

094 Jeff Foster

Interviewee: Rick Archer (RA)

Interviewer: Jeff Foster (JF)

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[*Music*]

RA: Welcome to Buddha at the Gas Pump. My name is Rick Archer, and my guest today is Jeff Foster.

Hi Jeff. I had the pleasure of meeting Jeff at the Science and Nonduality Conference just a week ago out in California. We had lunch together in a little Thai restaurant, which was delicious. I've been meaning to interview Jeff for a long time, but he's always had trouble with his bandwidth over in the U.K. Now he happens to be in the U.S., so we've worked it out.

Speaking of the Science and Nonduality Conference, I just want to make a brief mention of thanks to all the people who donated to my being able to go there. There's a donate button on my site, and it was on the basis of that that I was able to attend the conference. I really had a great time. If I have a chance I'll make a little video or write something up about the whole experience of the conference, but I just wanted to say thanks to those people who've donated and also perhaps to mention that the Batgap coffers have been somewhat depleted as a result of that conference. So if anyone feels like donating, or donating again, or something, it's much appreciated, but of course there's no obligation.

We'll let him introduce himself in the course of the interview, but Jeff is what I guess we would call a non-duality teacher.

No, he doesn't like that. We'll have to refine that [*laughs*].

In fact, I saw some little blurb. Maybe it was on the Science and Nonduality Conference description of you. It used the word "radical" and I thought, *Why is that there because I wouldn't think of Jeff as a radical? Why are they using that word?*

JF: It's a very good question, Rick. Well, I suppose the first thing to say is that we love to classify teachings and teachers that way. I mean, I guess perhaps the way I used to talk a few years ago, you might call that a little bit more radical, I suppose. I've never really had much of a label for what I am. I mean I just talk [*laughs*] about life, and people listen or they don't listen, and that's it really. Yeah, I mean people try to classify me and categorize me, but I'm kind of happy with being called anything, depending on someone's background. That's going to influence what they call you. So someone with a non-duality background might call you a non-duality teacher if they resonate with what you say. If someone hasn't got that background they might call you a friend, or they might call you a—I don't know, what do people call me? I don't know [*laughs*] I don't know what I am. What am I, Rick? You tell me.

RA: Well, we'll work on that.

JF: We'll work it out in the interview, I think.

RA: I was teaching a T.M. residence course one time, and I kind of walked in late. I was just coming from another city, and the other teachers were already there. I got up and just started talking. At one point somebody said, "Well, who are you?" I said, "Ah, I'm still working on that one." I got a good laugh [*laughs*].

So I wouldn't call you radical because, in my listening to what you have been saying, I consider you to be quite appreciative of the whole package. You don't seem to be taking a radical stance at one end of the spectrum and sort of dismissing or denying the validity of the other parts of the spectrum. You're just kind of, like, looking at the whole package as far as I can tell.

JF: I guess, yeah. I think—

You've frozen, Rick. You froze on my screen. I don't know if I froze. Have I froze?

RA: No, you're fine. I have to—There we go, thank you.

JF: Okay.

Well, yeah, we can get into all of this, but in the end, this message, it's not a rejection of any aspect of life because in the end what we're talking about is non-duality, which means not two, which means wholeness, oneness. So it all becomes a bit strange when you start saying oneness is this, but it's not that. When you start to reject aspects of life, you're kind of back into the old religious stuff, really. You're back into, I'm right; you're wrong. My path is the true path. I have the truth, and you don't. That's never been what it is about for me. It's never been about, I know and you don't. This is about the mystery. This is about the not knowing. This is about the falling away of all those rigid conceptual positions. That's what I've discovered over the years. Even non-duality can just become a religion for people. I mean I'm sure you've experienced this for yourself. This is, I guess, when we go into the story of my life.

RA: Yeah, we'll get into all of that.

JF: We'll get into that.

I was really stuck in that kind of rigid fundamentalist place of, I have no self, but you still have a self. Or I'm non-dualistic, but you're still dualistic. There's no me; there's no me here, but you still have a "me" and all that stuff, but funny thing at the time you don't see it. That's what's interesting. At the time, you don't realize that you're stuck in it. You just think you're free; you think you have the truth.

The beauty of life is that, in my experience, it doesn't let you get away with anything. Life is not going to let you come to rest on any conceptual position. Life is going to come along, and it's going to burn up any conceptual—even the conceptual position that you have no conceptual position. I mean it's brilliant, this thing.

RA: Yeah, well thank God for that, you know. Who wants to get stuck?

JF: Who wants to get stuck? Stuck-ness is suffering. I believe that's what this message has always been about for me. It's about the stuck-ness and about seeing the stuck-ness, and somehow seeing the stuck-ness and freeing yourself from the stuck-ness. You can get stuck in anything. You can even get stuck in this non-duality stuff. I mean, really, you can probably get more stuck than ever in this non-duality stuff. It's really fascinating, the whole thing.

RA: I've encountered a few of those [*laughs*].

In Sanskrit, probably the best word for non-duality is Brahman, and the word Brahman comes from a root that means great. There's a saying, Brahman is the eater of everything. The idea is that Brahman is thought to just be completely inclusive of everything, of the Absolute, of the relative. It's kind of more than the sum of its parts. So I think very often a rather preliminary stage of realization, which is not inclusive of everything, is thought of as non-duality. It has its own intrinsic non-dualness, but if it separates itself, as you were just saying, from all kinds of other things like the whole relative world, then obviously there's a duality. There's not a non-duality [*laughs*].

JF: Absolutely. I don't know if you want to get into this now because, I mean, in the end this is the real meat of it.

RA: Well, we can get with the meat.

JF: We can get with the meat. Let's go straight to the meat.

RA: Then we can always retrace our steps.

JF: [*Laughs*] If there are any steps left after that.

RA: We'll go back for the potatoes later.

JF [*Laughs*] Right.

This is why, these days, I use the metaphor of the waves and the ocean quite a lot because I think a lot of people seem to resonate with this, and it seems to clear up a lot of this stuff.

So you could say that the ocean is what's been pointed to. It's what's been called the Absolute, and the waves are the relative. This is why it's such a beautiful metaphor because it's not even a metaphor. You go to the ocean. You go walk to the ocean and look out, and it will look like there are waves moving through the ocean. You can't deny the appearance of that, but the thing is you get in a boat. You sail to the waves, and you go right up close to those waves. You will not find any separation between the ocean and the wave. You just can't say where the ocean ends and the wave begins. You won't find the line. So when you look right up close, where's the wave? But at

the same time you can't deny that there appears to be a wave, like from a distance. You can't deny that either.

This whole relative denial thing, it can be such a beautiful insight or realization on the spiritual path, that you discover this wide-open space. Call it the absolute, or call it the ocean, or call it consciousness, or call it awareness, or call it presence, or whatever. In the end it doesn't matter. Depending on your conditioning, you'll use a different word for it, but in the end it can be a beautiful realization to discover this wide-open space of awareness behind thoughts, behind things, behind sensations. It's like you discover the ocean behind—and you can see where this is going—you discover the ocean behind the waves.

I know in my own experience, years ago, that provided so much freedom to discover that, that spaciousness, that vastness, that presence, that awareness. But what happened, in my experience, was that I started to identify with *that*. I started to identify with the Absolute. I started to identify with awareness. I thought I had discovered freedom from all identity, and actually what I was doing was just identifying with something new. I was identifying with awareness, so I'm not a person. I dis-identified with the person, and now I'm not a person. I know that, and that's my new identity. I'm no one; I am awareness. I guess it was what I needed at the time. I guess at the time it provided—

RA: It fades.

JF: Yeah, it provided so much freedom, and it was an incredible insight. So much suffering did fall away, actually, in that discovery. But, you see, at that point I thought I was finished. I thought, *Right, I've done it now. This is my conclusion. Life is concluded. It's finished. It's over. I am no one.* But you're right; you're absolutely right, there was still that subtle, or actually not so subtle—when you really think of it, it's no so subtle at all—division between awareness and content of awareness, or between no one, I am no one or I have no self. Then you look out at the world, and you see all these other people who have selves. You separate, and you feel subtly superior to them because you have no self, or you're no one, or you're non-dual, although of course there's no one here to be non-dual. So you become very clever with language, but subtly, or not so subtly, you're separating yourself. You're separating yourself from everyone else who is still dual, or whatever. You can play this game in a million different ways, and it's a game. Really, it's a game—

RA: Reminds me of a joke. Do you want to hear a joke?

JF: Please.

