

Francis Bennett - BATGAP Interview (# 133)

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{BATGAP theme music plays}

Rick: Welcome to Buddha at The Gas Pump. My name is Rick Archer and my guest this week is Francis Bennett. Welcome Francis.

Francis: Thank you Rick.

Rick: I have a little bio here of Francis. Francis entered the Trappist Abbey of Gethsemane in 1981 and in the '90s subsequently lived at a daughter house of Gethsemane in Monk's corner, South Carolina. Until recently, he was living in a small urban monastery in Montreal, Quebec. He has been a spiritual seeker all those years, practicing Christian Mystical Contemplative tradition, and working deeply with teachers, in both the Vipassana and Zen traditions.

In 2010 he experienced a profound perceptual shift, in which he realized the ever-present presence of pure awareness, which some would call the "presence of God." He has worked in the field of spiritual-care in parish communities, and with the sick and dying in Hospice and hospital settings.

He has led retreats, offered spiritual talks, and has accompanied many on their spiritual journey. He graduated from the Pontifical College Josephinum with a BA in Philosophy and completed a 2-year chaplaincy residency with Ohio Health Hospital System. There, that's your bio.

Francis: Wow, who is that guy?

Rick: So, how young were you in 1981?

Francis: Twenty two - pretty young.

Rick: Yeah, and even before that, as a teenager, had you had yearnings and leanings in this direction?

Francis: Yeah, very much so. I had spiritual interest and fascination with the spiritual life. As a little kid I was always asking spiritual questions, hearing things in church and coming home asking my mom about it. And usually she didn't have a lot of answers, because I asked some pretty strange questions.

But, anyway, in my teens - early teens - I got involved in a movement that was known as the "Charismatic Renewal" in the Catholic Church and in mainline Christianity. It was a movement that was, kind of, a neo-Pentecostal movement, with speaking in tongues and healing, and lively singing and clapping, and so on. And I was very intensely involved in that as a teenager, and was on a quest -from right at the beginning - for the presence of God.

Sensing that, to live in the presence of God was really the whole reason that we were on the planet. And that led me, gradually, to the idea of becoming a monk. And at a very young age, when I was still in high school, a high school teacher that I really loved- he was an English teacher - Keith Gogenhauer - hi Mr. Gogenhauer, if you're watching.

And he got me turned on to the writings of Thomas Merton. So I was reading this stuff by Thomas Merton. I was very fascinated by it and I realized that the abbey that he was at in Kentucky - or he had been at; he died in '68, when I was like 9 years old - but, it was right in Kentucky. It was only 4 hours away.

So I started going down there when I was still in high school. And then gradually, over a few years of going down there and going on retreats, the monks got to know me pretty well and I got to know them, and the idea of becoming a Trappist seemed like a great thing to do.

I really, somehow, wanted to give my life completely to the spiritual search and to God. I get a little - sorry, I'm sorry. I get a little choked up sometimes. But anyway, I just wanted to dedicate my whole life to that, and that seemed like a way to do that, and so I did. At the age of 22 I entered, and the rest is history, as they say.

Rick: Good. It seems like the Trappists must be a fairly liberal group, because you were studying Zen and Vipassana and all this stuff, and nobody seemed to have a problem with it.

Francis: No, actually the whole movement - it's very interesting, you might know something about this because you were in the TM movement in the '70s. And right now, I don't know if you're aware of it, in the Christian Contemplative tradition there is a whole movement centered around the practice of Centering Prayer.

Rick: Right, who's the guy that started that?

Francis: Thomas Keating, Basil Pennington.

Rick: That's right. So they all learned TM in the early '70s...

Francis: They learned TM in Spencer, Massachusetts, and they kind of adapted that and also, from our own tradition - from the Cloud of Unknowing, from the early desert fathers who used also mantra-type meditative techniques, they came up with this whole new approach to Christian contemplative practice, utilizing a lot of the meditational techniques that you find in TM, in classical Advaita-Vedanta meditations.

And really, all the major spiritual traditions have very much the same technology of meditation. And in Christianity, I think in the '60s and '70s, there were a lot of people turning towards the East, you know, going to India, working with Zen masters. And in the United States, since the turn of the century really, as far as I can see, was inundated with Eastern spiritual teachers of all stripes.

And so I think there was a lot of concern in the Church that we had our own contemplative tradition, and yet these people were all turning away from the Church and turning to the Eastern practices. And I think it was an attempt to say to them, "You know, that's great, the Eastern practices have something to offer, but we also have our own approach to this, and you could profit from that."

And so the whole Centering Prayer movement grew up as a kind of red-haired step child - I don't know what you would say of TM? TM really, I think, ushered in a lot of that.

Rick: Yeah, I remember when those guys were doing TM - Thomas Keaton and Basil Pennington - they would come and speak at conferences. Do you feel like what they did was they kind of just modified TM to make it more Christian, or did they actually look back in their own traditions to see whether something of this nature could be found there, and actually found it and then revived it to make it the Centering Prayer?

Francis: I think what they did was they took the techniques of TM - maybe the style of teaching, the way of meditative instruction, and you sit there and close your eyes. You have a prayer-word, you repeat it, when your mind starts to wander, you go back to your word.

They were using a kind of technology, but they really did go back and discover the rich contemplative tradition that you find in Christianity from the early desert fathers, who had little prayer-words they would say that were really mantra-like things.

And especially, this one book was very influential, by an unknown British, English author of the 14th or 16th Century, if I'm not mistaken, I'm not sure, and it's *The Cloud of Unknowing*. And in that book he's really talking about the same reality. And it's basically using a meditative technique to bring you to, hopefully, an awakening. And I think there's definitely connection with TM, when you see these guys were actually turned on to this concept by their study of TM.

