get into the major topic of ego without further delay. The story of Genesis provides us with a luminous diagnosis. It says of Adam and Eve after they tasted the forbidden fruit: "Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves." Shame, guilt, egocentrism — how can we avoid this infernal spiral? Losing one's innocence maybe means contemplating one's navel, beginning to cherish an image of oneself, a bunch of labels, a heap of illusions. It maybe means cutting oneself off from reality and trying to become the center of the world by demanding absolute independence.

This almost congenital tendency toward narcissism is the source of a tremendous amount of painful conflict. If I exile myself from the fundamental ground of my being, if I close myself off in my mental representations, if I continually play a role, how can I experience real joy? In concrete terms, if I cling to an idea, from the moment I become attached to who I think I am, I can definitely expect to take a beating. To finish the job of ruining our lives, we can get involved in this formidable set of reactions: the more I suffer, the more likely I am to seize up and curl up into a ball. A hellish vicious cycle! Fortunately practice provides a way out for us.

How can we learn to drop this vicious tendency to cut ourselves off from the world, from God, and from other people? How do you cure egocentrism? To begin with, I can stop waking up in the morning as a greedy consumer and become a little more attentive to others. Dropping this logic of "me, me, me first" is no small deal. Nonetheless, we have thousands of opportunities to stop feeding the voracity of ego. As I cut the steak on my plate, without falling into an unhealthy state of guilt, I can glimpse the principles that dictate the way I live: Why should I think that my pleasure is worth massacring an animal?

The exercise is simple: Detect and then uproot the habit of putting oneself in

the center. Above all, never exploit another person but truly love him or her. One day a monk told me very straightforwardly: "Really being enlightened is putting others before oneself, no longer regarding oneself as privileged in relation to other sentient beings."

That's no small job!

The Diseases of Ego

CHRISTOPHE *Ego* is not part of the present-day vocabulary of psychology. We speak instead of self-esteem, which defines the entirety of the ways one looks at oneself, judges oneself, sees oneself, treats oneself. As for me, I would be comfortable describing the ego as the whole set of attachments one has to oneself, to one's own image, and I would like to talk about its pathologies and all their consequences. Numerous studies tell us that self-esteem is profoundly influenced by all our social relations. Many researchers basically consider that the value one ascribes to oneself is very strongly, if not almost exclusively, constituted by the feeling a person has of being esteemed by others. In other words, the way others see us conditions the quality of the way we think we see ourselves but which really reflects the way we see ourselves through the eyes of others.

There are two major pathologies related to self-esteem, both of which bring a great deal of suffering. First, there is the excessive attachment to self that we see in narcissistic people. This has an immediate and consubstantial consequence: the more one is attached to oneself, the more one wants to be admired and the more one thinks one is superior to others and is entitled to superior rights. This is where the characteristic behavior of narcissists comes from. They think they are entitled to drive faster than other people because they think they drive better, to get in front of everybody in a line because they think their time is more precious than that of others, to put their own interests before those of other people, and so forth.

But there is also a form of self-obsession, excessive attachment to the self, that is found in people who lack self-esteem. We're talking here about negative attachment. Fundamentally, these people have the same obsession concerning how they are seen and judged by other people as narcissists do. But instead of looking for admiration and submissive behavior from others, they are highly sensitive to judgment and criticism, because they are afraid of being rejected, afraid that people don't love them enough.

Work on self-esteem began in the 1960s. Fifty years later, we've made a lot of progress. We've understood that the objective, the ideal approach to working on self-esteem, is forgetting the self. When we look at people whose self-esteem

seems to be functioning properly, we see that their egos are not all bloated. They don't demand any more than necessary that others think about them. They engage in activities and relationships without continuously questioning themselves about themselves. American psychologists speak about a "quiet ego," an ego that is free from the obsession of "What are people going to think of me? Am I measuring up?"

The ideal approach to working on self-esteem is forgetting the self.

