

What Do You Want? Comparing Psychological, Sociological, and Buddhist Theories on Happiness

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Introduction:

Philosophers, religious leaders, and spiritual practitioners, from both the east and west, have been investigating the question of what happiness is and how to cultivate more of it for thousands of years. More recently, happiness is becoming a topic of investigation in the fields of positive psychology and sociology, which begs the question: how do these ancient philosophical and modern scientific theories on happiness compare? In this research project, I compared three different happiness theories, drawing from psychological, sociological, and Buddhist perspectives, and provided reasons as to why differences amongst these theories exist.



Dr. Martin E. P. Seligman
A founder of Positive Psychology



Dr. Jonathan Haidt
Sociologist, specializing in morality and moral emotions



Dr. Matthieu Ricard
Buddhist monk and writer with a PhD in Molecular Genetics

Methodology:

For this research, I referenced three main sources: Martin Seligman's *Authentic Happiness*, Jonathan Haidt's *The Happiness Hypothesis: Finding Modern Truth in Ancient Wisdom*, and Matthieu Ricard's *Happiness: A Guide to Developing Life's Most Important Skill*. I compared how Seligman, Haidt, and Ricard defined happiness and its constituents and how their theories addressed the role of biology, circumstances, relationships, external voluntary factors (such as the pursuit of pleasure), and internal voluntary factors (such as meditation or cognitive therapy) in the pursuit of happiness. I placed special attention on the problem of dependency and role of detachment or renunciation in Ricard's theory and addressed some objections raised by Haidt about the practicality or accessibility of some Buddhist practices and ideals for everyday people.

"However we go about looking for it, and whether we call it joy or duty, passion or contentment, isn't happiness the goal of all goals?"