And I think you're right that the Trappist communities, in general, were very ecumenical, very inter-faith, very open to different spiritual traditions. Because we are a contemplative order, I think many of the leaders of this community, the Trappists worldwide, were very interested in just facilitating for people, a living experience of God. And these things from the East were doing that for people. And I think they were really able to hear that, and I think that that speaks to their openness of heart, and I think it's a pretty open-minded religious community, I would say.

Rick: Do they get grief from more conservative aspects of the Church, or are they autonomous enough that they can just do what they want?

Francis: They are autonomous enough that they can do what they want, and yes, they got grief. You know there were, there's still, people who think Centering Prayer is of the devil, and things like that. But I think, by-and-large, even there's a lot of Protestant groups now, there's even Evangelical groups - I'm friends with Evangelical ministers of various traditions, and they're getting turned on to the idea of Centering Prayer and asking me a lot.

I've done a lot of speaking in, especially Evangelical churches and circles, about the Contemplative Christian tradition, and they're very open. There's a lot of openness in the world and there's a lot of closeness. And that's true in any religious milieu - it's true in non-dualist circles, it's true in Christian circles, it's true in Buddhist.

I was very involved with Theravadan teachers and Vipassana for a long time. And you know, there's different schools of thought in any organized religious or spiritual tradition. You get fundamentalists, you get moderates, and you get liberals, that's the nature of the game, I think.

Rick: There also always seems to be a tussle between those who are more experientially-oriented and those who are more belief-oriented, who put more emphasis on the external trappings and appearances, as opposed to the internal realization. The two are not necessarily on the same wavelength, always.

Francis: Not always. I mean, hopefully they feed each other and engage each other in a wonderful dance that's very beautiful and creative, you know - liturgy and ritual, and also inner realization of the Truth. And they should work hand in hand, but unfortunately, a lot of times people miss the forest for the trees, so to say, and they get so focused on the forms that they forget the underlying reality that the forms are supposed to be pointing to!

So, I think that's a danger in all spiritual... it can sometimes, unfortunately, become about a need to be right and a need to be sure, and to have some sense of security. And I don't think that's really what it was meant to point to, but that's what, a lot of times, religious trappings and ritual and form, technique and practices and all that, can sometimes become an end in themselves, and they're meant to be a means to an end, instead.

Rick: It's an interesting point. I see it as the rigidity of belief and attachment to form for the sake of security, as you say, as being symptomatic of a lack of inner experience, and it's a compensatory measure, because the inner experience is deficient.

And if the experience is much more rich, internally, then you can just kind of relax about all that stuff, you know? It's like either you don't know anything, or everything has its own validity in its own domain, but you're more easy going about it.

Francis: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Rick: So anyway, a young man, 21, 22 years old, kinda' hanging out with these guys, when did you finally join the monastery?

Francis: 22.

Rick: Oh, 22, ok.

Francis: Yeah, I officially joined at the age of 22.

Rick: Great. And of course, most 22 year-olds are full of juniper juice and bilge water, as my mother used to say.

Francis: I might have been full of that too, at some time. Ask my old novice master what he says about that.

Rick: Full of energy, tending to bounce off the walls and all, but did you settle right into it?

Francis: I think I'm still full of energy, bouncing off the walls, especially since I've had this shift, my energy is through the roof for some reason. No, I wouldn't say I settled right into it. I was a very social guy, I was very involved. I was in a Christian rock band...

Rick: Oh, cool. What did you play?

Francis: I played guitar and sang.

Rick: I was a drummer, as you probably know.

Francis: I heard you say that, yeah. And so I was a pretty active guy. I was involved in sports, I was involved in singing. I was very, very spiritually engaged with this whole charismatic thing. I was one of the leaders of a big, huge youth group - I was the worship leader of this big youth group...in my teens. From the time I was about 14 till the time I entered the Trappist, I was very engaged in all that.

And a lot of people were pretty shocked when I elected to join a contemplative order, where people kept silence and shaved their heads. I had long blonde hair, way down, you know? And I was very proud of it, by the way. So I had to shave all that off and keep my mouth shut, and chant songs and all this stuff. And I think some of my friends maybe thought I was a little nuts. But it was what I wanted to do; it was my passion, really.

Rick: That's great. Well, we're all a little nuts. But anyways, so you got into it, and so take us through it - whatever you feel is significant in your sojourn as a Trappist, and leading up to this awakening you had.

Francis: Well you know, it's funny, because I know you've talked a lot about this whole dynamic of...do people just suddenly awaken, or do they practice a long time and gradually awaken? And a lot of people have different stories about that.

Some people say they can't really point to a day where they just "woke up," but they just gradually, through little shifts here and there, they seemed to incrementally go through this transformation of consciousness. And for me it was both, really.

When I was a Trappist, very early on I was still a novice, and this Korean Zen master came to the Monastery and I was one of the people who showed him around. He came over with some students - he had some students in Lexington, and he came over with a group of students - and he was curious to see the monastery. I happened to be there with another couple of monks and we ended up showing him around.

And I was so impressed by this man's spontaneity and child-like, full of wonder, over the most ordinary, normal things. And he was asking all kinds of questions: "What's that? What's this?" - like a 6-year-old. You know how you are when you're 6, and you want to know about everything? At least I was that way - I was asking my dad about the planets, about grass, about flowers, about bugs, about everything. Well, this guy was like that. He was just full of wonder and joy, and just "joie de vivre", as they say. And he just so impressed me, I thought, "There's something just wonderful about this man. He's full of spontaneity and joy."