How does one attain this objective? If you tell a person with complexes, who imagines he is somehow deficient, to think about something besides himself, he is more or less incapable of doing it. However, once he is cured, he is capable of being aware of this. I remember a patient who said to me in this regard, "When I'm with people who I find impressive and I'm not in top form, I want to become like a little mouse and disappear so that nobody notices me." Then I thought of the work we had done together in therapy, and I said, "You don't have to make yourself small. You're not that big!" In other words, don't worry, people are not that focused on you;, it's not you they're concerned with or judging all the time. Unless you stand on the table and start screaming, you have your place with others without becoming an object of obsession for them.

There's an enormous number of studies on this subject. One of them that had the biggest influence on me showed that, paradoxically, it is beneficial for an individual's self-esteem to cultivate a sense of belonging, of fraternity with others. Not only does that not lower one's self-esteem but it also reassures and calms it. Conversely, the study showed that the desire to dominate created insecurity; it was threatening and exhausting. This points to a mistake made by many patients who don't have good levels of self-esteem. They think that to be accepted by others they must be admired by them. If their complex relates to a lack of culture, for example, they try to appear erudite. In earlier generations of therapy for self-esteem, what used to be done was to pump up the patients, to encourage them to see themselves positively. And many timid patients with complexes got the impression that in order not to be dominated anymore they had to become dominant. Today we emphasize horizontal relationships and not vertical ones. We put aside these dominance issues because they're very costly emotionally. We know, for example, that narcissistic subjects who have obsessions concerned with dominance, recognition, and submission in relation to other people are extremely insecure people with very high levels of stress, anxiety, and tension. The same thing goes the other way around for people who have low self-esteem.

I'll conclude with two points. Ego is a necessary evil, like a rented car. We need it to get through life, just as we need a means of transport to get from one place to

another — unless one is a hermit or a contemplative who never leaves his monastery and thus may find that dropping the ego altogether is simpler. On life's roads, some vehicles pollute more than others. There are big SUVs that use a lot of gas, cars that want to be looked at and be allowed to pass others by, and — on the other extreme — unobtrusive bikes that don't pollute at all or make any noise. It seems to me we can't get rid of the ego, just toss it out the window, but we can make sure for the sake of others that it doesn't produce too much pollution, and that it's not too costly for ourselves in terms of energy, care, and upkeep.

The second point: we can't hope to get rid of the ego by despising it. In the case of patients who suffer from low self-esteem, the solution is not to continue to look down on oneself. Often such people are obsessed with themselves and irritated by others at the same time. We come back to the crucial difference between detachment and nonattachment. The idea is not to try obsessively to detach oneself from ego. Rather, our efforts should lead us in the direction of nonattachment to the ego.

Genuine Self-Confidence

MATTHIEU I have often had occasion to speak about the dismantling of ego in Buddhist practice. Very often people are uncomfortable with this process. They ask, "Isn't it necessary to have a strong ego in order to function well in life?" Or again, "Don't many people suffer from psychological problems because their egos are fragmented or weak?"

From the point of view of Buddhism, we prefer to talk about inner strength rather than a strong ego. This strength goes hand in hand with liberating oneself from the tight grip of ego, which is the primary source of everything that poisons the mind.

The studies you're talking about have shown that compassion, generosity, kindness, and indulgence toward ourselves permit us to have healthy self-esteem. On the other hand, all the methods employed, particularly in North America, to reinforce self-esteem in artificial manners lead to narcissism. According to psychologist Jean Twenge, this is true to such a degree that over the last twenty years in the United States there has been an epidemic of narcissism. When asked, 90 percent of students thought they were among the top 10 percent of most talented people. Ninety percent of drivers — including even some who had recently caused accidents — were sure that they were better drivers than others. You don't have to be a great mathematician to realize that everybody cannot be above average!

In the United States, parents and teachers tell children from morning till

night, "You're special!" The children get sucked into this game. They wear T-shirts or put up stickers that say "I'm special!" One out of ten garments for girls have the word *princess* on them somewhere. I received a musical birthday card from America that said, "We want to tell you you're really special." Summarizing a significant number of studies, psychologist Roy Baumeister concluded that all the effort and money that schools, parents, and therapists have put into promoting self-esteem have produced only minimal effects. "After all these years," he concluded, "I'm sorry to say that my recommendation is the following: forget self-esteem and concentrate on self-control and self-discipline."[1]

Obviously we don't want to fall into the opposite extreme, as you have clearly shown in your writings, Christophe. Wholesome and healthy self-esteem is essential to thrive in life, given that a neurotic level of self-depreciation can bring about serious psychological problems and a great deal of suffering.

