

*A nascent Buddhist sees firsthand how Emory is applying modern Western science to ancient Eastern tradition—and why Richard Gere thinks it will save the world*

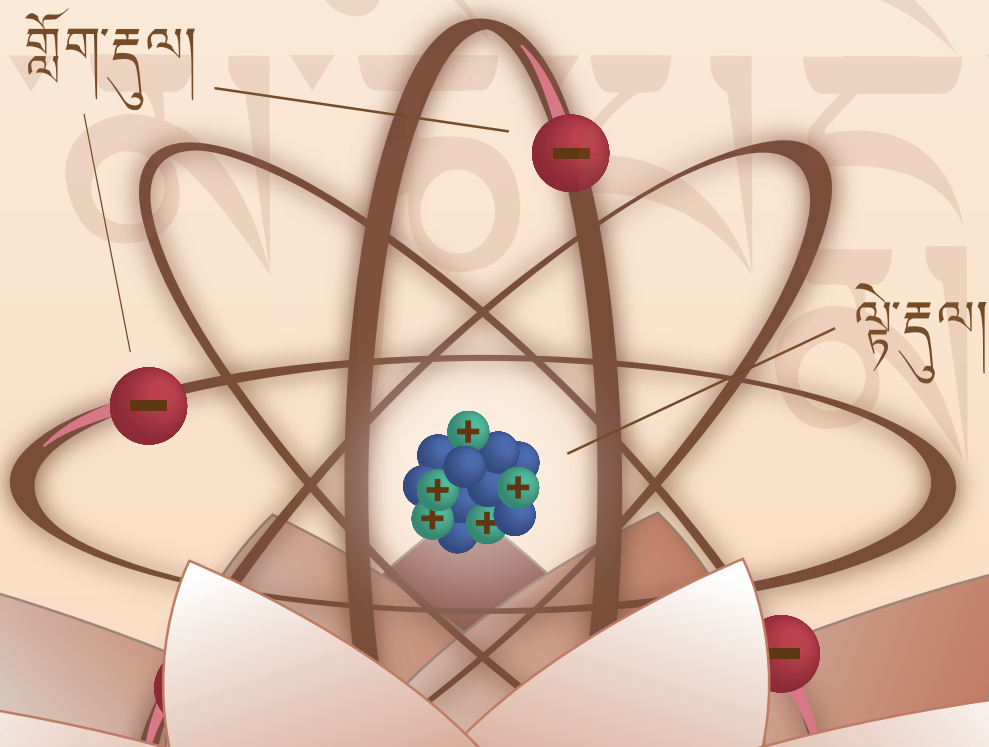
# TESTING FAITH

*By April L. Bogle*

**I want to be happy.** Coming to the end of a terrible decade that has included two debilitating divorces, a wrenching child custody battle, and my beloved father's diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease, I've decided it's time to figure out this happiness thing.

Happiness, according to author and Buddhist monk Matthieu Ricard, "is a way of interpreting the world, since while it may be difficult to change the world, it is always possible to change the way we look at it."

I read this in Ricard's book, *Happiness: A Guide to Developing Life's Most Important Skill*, and it was a breakthrough moment. Not that I hadn't heard some version of that message before, but this time it resonated. The book was assigned reading for the class on Buddhism I took at Atlanta's Drepung Loseling Monastery, the North American seat of the monastery that dates back to fifteenth-century Tibet. Its affiliation with Emory





**A Good Cause:** Richard Gere at the Emory-Tibet Science Initiative fund-raiser with Geshe Lobsang Negi and donor Joni Winston.

was inaugurated by His Holiness the XIV Dalai Lama in 1998. Drepung Loseling has become the place I seek refuge while I “fix” my happiness issue. I’m learning how to meditate, root out negative thoughts and emotions, and reframe my perspective.