RA: So the rabbi and the cantor are in the synagogue—I think it's called a cantor. I'll say that, but I think that's the term. The rabbi is very humble and he's saying, "Oh, I am no one. I am no one." Then the cantor hears him saying that, and he kind of chimes in, "Yes, I am no one. I am no one." Then the janitor, who is sweeping the floor, hears them saying that, and he starts getting into it, "Oh, yes, I am no one. I am no one." They overhear him, and the rabbi says to the cantor, "Ha, look who thinks he is no one." [*Laughter.*]

JF: That's great. Oh, absolutely. It just becomes another position, although at that place it can become so tricky. I know years ago, I was more blind than ever at that point. I was more blind than ever, I think. I really believed that I was no one, that I had no self.

RA: And what would have happened at that point if you had stubbed your toe or something? Wasn't there a heck of a lot of someone feeling that pain?

JF: Well, there was a lot of denial going on. There was a lot of denial going on, you see. It was like, I am no one; I have no feelings; I have no thoughts; I have no feelings; I am beyond human; I am beyond the human experience. Secretly, behind the scenes, it's not possible. It's more of an illusion. It became exhausting, actually, because it just becomes another image to have to hold up. I thought I was free from all images, and actually I was still very subtly holding up this image that I was no one because it would have to be an image. It would have to be an image to even speak the words, "I am no one," or "there is no one." You know a hell of a lot about yourself if you know that you're no one—

RA: Let's—oh, go ahead. I'm sorry.

JF: I'll just quickly finish this ocean and the wave thing because this is why I use this metaphor these days, because it's so beautiful. In the end, the ocean is inseparable from the waves. So in the end, this is not a rejection of the wave. It's not, I am not the waves because that becomes a new definition of yourself. In the end, what you are, as the ocean, is inseparable from everything that appears, and so that's when it's no longer a cold rejection of humanity. It becomes a total embrace of our humanity, of thoughts, of feelings, of sensations, until ultimately you can say, ultimately, there's no separate self here; what I am is just this space. But in the end whatever that is, is inseparable from all the stuff that appears. Then you can't even say that you're no one. I think that's when the adventure really begins. I can't even say that I'm no one. That seems too much, still too much heavy identity. I'm no one. How exhausting to have to be no one, yuck.

So what a relief, these days, to be able to be human, I mean really fully human again. In a way this has just become like a total celebration of humanness, and I have no way of knowing what this is. It's not like I know what this is, but whatever it is, there appears to be this body, and sounds, and coffee, and tea, and pain, and, you know, it's like it's all included. It's all included. For me that pointer, there is no one, actually I think what it really means is not, I'm no one, but you're still someone. It's not, I used to be someone, and now I'm no one, as if, I was a person and then magically one day the person fell away, and now I'm no one. That's all more of the old enlightenment myth.

In the end what does it mean to truly be no one? It means that you can be anyone, in a sense, and no one and someone are not two. Being no one really means I can be fully myself. I can be whatever is happening in this moment. If that's sadness, or pain, or fear, or anything, it's all embraced, and to me that's what non-duality is really about. I'm not saying this is the truth of non-duality. I'm saying in my own experience, I can only speak from my own experience. It seems to be what it's all about because in the end it would have to be a total embrace of life. It would have to be because it is life. It is life, so it has to be a total embrace of life. I can't imagine it being anything else.

RA: There are several thoughts that come to mind. One is that I think we need to explore this, I am no one business a little bit more so people know what we're talking about in case they don't, but one thought that comes to mind is that whatever we're talking about, it's not conceptual. I mean, you're not sort of advocating that a person entertain certain concepts, and on the basis of those concepts life is going to be a certain way. If this is to be real, and it has to sort of be in your bones and your blood. It's a living reality that is not lost by virtue of forgetting about it, nor is it lived by virtue of thinking about it. It's just as natural as breathing, as spontaneous as digesting. It's just the platform or the foundation on which you are living. It doesn't matter what you think or don't think, or understand, or don't understand, or anything else. It's experiential, not conceptual.

JF: Absolutely. That's the thing about non-duality. It's so easy to take all this stuff on as just a new belief system—

RA: Yeah, read a lot of books; learn the lingo.

JF: It's easy to learn; it's easy to learn. You read a few books. You pick up the idea that there's no self. So now you have a self just believing there's no self, and nothing changes. That's the thing. Nothing changes. You have a wave in the ocean simply believing that it's not a wave. The point is it still experiences itself as a separate wave. It still experiences itself as separate from the ocean. That's what this whole thing is really about. We long to no longer be separate from life. There's so many ways of saying it. Again, it depends on—pick your favorite words, but it's like we all long to come home. The wave in the ocean—

RA: Wants to remember its ocean-hood or something.

JF: Ocean-hood, that's a great word. Exactly. It longs to return to the ocean because it doesn't realize—This is the thing, because it doesn't recognize who it really is. It's already the ocean but doesn't realize it, so it goes off into the world of time and space and starts to seek the ocean in a million different ways. On the most basic level, I think that's what everyone is doing in this world. We're all looking for the ocean. We don't consciously realize we're doing that. We're looking for what we already are. We don't realize we're doing it. We experience ourselves as going out into the world and looking for fame, looking for wealth, looking for power, looking for success, or looking for enlightenment. It's the same thing, really. We're looking for some thing in the future. Some thing will complete me one day. It's always one day. One day, I'll find what I'm looking for, and then I'll be complete.

So, yeah, the wave that longs for the ocean could start to believe in non-duality. The wave takes on a non-duality belief system, so the wave starts to believe it's not a wave. The wave starts to believe it has no self, or the wave starts to believe it's not seeking anymore. Still, underneath it's desperately seeking, desperately longing. So in the end all the beliefs in the world, they're not going to do this. You know you're absolutely right. This has to get into your bones; it's an experiential thing.

So before, when I was talking about when I was stuck in the non-duality concepts, the I am no one, and I have no self, the beauty of life is that it wouldn't let me get away with it. There was still suffering. There was still seeking. There was still longing. There was someone who had convinced themselves they weren't seeking. So you can convince yourself of anything, but it's not going to end the seeking. It's not going to end the suffering, which I guess that's what this is really about, isn't it? It's the end of seeking.

What is the end of seeking? This is the question. Is the end of seeking something that will happen to you one day? Is the end of seeking an event, an experience that will happen to you one day if you're lucky enough, or if you practice hard enough? Or maybe it's grace. Maybe it just descends on you one day. Or, is the end of seeking actually more simple and much more present? Is the end of seeking just another way of talking about life as it is?

RA: Well, I think there are two ways of keeping a dog at your door, you know. One is you can tie it there, and another is you can provide some nice delicious food. If the food is there, the dog will just stay right there as long as there's food, and the dog is enjoying the food. So, I mean you can say to people, stop seeking, but if the clarity of experience hasn't arisen where they're really actually living that fulfillment that you're alluding to, then it's not necessarily appropriate for them to stop seeking. It could be a very false cessation where they're really not fulfilled, but they sort of have this attitude of, oh, I'm no longer seeking.

JF: Yeah, I mean if it was that easy to stop seeking, if it was just a case of telling people to stop seeking, everyone would have done it by now, right? If it was that simple: oh, yeah, I should just stop seeking, of course. You know, it doesn't work like that. Even if it were possible to stop seeking for a while, it's not going to last. The pain is going to return. Fear, all the human stuff, especially in relationship—These days I'm talking more and more about relationship because that seems to be the place where the seeking mechanism seems to play itself out in its most concentrated form.

People might not be looking for enlightenment. They might not be looking for completeness in that way, but we look for completeness in all sorts of ways. It's not just about the spiritual seeking in the end. We look for completeness through other people in relationships. We're waiting for other people to complete us. We're waiting for other people to understand us, or to approve of us, or to love us. We spend our lives waiting. For me, that was a huge revelation years ago. At some point I wasn't looking for enlightenment any more. That whole thing fell away. I realized there was no such thing as enlightenment in the way I had been thinking about it. At that point I really felt that all my seeking was over, but seeking can play out in much more subtle ways.

Seeking plays itself out in these big ways. Like, one day I'll become enlightened, but it also plays itself out in very subtle, much smaller ways. Just the search in this moment to be free from this pain, to be free from this fear—that's the same seeking. That's the same seeking. Or, in a relationship, seeking wholeness in another person, not recognizing that what you are is already whole, so you start to wait for someone else to give you that wholeness, that's when so much conflict in relationships can begin because if you imagine that someone is giving you completeness, they can also take it away at any moment.