In sum, the self-confidence of a narcissistic person is highly fragile because it is based on a swollen ego that is out of touch with reality. When Narcissus sees that there is nothing exceptional about him, that he is not more beautiful, more intelligent, more charming, or more talented than the average, he takes a hard fall that brings anger or depression. Thus it is not by clinging to the fabricated identity of the ego that one can acquire stable confidence. True confidence is born from freeing oneself from the traps and yoke of ego.

The I, the Person, and the Ego

MATTHIEU We take our "I" to be a unique entity, autonomous, and lasting. It is no doubt useful for functioning in life, but does the concept we have of it really correspond to reality? When I see a photograph of myself as a child, I say, "This little guy riding a bike is me." Since that time, I have gone through all kinds of experiences and my body has aged, but I still think, "It's me." In this phenomenon several mental mechanisms are present simultaneously: the perception of an *I*, that of a *person*, and that of an *ego*.

The I lives in the present. It's the I that thinks, when I wake up in the morning, "I exist," then "I'm cold," or "I'm hungry." It corresponds to the experience of our current state.

The notion of the person reflects our history. It is a continuum that covers the whole of our existence, which includes physical, mental, and social aspects. Its continuity over time allows us to connect the mental representations of ourselves that pertain to the past with those that relate to the future.

And then there's the ego. Spontaneously we presume that it constitutes the very core of our being. We conceive of it as an indivisible and permanent whole

that characterizes us from cradle to grave. The ego is the proprietor of "my body," "my mind," and "my name." Even though the mind is a dynamic flux by nature, in constant transformation, we can't help but imagine a distinct entity similar to a boat floating down a river.

Once the perceptions of "I" and "person" crystallize into the much stronger sense of identity called the ego, we want to protect and satisfy this ego. We manifest aversion toward anything that threatens it, and attraction for anything that pleases and comforts it. These two reactions give rise to a multitude of conflicting emotions — anger, desire, envy, jealousy, and the like.

One only has to examine this ego a little to realize to what degree it is no more than a mystification whose author is our own mind. Let's try, for example, to locate it. When I say, "You hit me," I'm not saying, "You hit my body, but that's not serious because that's not me." Thus I do associate my ego with my body. My mind, on the other hand, cannot be hit. But when I say, "You hurt my feelings," I associate my ego with my feelings, with my mind. Moreover, when I say "my feelings," "my mind," "my name," "my body," the ego appears to be the proprietor of all of that. It is not clear how an entity endowed with a definite existence could, like Harlequin, assume all these mutually incompatible identities. So the ego can only be a concept, a mental label applied to a dynamic process. It certainly is useful to us, since it makes it possible for us to connect a whole set of changing situations; to integrate our emotions, our thoughts, the perception of our environment, and such, into a coherent whole. But it is ultimately the product of a continuous mental activity that keeps an imaginary entity alive in our mind.

ALEXANDRE What would you say to a Zen master who applies "shock therapy" and who wouldn't hesitate, if needed, to deliver a hard smack to a disciple who is stuck in attachments?

MATTHIEU If I was a good Zen disciple, I'd say, "What hit me, the hand of the master or the intention that guided it?" Or again, "What hurt me, was it my cheek or my feelings?" That reminds me of a friend from Hong Kong who had come to our monastery, Shechen in Nepal, to receive teachings. There were more than a thousand people sitting on the floor, pressed close together, inside the temple. At one point the person sitting behind this woman, my friend, hit her on the back to get her to move forward a little. She kept being annoyed by this incident for a good hour or so. She said to herself, "I came from far away to receive Buddhist teachings on patience and compassion, and here some boor treats me that way even though he also came here to get those same teachings." But after a while she couldn't keep herself from bursting out laughing. "I had just realized," she told the abbot of the monastery, "that my body had felt the blow for a few seconds, but

my ego had suffered from it for an hour."