And so he offered to come and give us Zen retreats - little Zen retreats. They usually just lasted a weekend or so. One of them, I think, lasted about a week, but mostly they were short. He'd give us Koans to work on.

And so early on, when I was still in my 20s, I'll never forget the first, what they call "Satori," that I had.

I had just been on this little retreat with Soen Sa Nim, he was the founder of, I believe, the Providence Center - a Korean Zen master - Seung Sahn, I think - he goes by different names. We call him Soen Sa Nim. And I began corresponding with him, and whenever he would come, I would take the retreat.

And I remember after maybe my fourth or fifth retreat, I was walking down this stark cloister at Gethsemane - all white walls - and the sun was coming in through the windows, and there were little dust particles kind of dancing in the sunlight. And I just... there was this moment of total presence. I was just totally there and I was like, "Wow! This is amazing."

And I coupled it with an experience I had had very early in life of the presence of God - feeling a sense of awe and wonder, and joy and peace, and just tranquility of God's presence. And yet all my life, it would come and go and come and go, and I was always searching for that presence.

Well, when I had that experience of being in the present moment, I suddenly had this - it was like a "mini awakening" - realizing, "Hey, being in the present moment *is* being in the presence of God! There's no difference." The present moment, presence of God - same thing.

And I told that to Soen Sa Nim, he says, "Yes, yes, that's very true. Presence of God is presence of present moment. Oui, Yes." I've been living in France so I might start speaking in French- I just said oui. No, he didn't say oui; he didn't speak French.

That was a little opening but then, it was a little frustrating, because this sense of the present moment, it would just come and go. It would come, would be there for maybe a day or two, even after a retreat, or listening to him speak, or listening to even one of the monks speak in some very inspiring way. We had this monk called Father Matthew Kelty who was just absolutely a mystic, and he would speak sometimes and I would feel just absolutely permeated with the presence of God. It was everywhere, and it was just wonderful, but then it would fade.

And so I would seek for it again, and I would meditate and pray and do all these intense things. And then it would come back for a while, and then it would go, and it was like this hide and seek. So that went on for a long time, it went on in my Zen period.

I then got an interest in Vipassana meditation and studied with some really wonderful teachers in that lineage, and got very intense about that. I was at one point where I was doing mindfulness practices, going on retreats where you didn't speak at all, where you just noted everything, you know - "Eating, eating. Walking, walking. Sitting, sitting. Think, thinking." You just went through your whole day like that.

Rick: You'd actually think the thought corresponding to the thing you were doing? You'd be eating but you'd think the word "eating?"

Francis: Yeah, just to kind of note it. It was trying to point you to just being present in the experience itself. But a lot of times, like we talked before, people get caught up in the technique, and they miss the idea that this is meant to be a means to an end, it's meant to point you beyond itself, and you could get very caught in a technique. And also, I think there's something misleading about the whole thing, and this is where I think a lot of these Neo-Advaitic people get down on practices, because they say, "Well, awareness is already present. You don't have to do anything to get there; it's already here."

Which is true, but, there are little things which can point you toward recognizing that. And that's what I think practices are meant to be - pointers that point you [to] that spacious awareness that's always already present. But, a lot of times people get so caught in the practice itself, and the doing of it, that they miss the end.

Rick: Yeah, they focus on the finger, rather than the moon that the finger is pointing at.

Francis: That's a great analogy, yeah, and I think I did that for a long time. For many years I was very intensely involved but, I had little glimpses. Little glimpses of the now, little glimpses of the present moment, little glimpses of the always present awareness - spacious awareness - in which every single thing that exists, arises and ceases.

I'd get little glimpses of it. So then my perception was [that] this is something outside of me and I have to do all these practices to try to get it. Or it's like a trait, like learning how to play the piano or something, and I have to practice, and practice, and practice, till I get really good at it. I think that that's again missing the forest for the trees, but I was sincerely seeking.

I guess I had to go through some years, apparently I did, because that's what happened. So, I went through some years of that type of seeking, and it was very intense. And I learned a lot, but ultimately, it was a very coming-and-going kind of experience.

Rick: Yeah, in a way it sounds silly when we, say, compare it to playing the piano, where you have to practice and practice until you get good at it, but I think there is a legitimate comparison in the sense that when you're doing something like that, or take gymnastics - which is very much in the air these days, if you've been watching the Olympics - there's a certain kind of conditioning that the nervous system undergoes in which, over time, becomes engrained in its functioning, to display a certain ability like piano-playing or gymnastic abilities, or whatever. And if you didn't practice, even though potentially you have the ability, the ability isn't going to be realized.

Francis: It's like that with guitar. I play guitar and you go through learning chords, learning chord progressions, learning all these different things. And then eventually it becomes second nature to you and you just do it naturally, and you don't even have to think about it; it just flows out of you. And I think that's the idea with all kind of practice, of any kind.

Rick: So when you're living in presence, fully, there's something going on in the nervous system that is enabling you to do that, enabling that to take place, and that may not just turn on like a light switch. It may need to be cultured over time until it eventually becomes stabilized in the functioning of the nervous system.

Francis: That's interesting. I don't think in terms like that, about nervous systems and things.

Rick: Well you got one. You have a brain.

Francis: I do. Well, sometimes I wonder. Well, it's funny, because we were just talking about this whole thing of... is it sudden? Is it gradual? And like I say, for me it was both. I went through this gradual thing - a sense of presence and awareness would arrive, and then it would seem to go away.

And it was like that for many, many, many years. And I came to the conclusion, after a while: "Well, that's just the way it is. It comes and goes. You're never stable in this. Sometimes you feel that sense of

presence and then sometimes you don't, and that's just the way it is."