That's a source of huge conflict in relationships. You were supposed to complete me. You were supposed to make me feel happy. All these expectations are on other people. So that's another way that seeking plays itself out. It's not just looking for enlightenment. It's attempting to escape the present pain, the present fear. Or, it's attempting to get something from another person that they can't really give you. In the end, no one can give you this. No teacher, no guru, no lover can give you the wholeness that you truly seek. So, in the end, this is about letting go of looking for that wholeness outside of yourself. That's not just a conceptual thing: oh, I'm going to let go. You can't just let go of it. It has to be experiential.

RA: You can't let go of it unless you've actually found it.

JF: Yeah.

RA: Then the letting go is secondary, you know. It's automatic. It's like if you walk into your house, then the garden behind you is automatically forgotten because you're in the house, but if it's like, I should forget the garden, I should forget the garden—It will just happen when you walk into the house.

JF: Absolutely.

RA: This whole “seeking” word is sort of like a dirty word in non-duality circles, and personally I think that—It's a subtle point, but I think it needs to be explored. It's natural. We're hard-wired to seek greater happiness, and it's not something we're taught. It's something that we just do, and in fact probably all life forms do it. Naturally, as you were saying, initially at least we seek that outwardly: this relationship, this new car, this whatever. But we keep finding that those things don't provide it, at least not in any lasting way.

JF: Yeah, exactly, not in a lasting way. So what might happen, you get the new car, or the new lover, or the new job, or the new experience, the new spiritual experience, the new awakening experience, and it's wonderful. There isn't anything wrong with any of this. This isn't like a rejection of all of that because that becomes another game. It's really about seeing it for what it is. So you get the new car, or the new enlightenment experience, and maybe for a while, for a moment, or for however long, the seeking seems to disappear, and there's completeness. Then, of course, it starts up again. There's something that can't be completed. It can't be satisfied through objects, through people, through things, through experiences, and on some level I think every human being has a sense of that. We all know that however much money we have, however many possessions we have, however successful we are, however famous we are, or however enlightened we are, whatever that means to us, in the end it doesn't satisfy us. It doesn't satisfy, so where is this completeness that we're looking for? Are we really going to find it in time? Is it something we can find through doing, doing, doing, doing, doing, or actually is this wholeness already present within this present experience?

You're right: there's something very natural about it. We're looking for freedom from pain, freedom from fear, freedom from sadness. Maybe there's something quite natural about it. When

you experience pain, especially physical pain, for example, you want to do something about it. You want to lessen the pain, right? It's so natural.

RA: Take your hand off the hot stove.

JF: Exactly.

RA: You don't have to think about it.

JF: Or, even simpler, when you're hungry there's something incredibly natural about—

RA: Seeking food.

JF: Looking for food. But I think what humans do, that I don't think any other organism appears to do, we don't just seek shelter, or food, or whatever. We seek completeness. That's a different game. We're trying to complete ourselves. That's a different game.

RA: I see that as a good thing because humans have the evolutionary capacity to sense that there is a completeness somehow to be found, and so they seek it.

JF: I wouldn't say it's a good thing or a bad thing—

RA: It's characteristic of the human species.

JF: It's evolved—

RA: It's a more evolutionary characteristic, yeah.

JF: It's probably inevitable, but an organism in which the capacity for abstract thought has evolved, that organism is going to naturally be a seeker of completeness. From that perspective, it's natural. It's the most natural movement. On that level we can't really judge it. It's life. In that sense, even seeking is a perfect expression of life.

The thing about seeking is that it's also what causes all of our suffering. It's the mechanism behind all of our psychological suffering. Where it goes in the end is we basically don't allow ourselves to feel pain, to feel fear, to feel sadness because we're so busy trying to move away from it and reach some future completeness. We're so conditioned that all of these things, that the pain, fear, sadness, whatever—We're so conditioned to believe that these feelings aren't part of the completeness, you see. What if the completeness actually includes all the stuff that we're trying to run away from, ultimately?

If I have a headache, I might take some aspirin. I had an operation in the hospital a few years ago. [I was] in extreme physical pain, so I took some morphine the nurse gave me. It's like that. There's an intelligence there as well, but the real question is what happens once you've taken all the medicine? You've taken all the medicine you can take. What happens once you've done everything that you can possibly do? So I'm not saying stop doing what you're doing. Of course

you're free to do anything you want to get rid of the pain, or whatever, but in the end what happens when you've done everything you can do? Then what? That's when it becomes interesting. That's when it becomes really interesting. Well, maybe this is life, too. Maybe this pain, or least I call it pain—I call it fear; I call it sadness; I call it negative. We split positive and negative and take the positive. Again, that's not a judgment of that, but so easily that leads to present moment resistance. It leads to not allowing ourselves to really feel what we feel in this moment, trying to escape this moment. That's where it leads. So seeking, in itself, is a very natural evolution of life, but look what happens. Look at the suffering that can come from that, incredible, incredible suffering.

RA: I don't think seeking necessarily has to be an evasion of what we're feeling and experiencing right now. That very same impulse can be turned around and used as an exploratory tool to actually feel more acutely and more directly what it is you're experiencing—

JF: I think it depends how we use the word “seeking.”

RA: Yeah, yeah—I think the word can have a positive connotation.

JF: Oh, yeah, I guess for me the word “seeking”—

RA: Has the escape connotation.

JF. Well, it's the search in time for completeness. It's looking for completeness in time, which basically means if you're looking for completeness in time, on some level you're not seeing the completeness that is already here. So maybe when you just used the word “seeking” that is what you were pointing to, discovering the completeness that's already here.

RA: Yeah, I think there's both a healthy and a sort of unhealthy aspect of it, but the funny thing is, when you just said the thing about seeking completeness in time, these days when I hear almost anybody say almost anything, I simultaneously agree and disagree with them. I sort of see the paradoxical opposites, you know. Yes, you're absolutely right: completeness is here now, yet to take the opposite, there's a growing fullness of completeness, sort of a deepening, an enhancement, or whatever, that five or 10 years down the line, if you were to suddenly snap from this to that, you might think, *Whoa, quite a contrast. This is much more full. This is much more clear, or deep.* Somehow the two don't invalidate each other.

JF: Yeah, it's a paradox. I agree with you, and I disagree with everything as well.

RA: Me too—

JF: But I think that's healthy. I think that's really healthy. It does seem like a total paradox. It does because on one level life is absolutely complete as it is. Right now, these thoughts, these sensations, these feelings, this is the ocean. This is everything that I was ever looking for. This is a perfect expression of completeness, and, who knows, I might not have tomorrow. I'm not guaranteed this evening, you know. So it's like that. I mean discovering that was the real

freedom, oh it's here and now. That's what a lot of these spiritual teachings are pointing to: it's here and now.

So if we go back to the ocean and the wave metaphor, I think this is a really important point because I've met so many people kind of struggling with the paradox of this. So it's, like, on one level I'm already complete, but there does seem to be some kind of deepening or opening. But is that still seeking? It's like I'm complete, but I can be more complete. One day I'll be more complete, you know. Then we start seeking that bigger completeness. Isn't that part of the same mechanism? It seems like a real paradox, and I struggled with this myself for a long time.

I meet a lot of people who have had some big awakening experience or enlightenment experience. They've had some very deep and profound insight that it's all the ocean. They've had a very profound seeing, insight, knowing, whatever you want to call it, that everything is the ocean, that every wave that appears is the ocean, and, in that sense, life is already complete. What happens, I think, to some of the people I've met and in my own experience, is life doesn't stop there. The waves of life—and by waves I just mean anything in present experience is a wave. So a thought is a wave, a sensation, and a feeling, everything is a wave. So the waves keep coming. The waves keep coming. So you might have seen yesterday that everything is the ocean. Wonderful. You might have had a very profound insight yesterday, and call that enlightenment, or call it awakening. It doesn't matter. You might have had a very profound insight yesterday, or earlier today, or five minutes ago, that everything is the ocean; every wave is the ocean. But the waves keep coming, so what about this wave, and this wave, and this wave? What about this pain, and this fear, and this joy, and this sadness, and this thought? That's not going to stop. The waves don't stop. That's just the idea of the seeker that the waves are going to stop one day. That's a wave. A wave imagines that the waves are going to stop. That's more illusion, actually. The waves can't stop because the waves are life, too. The waves are the ocean, you see.