To come back to our examination of the ego, we often conclude that our ego is our consciousness. However, this consciousness is also an ungraspable flux: the past is dead, the future hasn't been born yet, and the present has no duration. How could the ego exist suspended between something that doesn't exist any longer and something that doesn't exist yet? As for the present moment, it's impossible to put your finger on it. The ego can't survive very long if it dwells in the transparency of the present moment, free from all discursive thought. It needs to feed itself on ruminations concerning the past and anticipations of the future.

If, then, the ego is only an illusion, freeing ourselves from it does not amount to eradicating the core of our being, but just to opening our eyes. And since our attachment to our ego is the source of suffering, it is extremely helpful to unmask this imposture.

There's no reason to fear that getting rid of the ego will turn us into vegetables — just the opposite happens. The psychologist Paul Ekman said to me one day, "I've noticed that the people who seem to me to have exceptional human qualities, who give an impression of kindness, candor, and joie de vivre — like the Dalai Lama or Desmond Tutu — have a barely perceptible ego. Others instinctively seek out their company, which they find particularly enriching. These people inspire others by not making any big deal of their status, of their fame, of their ego. Such an absence of egocentrism is staggering."

Forgetting the Self — the Silence of Ego

ALEXANDRE We hear the words *ego* and *me* all the time without really knowing what they refer to. To tell the truth, I would have great difficulty defining them. As I see it, the ego is a bundle of illusions composed of desires, fears, emotions, and representations to which we become attached, to our very great pain. We must distinguish this illusory "I," this facade, from the basic ground of our being, our innerness, which is beyond all reification. Nevertheless, the sense of ego hangs on in my mind in some kind of indeterminate way. That being the case, how can I free myself of it? Thanks to Christophe, I am beginning to refine my understanding of it. I have long regarded the extolling of self-esteem with a certain suspicion. I feared that it tended to produce a kind of cult of personality. But as Christophe has shown, without a well-structured personality, without a healthy confidence in oneself, we fall prey to many bondages.

On this point I am also fond of recalling the fine analysis of Jean-Jacques Rousseau in his *Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality among Men*. He distinguishes self-love, which leads every individual to take care of himself, to

avoid dangers, from vanity, which is a primarily social passion. We know all the disastrous consequences: the insanity of worrying about what people will say, hunger for the spotlight, the desire to dominate, the lust for power. Fundamentally, vanity arises from comparison. It's as though we create an idea of ourselves to which we become attached, with the result of maximal suffering. Basically this has nothing to do with self-love, which is a primitive tendency, a kind of self-preservation instinct that encourages us to take care of our lives and, in many cases, to improve ourselves. Unfortunately, however, quite often this energy goes into a tailspin and turns into selfishness. Rousseau's distinction provides me with an effective key for not sinking into the idolatry of "me, me" while at the same time also not straying into a pitiful state of self-contempt.

The great Indian sage Ramana Maharshi also provides us with a clear path. He can help us free ourselves from this "me" that jumps around excitedly in every direction and allows us instead to come back to the fundamental ground of all grounds, where joy and peace already reside. Practically speaking, I can imitate him by asking myself, "Who am I?" If one doesn't let it turn into an obsession, it is very liberating to question oneself: "Am I my body, my thoughts, my car? Am I my religious convictions, my political ideas?"

It is also liberating to interpret disturbing emotions as signals of possible ego attachment. Why the devil do I cling to an idea even though it makes me suffer? And why would I rather die sometimes than recognize my faults? On a more subtle level, another fishy thing is a kind of narcissism in reverse that lurks in the realm of spiritual practice: "I'm going to show you I don't have ego. You'll see!" In confronting this danger, there's something much better we can do than to take a dim view of ourselves. Rather than do that, let's take Spinoza's suggestion: "Don't mock, don't cry, don't hate — but understand."