And now that I’m on this journey, all the signs are there that this is the right road. I never in my wildest dreams thought I would get to meet Ricard and tell him that his book transformed my life. Or that on a night when I was feeling particularly sad, lonely, and worried about money as my job was being reduced to part time, I would get an email from Drepung Loseling inviting me to spend an evening with Richard Gere—the Hollywood actor whose affiliation with Buddhism is well known—and soon be standing face to face with him.

The journey took me to Washington, D.C., where Ricard, Gere, and Daniel Goleman, author of *Emotional Intelligence* and several other books on the science of the mind, were coming together to help raise money for the Emory-Tibet Science Initiative (ETSI). A joint project of the University and the Tibetan monastic academic system, the initiative is perhaps the

**Opposite:** The illustration incorporates a diagram of an atom from one of the ETSI textbooks, with its parts labeled in Tibetan.

boldest and most challenging program in the Emory-Tibet Partnership, according to Emory College Dean Robert Paul, who opened “The Convergence of Science and Spirituality” fund-raising event in October at the Mayflower Renaissance Hotel.

As I made plans to attend, my daughter, Taylor, unexpectedly asked if she could come along. A college junior studying psychology, Taylor had gotten interested in Buddhist philosophy after she noticed my new sense of peace. “This Buddhist thing is really working for you. You are calmer and it is making me calmer,” she had written in my most recent birthday card. This was one of the earliest and most important indications I was headed in the right direction.

And this trip together—thanks to Taylor’s standby flight and several other up-in-the-air arrangements—turned out to be the ideal opportunity to demonstrate to her my mindfulness, loving kindness, and compassion. “Breathe in, breathe out” became my mantra.

### *Ancient Meets Modern*

The primary purpose of the Emory-Tibet Science Initiative is to realize the Dalai Lama’s vision for a comprehensive science education curriculum that can be used to

instruct all Tibetan monastics by 2014. Now in its third year, ETSI has reached nineteen of the thirty Tibetan monastic institutions offering rigorous academic programs in Nepal and India. The initiative includes curriculum developed by Emory faculty and scholars, the production of a new two-volume Tibetan-English science textbook each year, a six-week summer intensive in Dharamsala, India, for ninety Tibetan monks and nuns and led by sixteen Emory faculty, and an annual international conference on science translation into Tibetan.

“Tibetan monks and nuns spend their lives studying the inner world of the mind rather than the physical world of matter,” read an article in the *New York Times* in June 2009. “Yet for one month this spring a group of ninety-one monastics devoted themselves to the corporeal realm of science. . . . Many in the group, whose ages ranged from the twenties to the forties, had never learned science and math. In Tibetan Buddhist monasteries and nunneries, the curriculum has remained unchanged for centuries.”

Through ETSI, ancient Buddhist practices meet modern learning and technology, from neuroscience lessons delivered in PowerPoint to dialogue between monks and Emory faculty taking place across oceans via the Internet. Mind-body exercises such as meditation, employed for centuries, are being examined with the most current scientific methods and resources.

Although in Washington that week, His Holiness was not able to attend the ETSI fund-raiser. Instead, he sent a letter and his own financial contribution. “I am happy to make a contribution of \$50,000 towards this important work at Emory and urge others also to lend their support to this unique and meaningful undertaking,” he wrote. Such donations are common, according to **Geshe Lobsang Negi 99PhD**, director of the Emory-Tibet

Partnership, who explained that His Holiness regularly uses royalties from his thirty books to support Tibetan causes.

Negi, who appeared on the panel of scholars at the ETSI fund-raiser, was born near Tibet and trained at the Institute of Buddhist Dialectics and Drepung Loseling Monastery in south India. He moved to Atlanta at the request of the Dalai Lama to establish a Buddhist center and to study Western science.

Now a senior lecturer in Emory's Department of Religion, Negi directs or codirects all components of the Emory-Tibet Partnership and is the spiritual director of Drepung Loseling in Atlanta. His work is to lay the foundation for Emory's ongoing programs and establish a two-way conversation between Western scientists and Buddhist monastics that explores two scientific perspectives: the inner science of the mind and emotion, and the science of Tibetan medicines—herbs, the holistic model, and how doctors relate to patients—all firmly grounded in scientific knowledge.