People can become very confused at this point because they go, well I thought I was awakened, but life is still happening, and, oh, I'm still suffering. Sometimes people actually suffer more than ever after a so-called awakening. They suffer more than ever because they had all these ideas about what awakening was supposed to be. Or, I had this idea that I was never going to suffer, because that's what it can feel like sometimes, you know. When you have this awakening, it feels like you're never going to suffer again. You can't even imagine suffering ever again. It's like it blows everything apart because who is going to suffer? There's no one here to suffer. It blows that all away, but again life, in its infinite compassion, is not going to let you get away with that. The waves keep coming. So, in that sense, every wave that appears—if it's pain, if it's sadness, if it's whatever it is—is an invitation back to the ocean.

So I think this is where you realize this is not a paradox at all. On one level everything is the ocean already; every wave that appears is it. Even the most intense suffering, if that happens, that's the ocean appearing. At the same time, though, every wave is also an invitation to see the ocean in that wave. It's like everything is the ocean anyway whether you see it or not. That's the already completeness. That's the ever-present completeness, but at the same time these waves keep coming, and it's this constant invitation. Oh, that's the ocean, too. Ah, that's the ocean, too. So it's like everything is complete, and there's this constant invitation to see that completeness in this way, and that doesn't stop. You could call that a deepening. You could call that a deepening,

or whatever, but I like to talk about it as like this constant invitation. The waves can get subtler and subtler. It's like, oh even these little tiny—That's included as well.

RA: That's what I would mean by deepening; it's subtler and subtler, or at least one way of thinking of it.

JF: Subtler and subtler, yeah, yeah, yeah. This is where it gets a bit confusing because it's not really that *I'm* deepening. It's not that a separate person is deeper into something.

RA: No.

JF: It's more like any remnants of the separation are kind of dying, dying, dying. That could go on forever, but it's no longer, I'm going to deepen because I'm going to become—It's no longer about that any more. It's, like, just life. That's what life is. Life is just the constant invitation to see. Life is—

RA: Another way of putting it might be that the embodiment is somehow becoming fuller, the embodiment of that realization. I mean if we think of ourselves as sort of sense organs of the infinite, you know, then we can be the infinite, but there's infinite capacity for the sense organ to be refined or to be more capable.

Take the analogy of electricity. Basically [there is] one underlying electrical field, but you have light bulbs of varying luminosities. There can be a little 25 watt, or there can be a 1000 watt bulb. They're both grounded in the same electricity, but they have different physical structures, which enable them to radiate light differently. So, like our own physical structure, not only physical but whatever makes up this instrument, it can become, over time, a brighter and brighter emitter, so to speak using the light metaphor, but that doesn't mean that the electrical field, which it knows itself to be, is getting any better, or bigger, or zappier, or anything like that. It is what it is. So there's simultaneous completeness and simultaneous growth, and the two are not in conflict.

JF: Exactly. There's no paradox. When you really see what's going on, there's absolutely no conflict. There's no paradox. There's no paradox at all. This stuff used to drive me insane. I think it drives a lot of people crazy. Some teachers say there's nothing you can do. Everything is seeking. Give up seeking. There's no deepening. It's just this, and the thing is—

RA: I agree with them, but I also take the opposite [*laughs*].

JF: Exactly, but then you see it's not even the opposite. I don't see it as opposites anymore. I agree with you totally, and this, and this wave, and this wave. It's like it's all-inclusive. It's just all-inclusive. That's why I find it hard to call myself a non-duality teacher anymore. What does that mean? I don't know what that means.

RA: Well, it puts you in a conceptual box that really might not be suitable.

JF: What I was going to say, as well, is the beauty of relationship—Maybe everything in life is a relationship, actually. Especially intimate personal relationships. I mean talk about deepening. An intimate personal relationship is always going to bring up those waves in you that aren't being fully accepted, or another way of saying it [is] that you're going to be constantly reminded of the things you're still holding on to, you know, what you're still defending, the images of yourself that you're still defending because the moment you try to defend any image of yourself, even if its very, very subtle, conflict is going to result, you know, in relationship. You see yourself as this thing, and it could be anything. It could be enlightened. It could be I see myself as successful, or strong, or it could be something very, very subtle. The beautiful thing about other people is they're not always going to agree with you. They're not always going to see you how you want to be seen. They're not always going to see you how you see yourself, even if you want to be seen as no one. I've learned more from intimate personal relationships than anything. I mean I really think so. Years ago when I was very trapped in the I am no one thing, that's not going to hold itself up in a brutally honest intimate personal relationship. You're not going to be able play that game. That's beautiful—

RA: Ram Das said, "If you think you're enlightened, go spend a week with your parents" [*laughs*].

JF: Absolutely. Non-duality is the easy stuff. I'm no one, no one here. That's the easy part in a way. Relationship, that's the adventure. That's like the final frontier, really. If you're willing, though, to look at it, and if you're not willing, forget it. If you think you're done, I'm awakened; I'm done; I'm no one, then—Who am I to judge in the end? Who am I to judge?

RA: If you could find a partner who thinks the same way, then maybe you could get away with it. I don't know.

JF: Good luck. Then you're going to end up shutting yourself off to so many people. You're only going to be able to hang around or be around a very small number. It's going to become another separation game. People are going to remind you that actually, God, I'm not even no one. Years ago, it used to really upset me because I was so sure that I was no one. So I keep on coming back to this whole note because it's so fascinating, really.

RA: No, it is.

JF: I don't think that this gets talked about enough in the non-dual circles because it's kind of like a little shadow, or maybe a big shadow. I think it needs to be talked about because I think a lot of people go through this.

RA: This whole no one business, maybe it's useful to point out why a person would feel that. I mean ordinarily what we consider ourselves to be when you ask somebody who they are, and they give you their name, they give you their job, they give you their age, their likes, their dislikes, all kinds of descriptive things about their relative personality, that's actually what they perceive themselves to be. What you're referring to is a discovery that people eventually encounter which is that, whoa, I'm none of those things, and I don't appear to be anything definable. Therefore, there can be this sense of no one. There's this sort of identification, as you

said earlier, with the Absolute or with the unmanifest, and that doesn't have any of these definable, explainable characteristics. So what am I? I seem to be no one.

JF: I'll tell you a little story. I think this is so beautiful. I think it says it all. It was last year sometime. I was doing a meeting, and during the meeting this woman was speaking to me. She was saying how she's discovered what you've just been talking about. She's discovered that she's no one. She has no identity. She's free from the self. Her life has completely changed, and [there is] so much freedom and peace. She said to me, "Jeff, there's one thing that I just don't understand," and I asked her what it was. She said, "It's my children. They still think I'm their mother." This was really causing her a lot of suffering actually, and she just didn't understand it. How can they not see who I really am? There were a lot of judgments about her kids. So what was happening was that they were saying to her, "Mommy, mommy," and she wasn't able to hear it.

JA: I'll bet you if one of them got hit by bus, her feelings of being a mother would very much come to the fore.

JF: This was why she was suffering. This is why life is so compassionate. In the end, life wouldn't let her get away with it. It gave her suffering. On some level, she still longed to connect with her children, but in her "I am no one" state she had lost the ability to. So life doesn't let you get away with it, if you're honest. I think she was honest about this. She was honest that she was still suffering.

JA: She just swung to that extreme. Hadn't integrated it.

JF: And she was telling me, she was saying, "Jeff, I don't understand it. Why do they see me as their mother? Can't they see who I really am? I have no identity. I'm not identified with anything." I said to her, "Yes, you are. You're totally identified," and she said, "Huh?" I said, "You're totally identified with not being their mother, and that's why it hurts so much." Your kids are coming along, and they're threatening that image. That's intimate relationship. If you're willing and open, allow your images to be threatened and find what hurts.

I used to be so terrified of interpersonal conflict. I would always try to run away from it, but these days I just see conflict is just a wonderful opportunity to really take an honest look and see what are you still defending. What image of yourself are you still defending? It could be something as subtle as one of these spiritual concepts like "I'm not their mother." What happens, ultimately, you know, is she's defending that image. She stopped being able to listen to her children. She loses the connection, which is what she really longs for. That's what she's really looking for. She doesn't really long to not be their mother; she doesn't really long to be no one. What she longs for is just that intimacy, and that means death. Intimacy is death; I mean real intimacy. For her what had to die, or at least be seen through or let go of, was this image that she wasn't their mother, and then that's when she could meet them. Then ultimately, I don't know who they are. Am I their mother? Yeah, ultimately those are all roles, but I am not their mother is another role, and it becomes another burden. Why do we need these stories about ourselves? Even the story, "we have no story." What are we afraid of? In just kind of pointing this out to her, once she could see what she was doing to herself, once she could see what she was still

defending, there was the freedom in just seeing it. It becomes so subtle sometimes. We don't see what we're still defending.