Tracking the ego mechanisms that drive us, detecting our enslavements, is a joyous challenge more than a duty. Why not start off one's day by taking stock, getting a kind of inner weather report: "Hey, today my little ego is seriously agitated. I'm not in good shape. I'm very vulnerable. I'd be ready to crawl to get somebody's approval."

I also like the exercise I suggest to my children when they're a little upset. We sit silently for a few minutes and contemplate what's going on in our minds. Buddhists sometimes compare the mind of ego to an overexcited monkey leaping continuously, without stopping, from branch to branch. The practice here is just to simply and calmly watch it carrying on like a madman, without trying to change anything at all. And then why not talk to it very peacefully: "Little monkey, little sweet one." What characterizes the discursive mind of ego is perpetual dissatisfaction. It always falls prey to the disturbing emotions.

When we feel joy, the ego is eclipsed. There's no need to prove anything

anymore. That's why heaping reproach on ourselves is useless. On the contrary, it tends to aggravate the little ego. Thus the road to freedom does not pass through mortifying the self but through giving the self, through joy and sharing. And little exercises repeated every day can lead us there.

Ascesis can begin by giving priority to "we" rather than "I." By the way, I learned that in Korean, people do not say "my house" but rather "our house." Experiencing ourselves as separate from others, isolated, ends up making us feel worse. If we wake up in the morning with the sole objective to keep our little me from getting injured, we'll find obstacles everywhere. Why not drop the mistaken perspective brought on by ego?

The other day my daughter was playing in the park. Suddenly I heard cries of pain. When I saw that it wasn't my child crying out, I said to myself, "Whew, it's not her." It was bizarre — there were twenty little kids and only one of them really interested me. How many sentient beings live on the earth? What errant reasoning that is and what a lack of love that I am concerned only with myself, even including those close to me, when there are millions of other individuals living on "our" planet! But sooner or later life takes on the task of reminding me that I'm not the center of the world.

MATTHIEU You speak of changing from "I" to "we." In writing books, it's very hard for me to say, "I think that . . ." People often say to me, "Your writing isn't personal enough." But my only objective is to share the ideas that are dear to me, to be a spokesman for the wisdom of my spiritual masters, and to provide information on the scientific studies that illuminate the subjects that concern us. I've tried "we," but I got rapped on the knuckles by friends who told me that in English, it sounds like the royal "we." They remarked, "Who do you think you are, the queen of England?" Nonetheless, it seems that "we" is good for our health. A researcher analyzing speech and writing observed that people who most often used "I," "me," and "mine" were more likely to suffer from heart attacks.

CHRISTOPHE On top of that, studies on the speech of patients show that when people make progress in therapy, they tend to use "we" much more than "I."

ALEXANDRE It's not necessarily a good idea to subject the ego to a drastic diet. Rather, we should use skilful means to get rid of it gently, and not get involved in exhausting campaigns based on willpower. As to the question of happiness, it seems to me that the ego is chock-full of preconceived ideas. Let's go so far as to take the time to ask ourselves what makes us completely happy. If your idea is making millions or becoming a star, chances are you will be unhappy for life.

How can we find real joy, the kind that our trials and difficulties can't touch? Master Dogen shows the direct path when he tells us that giving leads to detachment. Very simply, I can ask myself, "What can I do here and now for my fellow human?" From doing this I draw a strength that helps me climb back up the slope on which I'm sliding down almost irresistibly toward a painful egotism. No longer being content with a kind of totally abstract bulk generosity — that's the challenge. Sometimes it's easier to show infinite patience toward whoever comes along than to refrain from telling one's spouse to go to hell after the pettiest dispute.

Something that's a real setback for ego is self-irony. There's nothing that does the job better than a sense of humor that comes along and dislodges me every time I get stuck in a label, a concept. A hundred times a day I remember this quote from Meister Eckhart: "Observe yourself and look for yourself, and the moment you find yourself, let yourself go, there's nothing better you can do." In joy, ego leaves us in peace; it's on its best behavior. I don't remember who said that health is the silence of the organs, but I think unconditional joy is the silence of the ego.

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CHRISTOPHE It was the French surgeon René Leriche who said in 1936, "Health is life lived in the silence of the organs."