Matthieu Ricard

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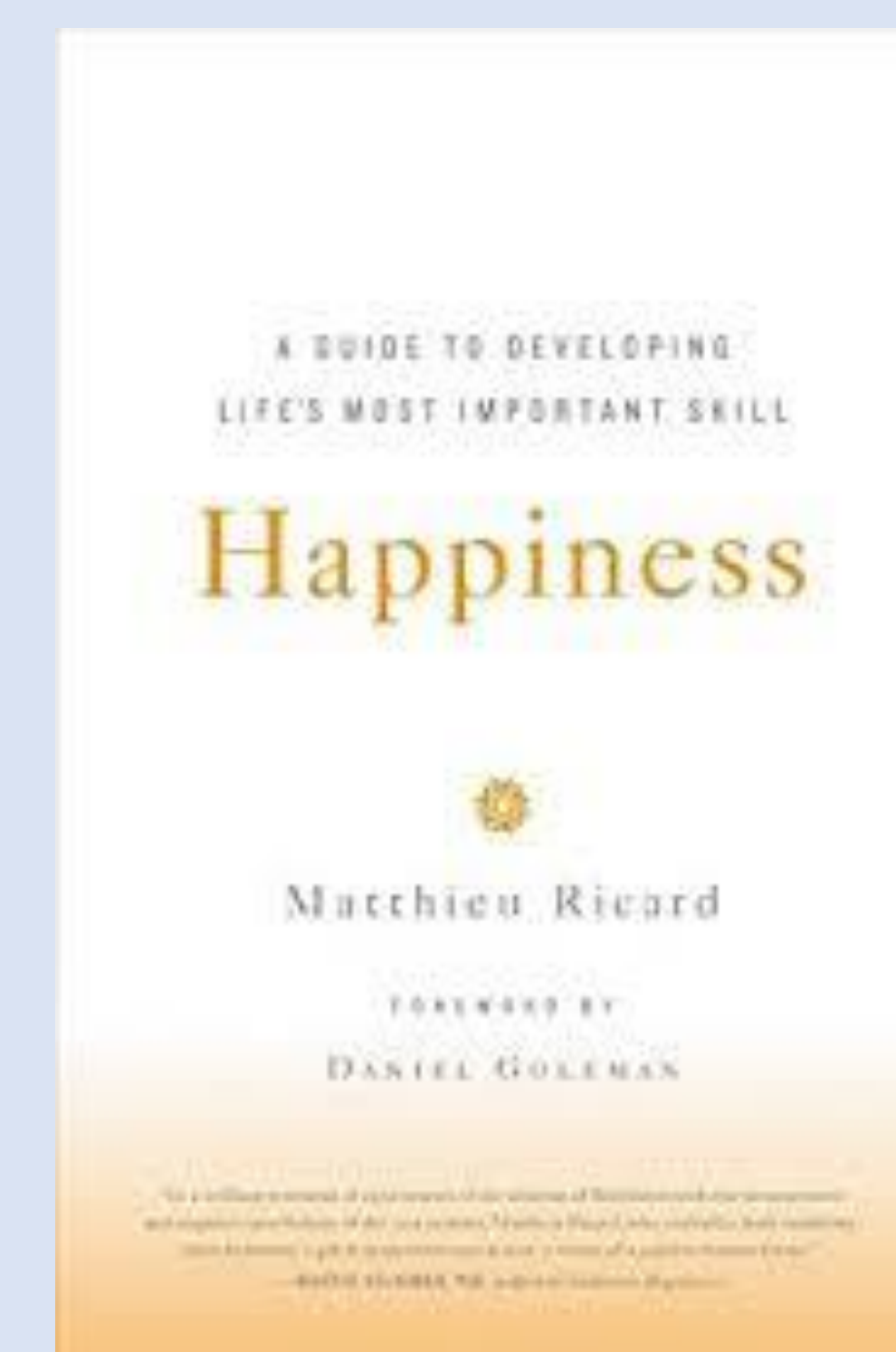
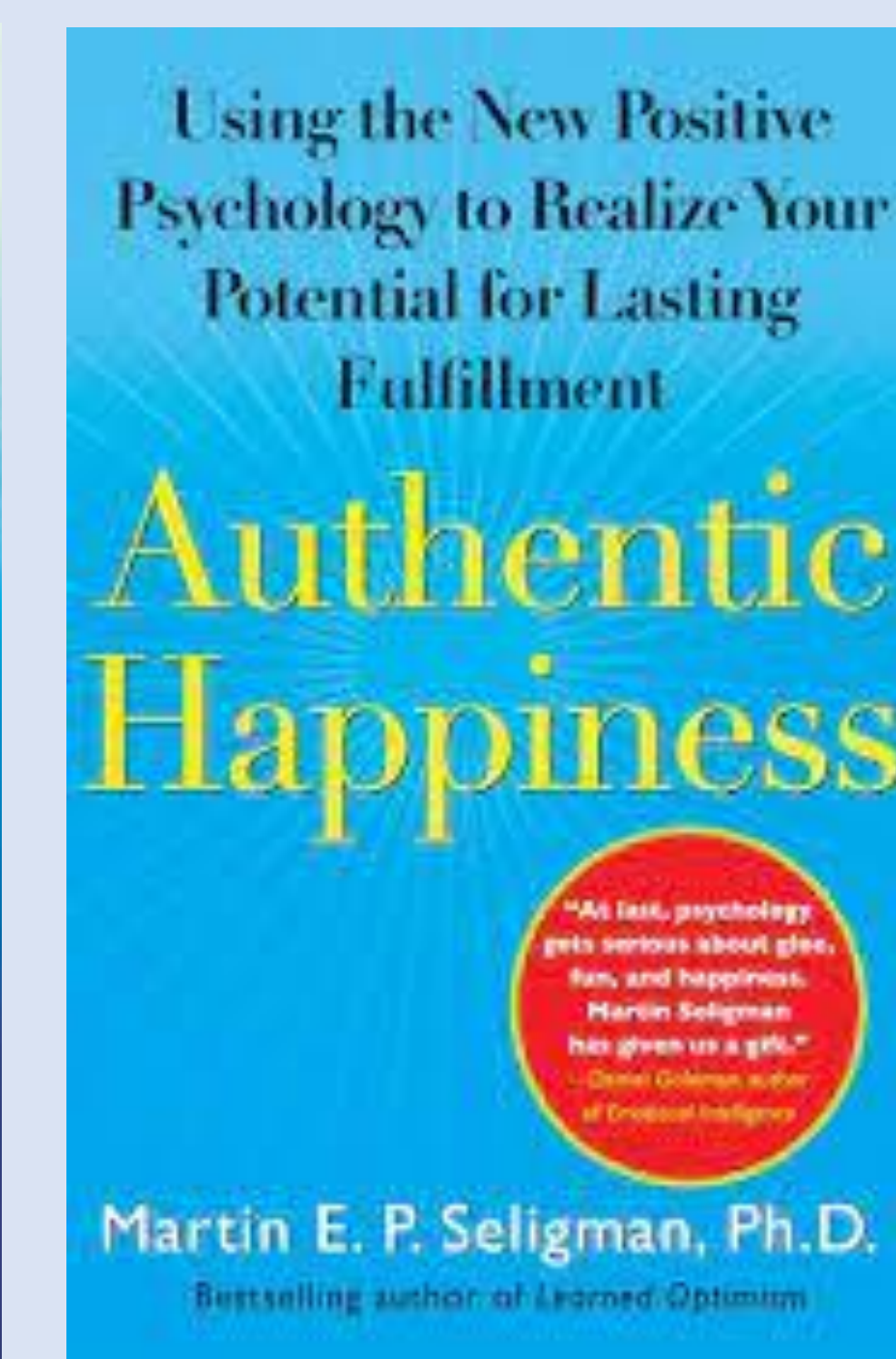
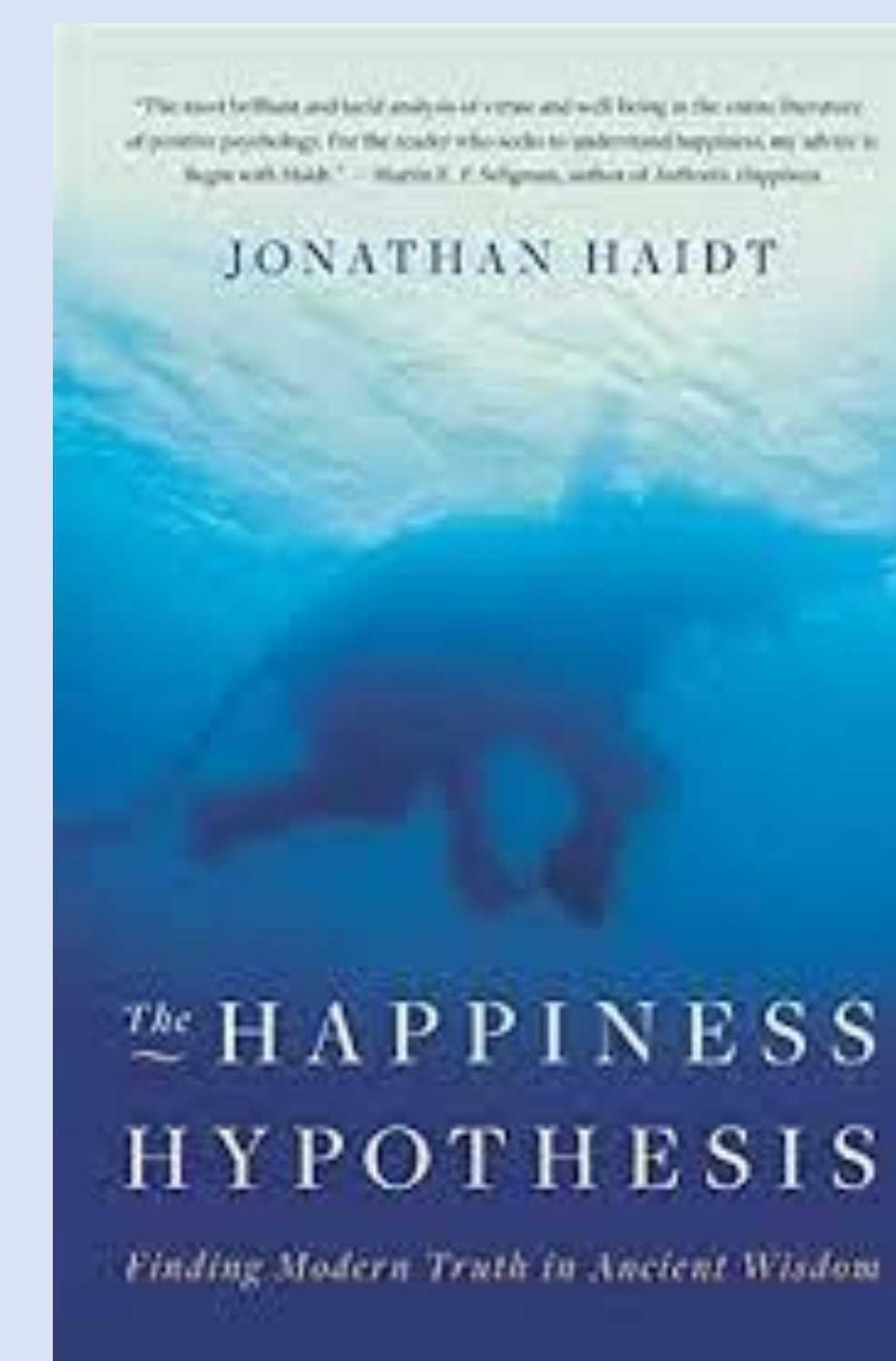
"Happiness is not something you find, acquire, or achieve directly. You have to get the conditions right and wait."

Jonathan Haidt

Results:

Seligman, Haidt, and Ricard agreed on two main points: that individuals exert a greater influence over their experience of happiness than they may realize and, more fundamentally, that happiness is something that can be cultivated. But, they disagreed on how to balance our efforts between internal and external pursuits, as well as on what those efforts might be. These differences arose because of two reasons:

1. They referenced different kinds of happiness, happiness derived from pleasure, virtue, and meaning (Seligman and Haidt) versus happiness as an optimal state of being brought about by the removal of ignorance and renunciation (Ricard).
2. They argued for different balances between long term efforts for inner transformation versus more immediate or practical solutions, depending on the level of the individual (in terms of attachments, dependencies, and desires).



Conclusion:

The theories illustrated by Seligman, Haidt, and Ricard paint different pictures of what happiness is and how best to cultivate or attain it. They focus on outlining the various roads to happiness, but it is left to each individual to decide for themselves what they want, be it pleasure, virtue, meaning, inner-freedom, or something else. Additionally, comparing these theories sparked questions about the practicality of applying certain ancient philosophical practices, such as detachment or renunciation, today. It also led to the question of how we should view Buddha's example, is it accessible or even desirable?