That's why I love doing these meetings and retreats because there's something so beautiful about gathering together and shining light on this very subtle stuff. I know it kept me so trapped. I mean I was so shut off from life and from everything. There's something so beautiful about just sharing this possibility of—well whatever this is. I don't know what it is, but this possibility of, well, recognizing who you really are, but not as a mental thing because it doesn't work.

RA: It's interesting. I hear a lot of teachers, or whatever you want to call them, like people at the conference that we were just at, people of that ilk, getting up, and basically their presentation has to do with a description of life as they see it, or of their experience, kind of an articulation as best as they can do it of how life appears to them. Very often they don't have much more to offer than that. So people sit, and they listen. I think it can be either helpful, or confusing, or somewhere in between depending on where you're at. It can be helpful if you're kind of close to that in terms of your own experience.

Like, I'm reading Rupert Spira's book right now. I'm reading each verse about three times, and it's like I can sort of feel a wave of clarity wash over me with each one. It's kind of like fine-tuning a radio. It just kind of gets you more tuned into settle down on those ideas that he's presenting, but if you're not very close to that, it can cause confusion because there's this great gap between your experience and what the person is articulating. You can end up, as you say, trying to make a religion out of it or build an edifice of beliefs that you cling to and become fundamentalist about, or whatever. There can be great misinterpretation and confusion. I guess people gravitate toward that which is useful for them, and if it's not useful then they'll just gravitate away and find something that is. So it all kind of works out in the end

JF: [*Laughter*] It does. It has a funny way of working itself out in the end. My experience is funny because I was never with a guru. I was never with a teacher. I never went to a retreat. I was a desperate spiritual seeker. I was an obsessive spiritual seeker. I just wanted freedom from this suffering, and that manifested as the search for enlightenment. I thought I would find enlightenment one day.

RA: So what were you doing, reading books? I'm surprised you never actually went and checked out some teachers if you had such a strong desire.

JF: I don't know what it was. It was my conditioning, or whatever. I was intensely private, intensely self-conscious, and shy, and shut off. I didn't know anyone. For me it all happened quite suddenly. I had this breakdown basically in my early 20s.

RA: Tell me about that.

JF: I think I had been depressed my whole life without realizing. I just thought that's the way I was. When I was younger, I never had any friends. I never spoke to anyone. I didn't really speak until I was about 20.

RA: That's funny because you're such a friendly outgoing guy now.

JF: I know. When I think about it, it's crazy, really.

RA: And we're talking about just 10 years ago, basically. You're just 31 now.

JF: Yeah, yeah, I mean, really my whole childhood, I was just in my shell. I guess I was always depressed, but it got worse and worse. In my early 20s I was living in London and in a job I hated. I didn't know who I was, what I was doing, what I wanted. I was a mess. I was confused about everything, sexually confused, and confused about career. I just didn't know how to live. I never really knew how to live, but it got worse and worse. I was in relationship with this girl, and it was incredibly intense. She was going to save me, and I found my soul mate. Then that fell apart, and then I became physically quite ill. I mean it all just happened at once, really. I look back, and I think, *Thank God that happened*, because it forced me. I had this breakdown, and I was ill. I was quite ill for a while, actually, physically quite ill. I quit my job in London, and I moved back to my parents' house in Manchester. They were very sweet. They let me stay there.

So what began was just this fire. It was just, oh my God, who the hell am I? I needed to know. This was like life or death now because everything had fallen apart. I was on the verge of suicide, and it was basically either I'm going to kill myself or I'm going to awaken. I was living every day, every moment with this. I had always been a pretty obsessive character, but—

RA: I can relate [*laughs*].

JF: But, you know, once I got my hands on the spiritual teachings, I just started tearing them apart. I would just read a book a day, book after book: Buddhism, Christianity, Zen, books on meditation, just everything. I can barely remember. I was just tearing through them. I started to meditate and self-inquire, but I needed to awaken. I needed to awaken today. I wasn't going to wait. I could be dead tomorrow. That's how desperate it was. This went on for about a year.

So at the time, it just didn't come to me to go to a teacher. I don't know why. It wasn't part of my make-up. I think a couple of times I considered it. I remember I would turn to the back cover of books and look at the photos of the teacher, and I would stare because I was into the whole guru thing for a bit. I thought their energy—I don't know what I thought. At some point, I was going to go to London and see a teacher, but at the last minute something just stopped me. I don't know what it was. It was like maybe it was stubbornness, or maybe it was a sense that if there is any truth here, I have to find it myself.

Before I had been a real atheist. I was trained in science, in rational thinking. I went to Cambridge and studied astrophysics, and so maybe there was some of that there, or some cynicism, or something. I just knew I was going to find this myself. Whatever it is, if I can't find it myself it can't be real; it will be second hand. I knew that, from the beginning, it had to be first hand. I didn't quite know what I was looking for, but somehow I knew it had to be experiential. Like, why do I need to go to India? Whatever it is, it's got to be here, too. It's got to be here in this house, sitting in my parents' garden yard looking at the flowers. It has to be here. So maybe that's why I never saw a teacher, but that was just my way.

RA: Yeah, it's just the way you were wired.

JF: Yeah, I mean I started doing a lot of practices, but in the end I just did a lot of sitting. I just did a lot of sitting with my pain, and my fear, and my sadness, and just sitting in suffering. It started to dawn on me that maybe freedom isn't to be found through escaping. Maybe somehow, if I sit here long enough in this sadness, in this fear, in this pain, something will reveal itself. I didn't know. So what happened—Let's finish the story now *[laughs]*.

RA: So somehow you broke through to this "I am nobody" state at a certain point.

JF: Well, yeah, I had certain experiences happen and certain realizations, and I had a very profound happening, a realization that I have talked about before. That was quite profound, actually. It's really hard to talk about. I say that I went through phases, but experience is never as clear-cut as that. It was all very messy. The whole thing was incredibly messy. One day I realized I was no one. The next day I was back into huge amounts of suffering. We like clean, clear stories don't we? But the truth of experience is—

RA: Well, a lot of people go through a phase like that where they swing back and forth, and eventually it sort of stabilizes, or gets integrated, or something. You know, I don't know if you're insinuating this, but I would suggest that whole phase you went through had its value. Sometimes people say, well now I'm realized, and nothing I ever did, or nothing you could ever do, could actually bring you to this realization, but I think we go through stuff for a reason.

In the Yoga Sutras, Patanjali classifies seekers or yogis in terms of mild, medium, and intense, and then among the intense [are] various stages. Then the most intense is, like, vehement intensity; he uses that word. He says that, in fact, those with the most vehement intensity do tend to realize the most quickly or readily. There are a lot of people with stories like that. I mean there are other people who just wake up one morning, and kapow!

JF: I've thought about this a lot. I think we love the dramatic stories. In a way, those are the stories that sell. It's often the people who have been through the dramatic seeking and the dramatic waking, those are the people, for some reason, who tend to want to write books and do talks.

RA: It makes for good books.

JF: Yeah, we love our dramatic stories. For some reason, those are the people who tend to do the talking, and then this whole new kind of mythology begins. So it's like only the people who write the books and do the talking, they must be the ones. Only the people with the dramatic stories are the real ones.

RA: Yeah, yeah.

JF: That's the beauty of doing these meetings over the years, you know. I've met so many people who don't go out and talk about it. They don't write books. They don't have much interest in it. They go about their ordinary everyday lives. They're doctors, and therapists, and artists. They see this, or get this, or however you want to say it. For them, it was very gentle. They never really went through some big dark night of the soul. Of course, everyone suffers to an extent. I don't think there is any human being who has escaped suffering totally, but their suffering was more gentle somehow. Or their seeking was more gentle, and it doesn't mean their experience is any more or less valid.

RA: No, I totally agree.

JF: That's one of those myths, you know?

RA: Yeah, I just wouldn't weight it one way or another. I would say however it works out for you, or you, or you, that's the way it is for you, and don't compare yourself with somebody else. Don't say that, well because it was this way for me it's got to be this way for everybody, or whatever.

JF: Everyone is trying to come home, and—

RA: All paths lead to Rome.

JF: All paths lead to Rome, and all paths lead to home because in the end we are home. This is the point. The wave is already home and doesn't realize it. So it seeks home. So, in that sense, you can understand why some of these non-duality teachers say things like, it doesn't matter what you do or don't do. You can understand where that's coming from because, in the end, everyone is going to get here.