ALEXANDRE When ego is eclipsed, peace comes, like a miracle. But almost always our mental FM broadcasts its background noise: "Get there fast, do this, do that, that's not okay, I have to have this, I must have that . . ."

Practicing meditation is trying to lessen the impact of these thoughts at last. Ego is not there to make us happy. It may have a function, but its vocation is certainly not to lead us to peace. Let's learn to disobey it moment after moment, to cease taking its orders as gospel. And why not? Let's laugh at the way we continually criticize, judge, and condemn everybody. What wipes all that stuff out is generosity that expects nothing in return. So let's not hesitate to ask ourselves, "Concretely, what can I do today to do somebody some good?"

MATTHIEU If the silence of the organs is physical health, then the silence of the ego is mental health! The ego is always asking two questions: "Why me?" and "Why not me?" Why did so-and-so say that ridiculous thing to me? Why did this trouble have to fall in my lap? Why am I not as handsome or as lucky as that guy

there?

Every human being wants to find happiness and avoid suffering, but the best decision you can make is not to entrust this happiness to ego. Someone who only thinks about himself is not doing anything practical toward attaining happiness. Moreover, his constant failures provoke a frustration and rage that he turns both against himself and against the outside world.

A healthy ego is a transparent ego, the ego of someone who has within himself a vast space of inner peace into which he can welcome others because he is not obsessed with his own situation. By making your ego less heavy and definite, you can spare yourself a lot of problems. You become less sensitive to criticism and praise. You tidy up your thought process and turn off the mental FM that drones on all day long: "Me, me, me, what's going to happen to me?" You also begin to see better what's going on around you and to perceive the beauty of beings and things. I remember Father Ceyrac, who died at the age of nearly a hundred after having taken care of tens of thousands of poor children over fifty years in the south of India. One day he said to me with a big smile, "I come out of the subway. The people are so beautiful. But they don't know it!"

CHRISTOPHE Working on the way one reacts to compliments and criticisms is a very good exercise for patients who are suffering from a sense of inferiority. They are neurotic. They doubt themselves. They often get exploited, beaten down, manipulated by others. Sometimes, on the other hand, they become aggressive because they are uncomfortable in their skin. We show them ways to accept compliments without rejecting their favorable content but also without revelling in it, without necessarily feeling built up by it. The same thing goes for criticism. Criticisms are not necessarily true, but they always give us some information! When somebody criticizes me (if there are grounds for it), they're sending me a message, either about me (I'm having some faults of mine shown to me, and I should be happy about that) or about how that person sees me, and I should be happy about learning that too! So in both cases — a suitable reminder or a piece of new information — these are helpful messages.

We teach our patients to be open to compliments and criticisms but also to somewhat distrust them. It is extremely dangerous to have a good image of yourself only if you receive compliments or expressions of admiration, and a bad image of yourself if you are subject to criticisms and lack of recognition. This is an addiction to other peoples' views of you, an addiction just like to sugar, tobacco, or drugs. We need to kick the habit. Of course, we have a need for compliments and criticisms, to remind us of our faults or sometimes to encourage us, but we must be careful not to let it reach the point of dependency.

Shower of Gratitude

CHRISTOPHE There is a very precious notion in what Alexandre was saying: the more we feel cut off from the world, the more anxious we are to save our skin. I remember working on gratitude with patients who were suffering from problems of self-esteem. We asked them to think regularly about what they owed others at times when they were feeling happy or had experienced some success or other. The idea was for them to ask themselves, after they had taken pleasure in what had happened to them, "In this happiness I am currently feeling, or in this success I was able to achieve, what is it I owe others?" The paradoxical result was, the more they learned to function in this gratitude mode, the more self-confidence they felt. Because, fundamentally, gratitude freed them from the kind of false self-confidence you've talked about, Matthieu, which consisted of only believing in their own strengths and abilities. They were acquiring a kind of confidence that is much more intelligent and much broader. This is a kind of confidence that is rooted in all the sources of help, love, and affection around them, which they weren't necessarily heeding before and which they only called upon when they were in trouble. But we should really do the opposite. We should think of those sources around us when we are in positive states in which we have succeeded at something, attained our objectives. Instead of weakening ourselves, as narcissists might think, we are strengthened when we say to ourselves, "You owe others a part — whether big or small doesn't matter — of what you are experiencing." It increases our sense of connection and solidarity with others. This connection is much closer and more intense than we think.