And then, like several years ago, one day, and I can put a date on it and everything, it hit me. I was in church, at a church service, and it was like I got hit by lightning or something. I mean suddenly, there was this deep sense of presence, deep sense of awareness. And unlike the other times that that had arisen, I suddenly say, in a split instant, that that awareness had always been there.

That presence of God, that awareness, that consciousness - whatever name you want to put on it, it had always, always been there. It couldn't not be there! It's like, there's no way it can't be present. Like, you exist, I exist. Can you not exist? Or could you somehow exist more than you do right now? Or could you exist less? You either exist or you don't, right? And that's what came to me.

What suddenly became absolutely clear to me was that this awareness, this consciousness, is eternally present - always has been, always will be. And once I saw that so clearly, it's never left since. It's just there, it's just always there.

Yeah, not much you can say about that. It's hard to talk about.

Rick: No, you're doing well. And of course It has always been there, but it hadn't always been there in your experience, but now it is. And It wasn't always there at all in the experience of all the other people in that church service, and yet it was right there, on some level, for them, but It wasn't realized.

And now what many teachers will do these days, and I consider it a rather unskillful means of teaching, is get up and just describe what you've described, and expect people to get it, on the basis of that description. And maybe sometimes some do, if they're ripe, or at least they get some intellectual familiarity with it, but it's not the substitute for the so-called "real thing", you know?

Francis: No. I can tell you that by experience. The real thing is so amazing. You can't describe it and you can't conceptualize it. Even these words I'm saying, hopefully they're pointing to it in a certain sense, but it's a very poor pointer. You have to realize it. It has to be your living reality, in your life.

And I think that's what all spirituality and religion is proposing to be about. Unfortunately, it's not always what it is about, but that's certainly what I think it's meant to be about.

Rick: Well, you know my favorite little phrase that I always say: "Don't mistake understanding for realization." People would be selling themselves short if they accepted or settled for an understanding of what you've just been describing, for the real, living experience of it, it would be a tragedy.

Francis: It's like reading a beautiful poem about oranges and biting into an orange; it's a totally different thing we're talking about. Not that a beautiful poem about a bite into an orange wouldn't be wonderful, you know, that's great, but has its limitations.

Rick: It's a far, far cry from the experience of the orange.

Francis: Far cry, if you've ever bitten into a really good, great, sweet orange.

Rick: Yeah, so this point bears dwelling upon, that what all this spiritual stuff is about is a living experience - in case anybody doesn't get that. I think most people do, but not everyone does; it's a living experience.

It's not an intellectual facility with a concept of it, or intuitive sense that it's there, or anything else; it's living, 24-7.

Francis: Well yeah, I think so. And even the reality of this that we're talking about now, I think the only way to teach this, I often say, "It's caught not taught."

Rick: Like a flu or something.

Francis: That's a negative, but yeah, caught not taught. You know, you can say all the right words, you can have an amazing intellectual grasp of non-duality, for example, and be eloquent, and be able to talk about it for hours on end, and maybe keep people spellbound on an intellectual level, but if you don't have that realization in your life, if you don't have a direct seen of that, people might catch intellectual curiosity and stimulation, but I think the thing itself is somehow intuited or picked up.

And the reason we pick it up from others is because it's already who we are! We're already that, we're totally already that - all of us. And when we see that in someone else, it's almost like looking into a mirror. When I look at a picture, for example, of Ramana Maharishi, I just dissolve. It's so beautiful just to look into his eyes, and it's just a photo. But it's like, there's something in you - it's this awareness, it's this consciousness in me that recognizes the consciousness that was in him.

Rick: That's what the phrase "Namaste" means.

Francis: Yeah, like saying, "Ok, I bow to the Christ in you, the sacred divinity in you, and it's also in me." It's in everyone, it's in everything, it's in every single form. It's that formlessness going into form.

Now there's something coming up there on the screen. Is that ok?

Rick: We're ok. Everything is groovy. Well, this "caught not taught" thing is a good one because, well traditionally, in probably every tradition, including yours, it was known that being in the company of the enlightened, so to speak, would infuse you with that.

It's just like if you hang around a lot of people who have the flu, chances are you're going to get it. And that's what Satsang is all about; being in the company of Truth. And there's this word, 'transmission' - in the Vedic terminology that would be called 'Darshan' - where there's an actual resonance that takes place between the teacher and the students, or even among the whole group. Which gets everyone attuned to a higher level of awareness.

And Ramana, his main teaching, people always say, "Oh yes, self-inquiry," but really his main teaching was just basking in his silence, if you were so fortunate as to be in his presence, and becoming so attuned in that way, to that level of awareness.

Francis: Well, like the little book I wrote, I have a chapter at the end in there called *The Purest Teaching Is Silence*. And really, one morning I was on a retreat and I wrote that chapter just sitting at a little table in my room. And I had had a particularly deep experience of silence that morning, just basking in that.

And that, in fact, if I had to describe if I do "practice" now, I wouldn't call it practice, really. It doesn't

seem like practice. But usually, for several hours every morning, I just sit in this silence and I'm just completely absorbed in that, for several hours usually. I don't keep track of it, but it seems to be about that amount of time, normally.

Rick: Just marinate.

Francis: Marinate... well, for 4 months after this happened, I could barely speak. And I pretty much marinated all the time.

Rick: Really?

Francis: Yeah. It was very intense after this happened.

Rick: Let's backtrack a little bit. We kind of glossed over it but, what more could you say about the actual awakening that you had in that church? Can you say more than you said?

Francis: Well, yeah, I was actually at mass. I was at mass.

Rick: Were you officiating or just a participant?