Actually it's interesting you should talk about that because, years ago, I used to speak much more like that, that there's nothing you can do. This isn't the result of doing. Again, there is some truth to that. I don't really speak like that any more because I really see the problem with that now. That's going to be misunderstood so easily. Over the years—and it was a real revelation to see this—I've met so many people who have been to non-duality meetings. They've been to these radical Advaita meetings, and they've picked up the concept, “there's nothing I can do.”

RA: [*Laughs*] Right, so might as well crack a beer and watch football.

JF: Yeah, but the point is they're still suffering. They're still suffering horribly, but now they're suffering with the belief there's nothing they can do about it. In a way they're doubly trapped.

RA: Yeah, it seems like you'd become pessimistic or something.

Well, you know, there's a good analogy of this. Let me just throw it in here. The sun is always shining, and once it realizes its sun-ness, it might say, hey I have always been shining. It never mattered what was happening with the clouds. Clouds. No clouds. Wind. No wind. It doesn't matter. I have always been shining. Nothing ever caused me to shine. So that's valid from the point of view of the sun, but from the point of view of somebody on the ground—and I'm overstretching this metaphor—it makes a big difference whether the clouds are cleared away or not.

JF: Yeah, there's nothing you can do to be what you already are. I think that's very clear. This presence, this awareness, being, the sun, the light, call it what you like, there's nothing I can do to reach this *because* I am already this. There's nothing the wave can do to reach the ocean, but there is the possibility of recognizing yourself as the ocean. That's when I think the non-dual message can be really misunderstood because, okay, so there's nothing you can do. It's not about doing to get somewhere because that could just be more seeking. It's not about I'm going to do this to reach what I am, but at the same time—

RA: Well, you know there's one thing the wave can do to realize it's the ocean. It can settle down. It can relax [*laughs*].

JF: There's nothing you can do, but there's a lot to see. It's not about the doing so much. It's the recognition. It's the seeing. I guess in the end, it depends what you mean by the word “doing” because that's a funny word as well. What does it mean to do? It's not so much doing; it's more recognizing what

is already present, which isn't about doing something in time. It's recognizing what is already here now, recognizing the waves that are already present are the ocean. This is the thing: the waves are already the ocean. If the wave is just telling itself, there's nothing I can do, and it still hasn't recognized what it really is—and I've met so many people as well. I just meet myself over and over again. It's funny when I say I meet people who—I also think, *That's also me*. It's like it's all the same. It's all the same seeker, really. We all kind of go through the same stuff, really, if we're honest, and I've completely forgotten what I was going to say.

RA: Well, I think you were saying that you meet a lot of people who are doing stages that you have been through yourself, and so you can relate to what they are doing.

JF: They're doing not doing. That becomes their new practice. So they go to a teacher who says, there's nothing you can do. All doing is dualistic. It's all routed in ignorance. So then they [say], okay, so that's going to be my new practice. I'm going to give up doing. That's my new practice. That's my new doing. My new doing is to reject all doing and to make fun of people who do, and that's my new doing. Then you get deeper and deeper into the doo-doo [*laughing*]. You get deeper and deeper. Secretly, they're still seeking it. It's equally, okay if I give up doing, if I don't do, then maybe it will happen. So it's still a form of seeking. Doing not doing can still just be another form of seeking. I think that's really cruel what some of these teachers do, and I don't think they intentionally mean to be cruel.

RA: No, they're just seeing it from their angle.

JF: This is how I used to talk as well until I saw what I was doing. On the one hand, you say there's nothing you can do, but you also say, ah, but something will happen one day. So it's like something has to happen. The person has to fall away. The self has to fall away, but there's nothing you can do. There's nothing you can do, but come to my meetings.

RA: Right, buy a few books.

JF: Come and listen to me tell you how screwed you are, and [there's] nothing you can do. Then they just sit there. People tend to helplessly sit there. They're still suffering. They've given up doing anything. They've given up exploring. They've given up looking. They've given up being interested by life. They think they're no longer seeking. Secretly, they're still suffering horribly, but they're probably more blind to that than ever. Now they've just become dependent on the non-duality teacher who seems to have something that they don't, but won't let them in. The teacher won't let them into the party.

I completely understand what these teachers mean. I completely understand what they're trying to communicate, but I think that's what has changed for me over the years as a speaker, teacher, whatever I am.

What I've become more aware of, over the years, is that it's one thing to know what I'm talking about. When I use the words that I use, I know what I'm saying. I know what I mean. It's something to do with compassion, I think. It's something to do with understanding that not everyone is going to understand what you mean and be willing to somehow come out of your own framework, come out of your own way of talking, and come into the their world. I used to have a very limited vocabulary when it came to talking about non-duality. What I saw was that it was keeping people stuck because I was sticking to my own "there is no me, there's no one here, there's nothing you can do." And it was becoming a new framework. Then, of course, I say but there is no framework. There is no framework. Well, of course there's a framework. There has to be some kind of framework.

RA: Well you know there's a saying which, and this is not meant to sound condescending, but speak to the level of consciousness of the listener. It's not to say, I am in a high state and you're in a low state, but this applies in every phase of life. You don't teach trigonometry to a third grader, or whatever. People are at different stages of growth and different stages of experience and understanding, and the art of really being an effective teacher is to be able to tune into the level that they're at and provide them with something that's useful at that stage.

JF: In a way, that takes a kind of humility, you know.

RA: It does.

JF: It's like a willingness to let go of your own way of talking, or your own language, or even your own identity as a teacher. In a way, you have to be willing to die. A great teacher—I'm not saying this about myself—

RA: No, no, I know what you're saying.

JF: A great teacher is able, in every moment, to die as a teacher and to no longer even know themselves, and then that's when they can meet you. When I'm not even holding that idea of myself as a teacher between us, then I can meet you in your world.

You're right. It's not even a condescending thing. It's not even I'm descending to your level out of compassion. It's not even that. What's left? What's left just to meet? We just meet. If I haven't got any idea who I am, or if I haven't got an agenda—It's about the agenda. If I don't have an agenda, then I'm really free to just meet.

My dad is a perfect example. My dad, he has no interest in spirituality, and religion, and consciousness. He just doesn't. He's never asked questions like that, really. Bless him, you know. He's worked hard. He made money. He ran a business. He lost his business. He lost money, and now he's retired. That's his life, and he seems to be fairly happy with that. I don't know. When he asks me, Jeff, what do you talk about? What's non-duality about? If I start to do the whole lecture, you know, the consciousness, no one here, there's no self—

JA: You'll lose him.

JF: That would be coming from my own agenda, my own need to be right, or my own need to appear as something. With my dad, it's really been a case of having to drop all of my precious language, all of my precious words, all of my teachings, whatever. What does my dad understand? What's his world? This takes really listening. This takes listening, you know. It takes listening to people and finding out where they are. My dad's world is: work; make money; retire. You know, he loves his family. I tried talking to him, and I tried so many ways of explaining it. In the end I just had to drop all the language. Like, Dad, you were a businessman weren't you? He gets that. And now you're not, and he says, yes. So, Dad, can you see how somehow that doesn't define you? We start talking about identities and definitions, and that's when he starts to open up but without using any of the fancy language, or any of the "I am no one." That's when he opens up.

RA: Yeah, well you know there's a saying that when the fruit is ripe, the branches bend down so the people can easily pick it [*background voice*].

Oh, my wife says I've exhausted all my analogies. No, I've got a few more. [*Laughing*]

Taking your example of saying to your dad, “There’s no one here.” He doesn’t relate to that experience, so why say it? It’s only going to create a gulf.

JF: It’s going to terrify him.

RA: Yeah, or it will just sound like nonsense.

JF: Yeah, and I’m not in the business any more of shocking people. I think maybe years ago, I would have enjoyed saying stuff like that just to shock people. I’m not interested in that any more. That’s another phase you go through, I think.

RA: Well, if you’re goal is really to be of some value to them, then shock is not—

JF: You have to meet them because what’s left? What’s left is to meet you, and to meet you means—well that’s the intimacy again. That’s the death. I even have to let go of my precious idea of myself as a teacher, my precious idea of myself as no one. That’s where we can meet. I’m not going to be able to meet my dad any other way. We might not be able to meet tomorrow, you know. This is the thing as well. We’re not guaranteed tomorrow. It’s like can we meet now? Can I drop my what am I defending? To me it always comes back to that question, what am I defending? What image of myself am I defending? What am I trying to prove to you? I mean, why? Where does it get me? It doesn’t make sense any more to me.