One of the most beautiful definitions of gratitude I know of is that of the philosopher André Comte-Sponville, who wrote, "Gratitude takes pleasure in what it owes, whereas vanity would prefer to forget about it." I am happy to owe something to others because, fundamentally, it's wonderful that others have given me this "something." I should not let this offend me or make me feel inferior or insecure. This doesn't mean that I was incapable of achieving something on my own. Or even if that's the case, from the moment others were able to help me, that no longer matters. Let's not forget it: cultivating an awareness of what we owe others in getting to feel stronger is a detour worth taking.

MATTHIEU Just a word about gratitude. Greg Norris, who studies the life cycle of commonly used objects at Harvard, explained to me one day that when I hold a piece of paper in my hand, at least thirty-five countries have worked together to make this possible. For example, a woodcutter cut a tree in a Norwegian forest, a Danish trucker transported this tree to a French factory, and so on. Then for the paper pulp we have to add the starch extracted from potatoes coming from the

Czech Republic; and the pulp was colored or bleached with chemicals made in Germany, and so forth. On top of this, each person who contributed to this chain has parents, grandparents, children, . . . all of whom perhaps influenced him or her in his or her choice of occupation. In brief, you could read, as though in watermark all over this piece of paper, the inscription, "Others, others, others . . ."

Seeing this interdependence of all beings and all things should continually fill us with gratitude. Like the environmentalists who assess the ecological footprint of a product, we could assess the footprint of gratitude connected with those who have made it possible for us to be together here today. Little by little we would learn that our gratitude should embrace the entire planet.

CHRISTOPHE One day a patient to whom I had taught these exercises began talking to me about the "shower of gratitude" that he took every evening in taking stock of his day! As he fell asleep he contemplated all the good things — big or little — that he had experienced and what he owed — wholly or in part — to others. And he said to me, "If you really think about it, this thing of yours really goes pretty far!" And it's true — it's incredible! If I suddenly pause and become aware of everything I owe others at this moment, I get the impression that half the human race is in this room! It's exactly what you were saying, Matthieu: gratitude toward the people who made the tea we're drinking, toward those who made the cup, toward the people from the utility company who are getting electricity to us, toward you who organized bringing the three of us together to create this book, toward the friends who are helping us out here and preparing the meals . . . It isn't long before instead of being a shower, it's a veritable Niagara pouring down on us! There's nothing in what we are experiencing here that is not due to other people — nothing! The light, the heat, the food, our clothes, the fact that we can speak to each other — we owe all that to our parents, our professors, our friends, and to tens and hundreds of unknown people. It's breathtaking, mind-blowing, and wonderful.

MATTHIEU In gift shops you often see these bowls or cups that have first names on them. You look for the one marked Paul, Virginia, Matthieu, or some other first name you have in mind. What should be marked on those bowls, but also on most objects we use, is "the others, the others, the others." That's what we should remember when we use any object at all. People moan about traffic jams, crowds in the subway, without thinking for a moment about the incredible cooperation implied in the existence and functioning of a big city.

CHRISTOPHE The gratitude exercise is very comforting. And in this "comfort"


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Advice for People Struggling with Problems of the Ego CHRISTOPHE

- Be your own friend, have a relationship of friendship with yourself; but don't chase after admiration or promote your own image. It's really a matter of friendship — wanting the best for a friend is being able to be compassionate with him or her but also gently demanding.

- Create little mantras of self-compassion: "Do your best, and never hurt yourself."

- Lighten up. Say to yourself, "My ego is a little bike, not a big SUV!"

- Take a "shower of gratitude" every night. This will remove ego's useless cobwebs, bring joy to your heart, and reveal to you all your inner and outer strengths.


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