Francis: No, I was just participating, I was a brother. So I was an ordained priest and we went to mass every day in the community. So I was there at mass and the priest held up the host - the bread-wafer. He said, "Corp du Christ"- it was in French. He said, "Body of Christ", he stuck it in my hand, and I looked down at this little wafer in my hand, and I thought - it wasn't even I thought; it was a flash - a flash came to me.

He's putting this in our hands and we're looking at it, and we're thinking that we know what this is. And suddenly it occurred to me, "I don't know what this is." [He] put the wafer in my hand, I looked down at it and suddenly it was like, I would say it was like I had no language. I had no thoughts. The mind just stopped; there were no thoughts. I just looked at this in wonder and I had no idea what it was. It was something, and I was just like... "What is this?" There wasn't even words. It was like... "What is everything?"

My conceptual abilities just sort of stopped. And even my sense of myself, of God, everything was just sort of gone. It was clean-gone. And for a while, for probably about a week after that, I thought maybe I was losing my mind - I wasn't sure. It really was very destabilizing, at first. I didn't know what to think.

And then I was on a search. I was looking at mystics. I was pretty familiar with the works of John of the Cross and people like that, and then I was on a search to try and comprehend what had happened to me. Although I was filled with bliss - there was a deep bliss there - but there was hardly any thinking going on.

The thinking faculty just turned off. Just completely turned off. And yet, the funny thing about that is I could function so well! I wasn't thinking about things at all, but I was just functioning. I was doing things. I was writing talks, I was giving talks, I was ministering to people, I was visiting the dying and elderly, and words were coming out of my mouth. And in fact, people seemed to be more touched by what I said or what I did, or just my simple presence. It was a whole different experience of living, really.

Rick: But your subjective experience at that time - everyone saw you as being really together, and you were functioning well, and you were inspiring them, but your subjective experience was that you were kind of on autopilot, you didn't know what was going on?

Francis: Autopilot sounds kind-of-like a zombie; it was more like I was just in bliss. I was in the most incredible (tearing up)...I'm sorry.

Rick: That's ok, no apologies.

Francis: Sometimes it just hits me. You can edit this stuff, right?

Rick: No, no, people love this stuff.

Francis: ...See some guy blubbering on the screen. Anyway, it was just like I was swimming in this bliss, but there was still all this functioning going on. And sometimes that thought would arise like, 'how is this possible? How am I doing all this high-functioning stuff and I'm not giving it a moment's thought? It's just happening through me.'

And my sense was - there's a little Scripture in Saint Paul where he says, "It is now not I who lives but Christ lives in me. And the life that I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God." And it was like that. It was like the Christ, or consciousness - you could call it a lot of different things, but this blissful Reality was functioning through this body and mind, and I was just watching it happen. It's still... it just hasn't gone away.

I think I've adjusted to it a little so it's not so strange now; it's more like normal. But for 4 months I went through a little bit of an adjustment, a learning curve - I don't know what you call it. And I called my Vipassana teacher-friend a lot, Eric Colbig, he's wonderful - friend and teacher. And I called him a lot like, "What's going on with me?"

And he would say, "No, I think this is good. This is a good thing. You're definitely coming into all this stuff we've been talking about and trying to practice for all these years." But it was a big, big shift. Shift is a good word for it.

Rick: "Shift happens," as they say. It's a bumper sticker. Well I was going to say, because you were referring to it in the past tense - "...it was this," and "...it was that" - but then of course you went on and added it wasn't just past; it's now, but you have integrated, or adjusted to it, which I think is an important point.

Francis: At first it was just so different. My whole sense of being was turned upside-down. And I don't know, I think it would be normal for most people to have a little bit of an adjustment period. Where really, even though it was wonderful - filled with joy, filled with bliss, filled with peace - but on a conceptual or an intellectual level, I had no idea what had happened to me.

I knew that I was somehow experiencing this deep sense of union with God - what I would call "union with God", but it was a mystery, you know? And I couldn't talk about it. I went to my spiritual director and I stammered out, "This thing happened to me." And he asked me a few questions, and I tried to answer him but I couldn't. And a lot of times when I would try, I would have just what happened to me right now; I would just get hit. I'd get a "hit" of this stuff.

This bliss would just overwhelm me and I'd just dissolve, I couldn't even speak. And that went on for 4 months, I would say, a good 4 months.

Rick: There's an interesting thing here. I have this friend who watches all the interviews, has declined to be interviewed because she feels like there's really "no one there," to a sufficient degree, that she could be interviewed. And so we have this debate about, is there a point at which you're so far gone that you couldn't hold down a job at the New York Stock Exchange, or any kind of practical thing ... you wouldn't want to be flying an airplane with a couple-hundred people in it? Or is it possible to integrate any degree of realization with practical life? And there are examples and arguments on both sides of it.

There are these Indian saints, like Neem Karoli Baba and Anandamoyi Ma, who pretty much had to be fed and kept from wandering off into the forest. Or even Ramana Maharishi, you couldn't imagine him working as a railroad conductor or something really down-to-earth. Or is it just that it's not their dharma and they're just serving the function for which they were designed? And perhaps they could be fully realized, to the same degree – a person living in very practical circumstances? It's an open question. I'm not coming down on it one way or the other.

Francis: I think that, it certainly is for me anyway - I can only speak from my own experience, I don't really know a lot about other peoples' experience with all this stuff - I think for me it was a matter of adjustment. When it first happened it blew my mind. It literally blew my mind and I really didn't know what happened. And yet, the ironic thing, like I said, I was functioning very well; even better than usual, I would say. And yet there was no concern about the function; it was just function was happening through me, through this body.

Rick: Automatically?