I used to be such a missionary for non-duality, and I was going to wake people up. Everyone’s asleep. They’re all so deluded. It’s another game. It’s another I’m going to go and preach non-separation to people. How ironic?

RA: Well there’s a subtle arrogance to it, wouldn’t you say? It’s a subtle kind of spiritual egotism and a little bit of a holier than thou thing creeping beneath the surface there. I’m not saying you’re that way now, but we’ve all been through this. You know, you go to the grocery store, and there’s this feeling of, *Oh, this poor person at the cash register. I’m so much more wise than they.* You know, it’s an immature phase, I think, that hopefully we grow out of, and eventually there’s no thought of that nature. You’re just relating to the cashier.

JF: That’s non-duality. In the end you’re not going to find it books. You’re not going to find it from some guru. It’s the man or woman at the cash register. If non-duality has anything to say about anything, it has to be there at—the gas pump.

RA: Yeah, Buddha at the Gas Pump. That’s why we named it this.

JF: Yeah, if it’s not there at the gas pump, it’s meaningless. I was talking to someone the other day about this. I think what saved me from that whole Neo-Advaita—from getting really stuck in that “there’s no me; there’s no past; there’s no Africa; there’s no Hitler.” You know, all that. What really saved me was that I had always been fascinated with human suffering, especially with my background in the Holocaust, Nazi Germany, and the killing of millions of people.

RA: Did you have ancestors who were killed during the Holocaust?

JF: Yeah, yeah, and for me it was so interesting. It was always, *How do I bring these two together?* This Neo-Advaita stuff, “there’s no me; there’s no you; there’s no passion,” and, at the same time, how can you deny it? You know, you watch these documentaries and photographs [showing] piles of human bodies. How can I reconcile that? It’s too easy to sit here and say that never happened, or that’s just a thought. It’s too easy.

RA: Glib.

JF: Glib. It's easy to say when you're sitting here, you're well fed, and you're warm. I've heard teachers say this, that there's no Hitler. I've heard them say it. I've heard teachers say crazy things. I won't say who this was. They say, Oneness gasses Jews, so what? I've heard that. I totally understand why that's what gives non-duality a bad reputation. It's easy to say that when you're sitting here well fed and warm, but try saying that with your body inside a gas chamber.

RA: Yeah, really. I'm tempted to say to some of these people, well if there's really no one home, go down to the bank, take out all the money, and send me the check. Because there's nobody to whom that will matter, but I still identify myself as somebody who would enjoy receiving all that money. So send it this way [*laughs*].

JF: Otherwise, this just becomes a game of denial, and denial is not freedom. In denial you're more trapped than ever.

RA: It's a river in Egypt actually.

JF: That's what always saved me from the Neo-Advaita hell. It's like whatever this is, it has to be there. It has to be true whether I'm sitting here or whether I'm in a concentration camp. Whatever this is, it has to be true there as well. It has to be true there, in that concentration camp, or wherever. All the fancy new Advaita ideas in the world aren't going to save me. I think that's what always kept me kind of grounded in a way.

RA: Yeah, it's funny I go through a similar fantasy in a way. I think, *How would whatever state I have hold up if I were subjected to crucifixion? Would I completely lose it? Or, would there be some kind of acceptance?* I don't know.

JF: If this is a state, if it's a feeling, if it's a belief, it will fall away. That's the thing. In the end, this has to be everything. That's the only thing that can't fall away is everything. If you think freedom or Oneness is a happy feeling, or Oneness is a feeling of peace, or oneness is absence of pain, it's still all conceptual. Again, life is going to come along, and it's going to destroy it. That will be taken away. Yeah, you'll be standing there in the concentration camp, and you might not feel what you expected to feel, you know. It might be a hell of a lot of pain and sadness.

RA: Even if you don't experience or understand Oneness to be all those relative attributes you just mentioned, if Oneness is grounded profoundly enough in your being, that that realization could withstand some extreme circumstance like that?

JF: To me that was always the test.

RA: I haven't been through that test.

JF: No, well, I've been in some pain—

RA: You went through the hospital test.

JF: It's not really like I'm going to test myself. It's more like whatever this is, it has to be there in everything. If it's a state, it will come and go. If it's a feeling, it will come and go. The question for me was always, what doesn't come and go? What doesn't come and go, and can that be discovered now? This

is the end of safety. I can't kid myself any more that tomorrow I'm not going to be in a concentration camp. I can't pretend any more. That's where compassion comes.

RA: You might get some cancer or something and be in agony.

JF: Yeah, I cannot pretend. I cannot kid myself any longer. It's comforting to kid yourself, but in the end I can't. I have to open myself up to everything, everything, everything. So yes, of course, it's easy to sit here and do the Neo-Advaita stuff: there's no me; there's no suffering in the world; there's no starving children. It's easy, but what does it mean? It's a catch phrase.

Yeah, there is a truth in it, but it's not true. There's a truth in it. But the moment you speak it, it's not true. That's how I see it these days. There's a beautiful, exquisite truth in it, and the moment you speak it, it becomes untrue if it's not immediately—this is what it came down to for me—if it's not immediately balanced out by its opposite. I think I made a video about this. There's no Africa; not true. There is an Africa; now it's true, you know, because it's everything. I think Byron Katie talked about it like this. The crucifixion it is: I am no one; there is nothing; there is no past. Somehow it completes itself with the resurrection.

RA: Oh, how interesting. I never thought of it that way.

JF: The crucifixion, it needs the resurrection to complete it. Then it's complete. Then it's really complete. The crucifixion is only half the story. It kind of returns as, there is an Africa; there is a me; there is a you; there is a Holocaust. Absolutely. There is suffering; there is pain, and there's where compassion begins. Otherwise, there's no compassion, you see.

RA: Sure, I mean the whole idea that Oneness gassed the Jews. That's a very uncompassionate statement.

JF: Well, it's easy to say. It's an easy thing to say, an easy thing to believe. Of course, it's all Oneness, or life, but—

RA: On that level, Oneness didn't do it because Oneness doesn't do anything [*laughs*].

JF: That's the truth as well. The truth is human beings, we did it to each other. Let's get real. We do it to each other. We kill each other. We torture each other. Why? Because we don't see this. Because we don't see who we really are. Because we don't see this intimacy, this compassion. We don't recognize ourselves as the ocean. So we start looking for it, and we start attacking other people who we think are getting in the way of it, right? These people, they're blocking my wholeness. If you really looked at it, you could probably start to explain all violence. At least you can start to see where all conflict begins. Where does conflict begin? It begins here. Me. You. Me. You. You know? This is where conflict—

[*Background noise*]

Aww!

RA: She's hungry.

As your perspective has evolved, in the way we've been discussing, what sort of changes have you noticed in your audiences, in your groups that come on retreats and stuff? Not only how has your teaching evolved, but how has the whole group consciousness changed, and the types of people who come, and the interactions, and the level of spiritual maturity of the individuals, you know, all that sort of stuff? Have you noticed that your audiences have evolved along with you, in a sense?

JF: It's hard to say exactly. I know I've lost quite a few people since I started more and more kind of honoring the messy human stuff. The people who used to come to my meetings were more kind of the hardcore non-duality Advaita crowd, and often they don't want to hear about the messy human stuff.

RA: There's a Neo-Advaita website that recently I heard accused Scott Kiloby of being schizophrenic because he's getting into all this so-called messy stuff [*laughs*].

JF: We don't like paradox. We like our truth clean. We want consistent, clean truth. This messy human stuff comes along, and it ruins our—

Yeah, I've lost a few people, I think, but I've gained other people as well. I think there are a much greater variety of people now who come to the meetings, people who have never heard of non-duality before, artists and musicians, and people who really aren't into spirituality at all. I think the way I speak has kind of opened up, and the language has kind of broadened. I think it's more accessible somehow. It's less dogmatic, and it honors the relative more. People get a lot less angry, so that's incredible.

RA: Oh, really? What were they getting angry about?

JF: Well, you know, the whole, how dare you deny the human stuff? There was some truth in that, and I can understand now. It's so funny because I did speak much more from the Absolute perspective. I was never really a fundamentalist, but it had more of that feel to it. I had more of that kind of slightly Absolute, slightly beyond human, so people sometimes reacted quite violently.

RA: Yeah, I can imagine. If somebody's daughter dies or something, you just brush it off as, oh it didn't really happen.