"This is not about bringing Buddhism in through the back door. It's about how Buddhism can contribute to the well-being of humanity," Negi said. "It has to be understood that basic human values and healing practices are not Buddhist per se—they are universal. They were developed in Tibet within Buddhism, but here can be understood in scientific terms and then will be more easily accepted and implemented."

Negi is now fostering the growth of three new programs that can provide additional evidence. One is the scientific research on Tibetan medical compounds being led by world-renowned Emory scientist Raymond Schinazi, coinventor of drugs that revolutionized the treatment of HIV/AIDS. Schinazi is collaborating with Tibetan doctors to analyze medicines for antiviral and anticancer properties.

The second is a pair of pilot projects that evaluate the effects of meditation in children. One group, seven adolescent girls who live in foster care in Georgia, were taught mindfulness and compassion meditation for six weeks to teach them to be more resilient, more positive with others, and more productive academically. The results were encouraging, and the program now has the attention of state leaders



**With Emory's help, Tibetan monastics are learning science with current methods and technology.**

and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The other group, with younger children at the Paideia School near Emory, is designed to introduce practices of meditation into modern education.

For the third program, Negi has teamed up with Emory's Charles Raison, assistant professor of psychiatry, to study the effects of compassion meditation on inflammatory responses when people, in this case Emory students, are stressed. Initial results, published in *Psychoneuroendocrinology* in 2009, showed a strong relationship between time spent practicing meditation and reductions in physiological and emotional stress.

The study's next phase will compare compassion meditation with mindfulness training and a series of health-related lectures. The outcome of both phases will help neuroscientists understand mind and body connections and the power of the mind to effect illness and health.

### *High Profile Support*

Why did Goleman, Gere, and Ricard lend their fame to the Emory-Tibet Science Initiative as speakers at the Washington fund-raiser? For each of them, the study of Buddhism has become a global quest. They hope to help bring 2,500 years of Buddhist understanding of the mind into the Western mainstream, and they share the belief that the soundest course is to

prove its worth by testing it with Western scientific methods.

As a psychology student at Harvard, Goleman traveled to India to study the psychological systems of Asian religions. He wound up writing his dissertation on meditation as an intervention and stress-free activity. Goleman became a science journalist for the *New York Times* and eventually joined the Mind and Life Institute, a group that began a series of dialogues between the Dalai Lama and Western scientists dedicated to examining Tibetan practice through a research lens.

This work continues today, and added to it is the aim to teach Buddhist monks and nuns Western science so that they can join the study. And that is where ETSI plays a pivotal role. "His Holiness said to me that in a century or two, the scientist doing the research on meditation practice will be a practitioner, he'll be doing it on his own brain, and it starts with this kind of education," said Goleman. "So that's one of the many reasons I feel this initiative from Emory is of great importance for furthering this field and also for the byproduct, to help alleviate human suffering."

Ricard, who serves as a subject for many of the Mind and Life Institute research studies, was working as a cellular biologist at the prestigious Pasteur Institute when he became interested in Buddhism. He was intrigued by a series of

documentaries on the great spiritual masters who had fled Tibet after its invasion by communist China.

After several visits, Ricard moved to India to do postdoctoral study and stayed for the next forty years, ultimately becoming a Buddhist monk. He had no intention of returning to science until he was convinced to join the Mind and Life Institute project on destructive emotion. The idea was to study changes that might take place in the brain during meditation, particularly the areas that generate good feelings and compassion. It was to be the first such study on someone who has as much meditation training as Ricard's—more than fifty thousand hours. If changes in his brain were detected—and they were—the group planned to continue the study with all levels of meditation practitioners.

"It's such groundbreaking research," Ricard said. "It's the start of the golden age of this context of neuroscience and psychology and clinical study of meditation."

Gere's journey began when he was a young boy growing up in a Methodist home. Although he thought the compassion within Christianity was "extremely powerful," he felt it wasn't "courageous and probing and really challenging."