Francis: Automatically, kind of. I was just watching it happen. Sometimes I would go, "Wow, that went well for not having put any thought into it." I would get up and give talks, just extemporaneously It would just come through me, and people would be crying, and people would be really moved. And I would think, "Wow, that's really different." Before, I would prepare talks and take a normal amount of preparation, and I just wasn't able to do that at that point, although gradually, I readjusted that.

This hits on a point that you and I have talked about that I think is very important, is this idea of the absolute and relative. On an absolute level, we are this pure consciousness, and this awareness, and this bliss. And yet there is a reality on a relative level: I am Francis and I have certain responsibilities, you could say, and I have certain roles I play in life. And more and more, for me, there's a deeper and deeper and deeper integration of these 2 levels. And more and more, it's just like, there's no problem with either one of these levels; they're both absolutely valid.

And while I'm moving through the relative world of roles and things - like, I can be an uncle, a friend, I can play different roles. I could be a spiritual advisor to somebody - it's a role I play; it's not who I am on any absolute level, but, it's got its place, it's got its function. And for me there's just no problem between those two.

I don't know what your friend is going through. Maybe she's going through a developmental phase of integration.

Rick: She seems to feel that she's done. She's one of those people, and I've interviewed a number of them who, when you talk about, "Well, where does it go from here? What's your sense of further progress?" They kind of scratch their heads and say, "Well, I'm done. How could there be progress? It's finished."

Francis: On an absolute level, that's true. I think on a relative level, it's never finished.

Rick: Yeah, that's the way I see it. But when people say that, the best I can do is say, "Well, let's see what happens. Let's see where you are in ten years." But it seems to me there's never any end to growth. And there may not be growth of the absolute; how can that grow? But in terms of integration - the word you just used - is there any end to that?

Francis: I don't think so.

Rick: And let's define integration; you define integration.

Francis: I think integration is the interfacing of 2 things that, seemingly, are different. And then I think the integration process is the gradual realization that they're not different; they're just 2 sides of the same coin. They're not at all opposed to one another in any way, shape, or form.

It's like that old saying from the Mahayana Sutra that says, "Form is emptiness, emptiness is form. Form is none other than emptiness, emptiness is none other than form" - the Heart Sutra, I think it's called. They used to chant it in the Zen practice I did.

And I think what that's saying is that these levels are absolutely...I mean, the whole idea of non-duality - is not 2, it's non-dual; everything is one. Well then, relative and absolute can't be absolutely opposed to one another. What is that? Duality.

Rick: Duality, right, it's not Advaita.

Francis: So my sense is that this is one area of growth, where you gradually come to a sense that there's absolutely no contradiction between these 2 things, whatsoever. None at all.

There was a book by Ken Wilber, can't remember the name of it - read a couple of books by him - but in this one where he had a lens, and it was a concave lens, but it was saying: well, it's convex and concave, at the same time.

Any convex lens is also a concave lens! Just flip it over, it's a concave, then it's a convex, then it's concave. Is convex and concave opposed to one another? No, it's the same. It's just an analogy, or a Metaphor, but I think it's just the same with the relative and the absolute: the relative is absolute and the absolute is relative, in a certain sense.

The absolute is relative in the sense that the relative is the manifestation of the absolute. And we couldn't have any kind of appreciation of the absolute unless there was a relative. You see what I'm saying? It's very paradoxical language.

Rick: Gets us back to why the creation exists in the first place.

Francis: Who knows? I'm not sure about that one.

Rick: Well, but think about that one. If there weren't a creation, then could the absolute really appreciate Itself?

Francis: Right! Just look at the concept of space. If you had infinite space with no objects appearing in it, then you couldn't really understand or have any kind of grasp of space, without the objects. If there was just space, well there would be nothing, in a certain way. But if there's just one little object in space, then you can suddenly become very conscious of the space, somehow.

It limps - all analogies limp, as they say - but it sort of points to this idea that the relative can't exist without the absolute. And in a certain sense, the absolute can't exist, or stand out, or be perceptible, without the relative. So, form is emptiness, emptiness is form.

Rick: This gets us back to the Andrew Cohen theme of evolutionary enlightenment - a 14-billion-year process in which the sophisticated instruments have evolved to the point where the absolute can realize Itself as a living reality.

I want to just dwell on the concept of integration, just for another moment. It may seem that that word has a connotation of overcoming a handicap that, sort of, afflicts one, when realization takes place; in which you no longer can function properly, and you have to get integrated in order to carry on an ordinary life. But I think it goes way beyond that to degrees to which Divinity, or light of God, can be radiated through the form of an enlightened person. And that can become very, very, very powerful.

Francis: Yeah, it seems that's what It wants to do, doesn't it? I don't know why. It's kind of interesting, but it seems like it enjoys all these forms - all these plants and trees, and animals and insects. It's amazing. I look around and I see all these things, and sometimes I'm just blown away by the beauty and the wonder of it all. It's just so amazing.

And yet, that seems to be what the absolute "wants," for lack of a better word - "wants" to do. It loves to play like that. It's odd, isn't it?

Rick: One thing you and I talked about, outside of this interview, was your experience of being aware during sleep. And I was thinking about that, and maybe you can talk about it a little bit, and I'll give you a few quotes from people that I came up with after we had that conversation.

Francis: Oh, that would be interesting for me, because I've asked a few people that I ran across that have had little awakenings, or claiming to have big awakenings, and I haven't ran across too much about it. But it's just that since this happened to me, my experience of sleep and dream and waking - of course we've already talked about the difference in the waking experience a little - but especially dream and sleep have really changed a lot.

It's like coming to a discovery of the fact, in a certain way, that this spacious awareness in consciousness is just always present. It can't not be present. It's just there, and it's just there when I sleep, too. It's really interesting and it's hard to put into words, exactly. Because it's like, when you're asleep, there's no objects, there's no body, there's no world, but there's still that awareness; it's still fully there. And yet there's nothing for it to be aware of but itself, if that makes sense. I don't know.