JF: But you know what the guru trick is? Oh, you're getting angry. That's a sign that you're still stuck. It's so tricky. I'm so clear, and if you don't understand, it's your problem because I'm totally clear. It's not that I'm totally clear, and they don't understand because they're deluded. Maybe this is the opportunity for me to meet them and to try to be more clear, try to clarify, and let go of the old way that I used to talk.

That's when things started to really move. You know what it was, I think it was listening to people's objections, but really listening. I think probably that and relationships have taught me more than anything. Maybe it is all relationship, isn't it. Listen to the objections, not just passing them off as, oh you don't get it. One day you'll get it. That's just arrogance. This is a chance for: can I be more clear; can I clarify something; can I find a different way of saying it; can I be more creative in the way I talk about this? Really, the way I speak these days, and even a few years ago, it's so different now. I'm surprised. It's not that I consciously, one day, decided to speak differently. It was kind of like an evolution. It was like it naturally started to evolve.

RA: It grew, yeah.

JF: I've learnt more from the people who come to my meetings than anyone else, I think. It's listening to them, the way they speak, the questions they have, the difficulties, the way they mishear, or just the way they express it themselves, their language for this, the words they use. Really, some of the ways people express this is far more beautiful than I could ever do. It's really moved me to tears. Some people in the meetings, without using fancy language—and they don't see themselves as teachers—They don't have that identity. It's just this natural expression.

RA: So you're making a beautiful point, really, which is that you're saying that you've been the prime beneficiary of all this, in a way, you know? Talking to people in groups has become an exercise in deepening and clarifying your own experience, your own understanding. So it's not like your lording it over them and parceling out some kind of absolute truth. It's more like it's a mutual exploration, and it's been of tremendous benefit to you to have them as a sounding board for that exploration.

JF: It's been a real adventure. What is it really? When you strip away all the mystification, it's meeting with friends. It's meeting with fellow waves in the ocean and gently pointing back to the fact that, you know, you are already what you seek. It's not, I'm a special wave, or I'm the teacher wave, or I'm the enlightened wave, and one day you little waves, you're going to become like that. That's the old stuff. It's gently reminding people of, in a sense, what they already know.

RA: Well, in the beginning of the interview, I referred to you as a teacher, and you were uncomfortable with that. I can see why. Maybe a facilitator or something might be a better word.

JF: Yeah, I mean I've never seen myself as a teacher. I mean I'm comfortable with the label these days. I guess teaching happens. I mean you could say it that way. In sitting in a room with people, teaching happens, speaking happens, listening happens, but I don't walk around with this identity, I'm a teacher. I don't take that home with me [*laughs*]. In the context of a meeting, teaching happens, sharing happens, exploring happens. You could say teaching happens, and there's no teacher.

It's the same thing with music or art. You speak to any artist, an honest artist, and what they'll say is they find that art appears, or music appears, and then it's only afterwards thought says, *I made that. I did. I'm the artist. The artist made the art, or the musician sang the music.* Actually, when you really look, that's why, with this stuff, you're specialness isn't going to survive because it's total humility. It's not my humility. It's not that I'm so humble. It's like total humility in the face of life, really, because life is the authority. Life is the teacher. Life is the guru. Jeff isn't the teacher. Jeff is an appearance within life, and the function of the Jeff character, well these days anyway, appears to be sharing, talking. On a deeper level, what is it? It's a mystery, really.

One of my friends talks about this as the extra miracle. The first miracle is life itself. The first miracle is that anything is happening at all. The first miracle is breathing, and sounds, and smells, and trees, and volcanoes. That would have been enough, in a way, but there's this extra miracle, this additional miracle, that wasn't necessary but appears to be the case. The extra miracle is that, within the first miracle, we can meet like this, or in a meeting or retreat, and point back to the first miracle. Ultimately, even though you can't put this into words, you can't talk about it, that's part of the celebration, that we can meet, and we can talk about it on a deeper level knowing that you can't put it into words. We sing our song anyway. We sing the music, and we listen, or we don't listen.

So I've never taken this whole teacher thing too seriously. I'm happy to be called a teacher, happy to be called a friend, or happy to be called Jeff, or no one, or whatever. It's like, yeah, can I be all of those things? Yeah, you know, can I be anything? I can be a friend. I can be a son. I can be a boyfriend. I can be a teacher. I can be an interviewee. If I go to the doctor's, I can be a patient. If I go to the theater, I'm a whatever. What are they called? I can be all of that, you know.

RA: Audience member.

JF: Audience member, or whatever.

RA: So many hats.

JF: Many hats, but none of it has to stick. Our suffering seems to begin when we fixate on one of those things. I want to be that thing, and we spend the rest of our lives defending that thing, that form, that image, even the image, as we've been saying, that I have no image. It's like anything can be used.

RA: True, I mean the doctor comes home and plays with his kids; he's not a doctor anymore. He's just sitting on the floor, a guy playing with his kids, you know.

JF: Exactly. So Jeff Foster, he does a meeting, and then he leaves, and he goes to a café, and now is he a teacher? Is he still a teacher? Of course not, he's buying coffee, and he's chatting with the server. It's funny, we carry these identities with us, and we don't need to. Then we end up shutting off from life and then separating ourselves from others.

RA: Well, it's kind of what we were talking about towards the beginning where we tend to, or people in general tend to, calcify in terms of a self image that has to do with the circumstances of their life, you know, their gender, their job, their age, their this, their that, and what you're, I think, pointing to is something which is more fundamental than all those things, which is not encapsulated by any of those things, and which ultimately we rest as.

That fly has been buzzing around you the whole interview. It actually landed on your nose [*laughing*].

JF: My true teacher, the Buddha in the form of a fly.

RA: So I suppose that you can state it better than I, but maybe the takeaway lesson from this whole thing is what? What would you say if you had to—you know, your bus stop wrap. If you had to wrap this up and state it in a nutshell—

JF: You want a sound byte from me?

RA: Yeah, the sound byte. You're running for Prime Minister of Great Britain on the Non-Duality platform [*laughs*], and they want to know.

JF: Well, you know, I think what it comes down to in the end is: can this moment be deeply allowed? And if it can't, can that be allowed, too? Can that just be allowed? Even if this moment—Sorry, this is a long sound byte.

RA: That's okay; that's okay.

JF: Even if, in this moment, you find you can't allow, you find it impossible to allow, you can't accept, can that be allowed to be there? This acceptance that I talk about, it's like radically all-inclusive. It's like shockingly all-inclusive, really.

RA: See, I *allowed* you to do a long sound byte.

JF: That's true compassion, Rick. Thank you. You met me where I was [*laughing*].

What's the essence of this teaching really? Perhaps what is the essence of all spirituality, maybe, is like, allow, you know. I can't think of any simpler way of saying it.

RA: That's a good one. I think that's what Byron Katie is trying to say with her "loving what is," and Adyashanti has given lectures on allowing everything to be as it is. You hear it over and over again. Definitely.

JF: That's not passivity.

RA: No, it's not apathetic or passive.

JF: Because that's detachment. That comes from fear. In this allowing, even fear is allowed, you see, so that's the end of detachment, in a way. That's when you really open to life. It's like total openness to life. It's that intimacy again. I think I use that word more than anything these days: intimacy. That's my sound bite.

RA: Okay, great. Get yourself a T-shirt made. Intimacy. I don't know what will happen if you start wearing that around.

JF: It might give the wrong—

RA: I don't know if your girlfriend will like it. You'll start getting approached in cafes [*laughing*].

All righty. Well, this has been great, Jeff. I'm glad we finally got to do it. I'm glad we got to meet last week, and we'll be meeting again, I'm sure, at conferences like that. It was really a joy.

JF: Thanks so much for having me.

RA: Yeah.

So let me just make a couple concluding remarks. So you've been watching, I think this is maybe interview number 94 or something. I just number them so if people come on the site they get a sense of how many there are, and they know what to explore. This is an ongoing series. I do one every week. I believe next week it's going to be Rupert Spira. I'm doing a British doubleheader here, and Rupert is marvelous, as you'll find.

There are a number of ways of watching or listening to this show. You can watch it as a video, sitting in front of your computer. You can listen to it as a podcast, which is the way I would do it because I can't sit in front of my computer any more than I do. So there's a podcast you can subscribe to, and you'll get it as an audio. It's on YouTube. It's also on Batgap dot com. There's also a little discussion group that springs up around each interview when I post it, so participate in that if you like. There's a little email newsletter you can sign up for, so that each time I post a new interview you'll get a notification.

So that's all there is folks, so thank you very much for watching or listening. Thank you, Jeff. It's been a joy, and we'll be in touch. We'll see you all next time.

[*Music*]