"And that's what I was incredibly struck by in Buddhism in general, not just in Tibetan Buddhism," he said. "You've all heard His Holiness say that the words of the Buddha are to be challenged. If they're not of any use to you, then let them go. I think that's why Buddhism has stayed so strong for 2,500 years now is that insistence on trial."

Gere, star of *An Officer and a Gentleman* and *Pretty Woman*, has used his fame to raise money for a variety of Tibetan causes, including a revolving fund started more than a decade ago that enabled fifty groups of monks and nuns to come to the United States to study.

"I think that was the beginning of Tibetan monasteries and nunneries encountering Western science because inevitably they would be going to universities around the world. . . . I want to see it get to the next level where it can be endowed," Gere said. "The fact that you [ETSU] come up with textbooks for them on Western science is miraculous. How they've taken to it is miraculous. How it's

in their language is miraculous. And now this can be spread through the community to bring people into the twenty-first century in a very organic way. I think it is incredibly moving, what you have done, and I applaud you."

Gere's primary concern is preserving the Tibetan culture, not just for Tibet, but for the world. "I don't know how we can survive without what they have protected for us the last two thousand years," he said.

### *Compassion and Courage*

As soon as the panel discussion ended, I headed for the stage, hoping to pose a couple of questions to the panelists. Ricard was standing alone. "Your book transformed my life," I told him. Labeled by scientists as the world's happiest man, he radiates inner peace and wisdom.

Gere, by contrast, was surrounded by people clamoring to get his attention and a bodyguard trying to usher him out the back door. *Breathe in, breathe out.*

"Excuse me, Mr. Gere. I'm with *Emory Magazine*, and I have a question," I said. "What is the biggest obstacle to achieving this universal goal of helping people learn about the workings of the mind and the benefits of compassion?"

My answer came complete with the Richard Gere focus and charisma I'd seen on the big screen, all there in the flesh.

"The biggest obstacle is in our own hearts and minds," he said. "We're just habituated to the known. The way the mind works, it always goes to what it knows. So the kind of energy that can break through into new territory, exploring energy, doesn't come to us easily."

Not ready to let him go, I asked an immediate follow-up question: "How do we break through it?"

"Courage," he answered, full of conviction. "Compassion and courage."

And then someone interrupted with his own questions, and Gere's bodyguard was ready to pull him out the door.

"No wait, I want to finish this with her," he said, looking my way. It probably was

plain old pleasure, but at that moment, I wondered if I'd entered *sukha*—a lasting state of well-being.

"I find in my own life, if I don't do it for myself, it makes it a lot easier," he said. "If doing this event was about me, my livelihood, there is no way I could do it. As soon as we see ourselves as vehicles to help people, other energy comes through us."

And then he smiled directly at me, and left the room.

I stood motionless, breathing in, breathing out. When I looked up, there was Taylor, camera in hand, smiling.

"I was watching and didn't think you were going to ask him a question," she said breathlessly. "And then I realized, 'She's going for it!'"

Everything about our trip had fallen into place—I believe, in large part, due

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—GESHE LOBSANG NEGI 99PHD

to the mindfulness, loving kindness, and compassion we had practiced—and I couldn't let Taylor down at the peak moment. I had to show her that she can count on me despite all we've been through in our family. I had to let her see that I have the courage Gere spoke of. And that when I'm challenged, I can breathe in and breathe out and reframe my perspective—and so can she. It's a way to happiness that you can count on, and some very wise, renowned scholars and practitioners—from Emory faculty to Buddhist monks to Hollywood stars—join me in believing that Western science may ultimately prove it.

As Taylor and I departed the Mayflower for a friend's home somewhere in Maryland, we were confident we'd find our way. We breathed. We laughed. We were happy. ■

*April L. Bogle is director of communications for Emory's Center for the Study of Law and Religion. The Dalai Lama will conduct an interfaith dialogue at Emory in October 2010 to culminate the center's five-year project on The Pursuit of Happiness.*