When I wake up, there's a sense that that's what's been going on - this awareness has just been there.

But when I'm actually in the sleep, it's totally empty; it's just awareness. And since there's no objects... I don't know, it's really hard to put into words.

Rick: You're saying it pretty well. The faculty which would say to itself, "Oh cool, I'm having this inner awareness" - that's shut off.

Francis: Yeah, that's totally shut off.

Rick: That's a waking-state function and the waking state isn't there.

Francis: Well that doesn't even exist very much in the waking state now, but it doesn't exist at all in deep sleep. So in one way it's not different, it's the exact same experience... well, it's not an experience. Ah, words always break down just about this time.

That's what's always there. That awareness is what's always there. It's who I am really, on an absolute level, and I don't stop being who I am when I'm asleep. I guess that's a simple way to put it. It's still there, it's still present.

Rick: The quotes I thought of were that verse from *The Song of Solomon* in the Bible: "I sleep though my heart waketh."

Francis: I love that. I think that really says it.

Rick: And then there was a thing from Ramana Maharishi that somebody sent me. I meant to print it out and I forgot to, but basically, he was referring to the same experience. Maybe I'll post it on your page at www.BATGAP.com - the exact quote. But it was very clear, that's what he was talking about.

And then there was this great yogi who lived in the caves outside Rishikesh, named Tatwal Baba. One time somebody asked him, "Do you sleep?" And he said, "What would happen to the world if I slept?" Then they said, "You should come to London." And he said, "I am London."

Francis: A little non-dual stand-up comedy there. The other thing that's interesting is that I don't sleep much at all anymore. It's kind of strange. I don't seem to need...

Rick: As many hours.

Francis: No, but I'm full of energy all the time. Certainly, my energy since this thing has happened is much greater, much more vital, and I never seem to lose energy. I don't need very much sleep. I go to bed late now, and I wake up really, really early. And then even when I'm asleep, it's restful - the body is resting - but there's still consciousness, it's fully there.

You know, it's strange...I don't know. I'm not trying to make some big deal about it or anything. I think I asked you about it because you're so knowledgeable about these things and I'm really not. I have my experience and I've read a lot of stuff of Ramana Maharishi. He didn't write a lot, but I read everything he wrote.

In *Talks by Ramana Maharishi* I ran across little snippets of reference to this, but I never heard much about it. And then when I mentioned it to you, you seemed to know about it, so I was curious.

Rick: Well the reason I do is that in the TM movement, which was my background, Maharishi made a big deal of that, and he said that it's really the acid test of self-realization: if you lose awareness during sleep, you're not self-realized. You may think you are, it might seem to be there in the waking state, but if you're out like a light with no awareness during sleep, then it's not fully established. And of course he didn't consider that to be a final state, there's some cool stuff way beyond that.

Francis: I don't know though, because I've heard a few people on your site, that you interviewed, and you asked that question a couple of times, I remember. And they said, no, that that wasn't their experience, that they weren't conscious during sleep, and they seemed pretty awake to me.

What they said really resonated with me and I felt a sense like, they're seeing this. Because there's something about this, when this happens to you - and even saying "happens" to you isn't accurate at all. Anyways, for the sake of conversation, when this happens to you, you recognize it in other people. It's hard to explain.

When you see somebody, even just see them, they don't even have to open their mouth, but especially when they open their mouth and they start talking about it, you get that - "Okay, they really see this too." There's a sense of almost recognizing somebody in your family. Like maybe you had a brother that you never knew about, and you see him and you go, "Oh, wow, he looks like me. He somehow must be a brother." You just sort of know it. I don't know - it's funny.

Rick: Well yeah, in my fundamentalist TM days I would have said, "Yes, it's absolutely a necessity, you have to have awareness during sleep." Now it's like, "Who knows?"

Francis: I don't know many things, right? I don't know nothing, in fact.

Rick: And I actually have friends - we used to have this weekly Satsang; it's still going on here in town, I used to go to it every week before I started doing BATGAP. One evening I just really dwelt on that point, made the whole evening about it. And I just kept asking all these guys and most of them said, "For me it was just a phase and I'd rather be out like a light; I'd just rather be "poof," asleep."

Francis: Well maybe that will happen with me, who knows. It's only been going on 3 years now, so who knows.

Rick: But that friend of ours whom you spoke with, that I referred you to, who wishes to remain anonymous, says he hasn't lost awareness since he was 10 years old, and he's in his mid-60s.

Francis: He was great for me to talk to because he confirmed a lot of the strange aspects of this in my experience, and he was like, "Oh no, that's perfectly fine." He was real matter-of-fact... "Oh no, that's normal," because I was full of questions.

I have been in an environment where I really didn't have much opportunity to talk to anybody who had had this kind of thing happen to them, and I was always searching for that. If a spiritual director or somebody like that would come through town, if I got a chance to talk to them I would ask them, "Do you have any funny experiences when you sleep?" They look at me like, "what?!"

And nobody knew what I was talking about, but anyway, I was looking for somebody in my own tradition who I felt understood me, and I couldn't really find it, to be honest.

Rick: Well, I think if you were able to get in a time machine and go talk to ...

Francis: Meister Eckhart, maybe.

Rick: Him, or Teresa of Avila, or one of these people, you'd find a lot of answers, they would know a lot about it. I haven't read much Christian Mysticism myself so I don't know, but I'm sure it's there.

Francis: I've been reading Christian Mysticism since I was 16 years old and it's definitely there, but you have to read between the lines a little bit. Also, a lot of Christian mystics were very, very immersed in doctrinal stuff and theological understanding of things. And it's couched in a certain system - religious system.

But the thing that's fascinating to me is, when I read these other traditions, what we're talking about is in every major religious tradition in the world. This non-duality, this sense of oneness with the sacred, with the Divine, with God, is at the heart of every religion, and it's just talked about in different terminology, different personalities expressing it. But in essence, it's the same reality, isn't it?

Rick: Yeah, and it's also translated through different translators from other languages. And who knows what the translators are doing to it.

Francis: Oh yeah. I think that a lot when I read the Bible now. I read words of Jesus and I think, "Nah... I don't think so."

Rick: Yeah, firstly, nothing was written down for a couple-hundred years, and then you got some guy translating from the Aramaic, and maybe into the Hebrew and into the Greek. And even if they go straight from the Aramaic, there's a lot dependent on the level of consciousness or clarity of the translator.

Francis: Right, and then you've got monks copying it down, century after century. And maybe somebody told a joke and he got distracted and copied it down, I mean who knows?

All of those things also take on a lot less importance - the idea of "sacred scripture," and it's "inspired." Alright, I believe it's inspired, but I believe the Bhagavad Gita is inspired too. And I believe the accounts of Saint Francis, *The Little Flowers of Saint Francis*, is inspired too. They're all - though written through human instruments, they're not going to be perfect; they're going to have all these little things we're talking about, and yet there's something that's conveyed in them.

Again, they're just pointers. All this stuff, it just points. It points to this absolute reality that can't even be talked about. This interview itself is proof that it can't be talked about, because I'm... blah blah blah blah.

I don't know how to talk about it. I do the best I can. In a certain sense, I somehow feel that this consciousness wants me to talk about it. It seems that I find myself talking about it and people seem to find it helpful, but a lot of times, even as I'm saying something, I'm feeling like, "Well that's not really accurate." The words I'm using are very poorly pointing, and the conclusion I've come to is: there are no words that exist that are adequate, they just don't exist.

Rick: For anything! For as I often bring up, try to use words to describe the color red. You just fall flat, you can't do it. Or the smell of a rose. There's the realm of experience. The realm of words is a pretty poor substitute for the realm of experience.

Francis: Beautiful, I love words, I love to write, I love poetry. I love to write, I just love it, but it's limited. It's very limited. But it can point, and it helps people in some ways, but it's inadequate - totally.

Rick: When you had your awakening - if you're ok with referring to it that way...

Francis: I refer to it somehow, I guess.

Rick: Did you more or less, immediately, not only realize that "I am that presence," "presence of God," or whatever, but that all this is that as well, or was that a phase that came later on?

Francis: No, it all came at once. It was totally clear that this awareness, this consciousness that I am, absolutely pervades every form that exists. That all these things, for lack of a better term, they flow out of this absolute reality. They flow out of that, they're manifestations of it. Does that make sense?

Rick: Yeah. So you never really went through a witnessing phase, where consciousness was seen as distinct from, or separate from; absolute and relative didn't get separated out?

Francis: No, I went through that a lot, earlier. And it wasn't always present, but the witness was present a lot, a lot of the time. I was the witness. Over the years, that seemed to be a shift that was more or less permanent, but it wasn't totally permanent. But when this happened, that fell away with everything else.

The witness fell away, as much as my concept of "God," you know? Everything fell away. The "witness" thing - a lot of therapies use that idea too of, "witness the witness," "witnessing consciousness." and so on. But that's not the final, that's not the spacious awareness; It arises and ceases *in* the spacious awareness, like everything else. The witness, you know?

Seems like sometimes I hear different teachers talk about the witness as if it's some kind of end. Like, "That's it, that witness." And my sense is no, that's not quite it. It's a phase. It's certainly a development along the path, but I don't think it's the final destination, not really. That's my sense of it anyway.

Rick: Yeah, I would agree. There's a chapter in your book about the search for happiness. And when you read that chapter it seems so obvious, that it's almost a cliché to say that happiness is within us; it's not a function of what's going on outside. And yet it's not obvious to the vast majority.

Francis: It doesn't seem to be when you look around, does it?

Rick: No, and even an awakened person, Saint John of the Cross for instance, was confined in a little tiny room for 14 years. He couldn't lie down, he couldn't stand up, his food was thrown in among his feces, he was in a very dire circumstance. And I wonder to what extent his inner happiness was able to sustain him under those circumstances, because some situations seem to challenge it.

Contrast a situation like that with taking a nice hike in the mountains, in fresh air, and it seems like you're going to be a lot happier. In your own experiences, is there something that's just rock-solid regardless of the vicissitudes of life?

Francis: Again, there's a relative answer to that and there's an absolute answer to that. The relative answer is, yeah, I would be relatively more happy hiking in The Sierras than I would be in the prison cell in Toledo, eating gruel. But the deepest, most absolute happiness is unconditional, it's like it's innate in this absolute reality we're talking about.

This happiness is what that is - it is happiness itself. It is stability, it is happiness, it is peace, it is joy. It's all these things we're looking for in all these objects and situations, and so on. And yeah, I would prefer, if you gave me a choice, you said, "Okay, you could be hiking with Rick in The Sierras and have a picnic-lunch in the middle of the day and birdwatch, or you can be in a prison cell." Well, I would probably choose the hike.

But if I'm plugged in to this Source of absolute unconditional happiness, it's there. It's just like that awareness when you sleep - it's there. It's always there, it doesn't leave. And I don't mean to trivialize other peoples' pain or other peoples' suffering, because you know, I have led a relatively comfortable life. It's easy for me to philosophize from my ivory tower of comfort and first-world security and all this. But if I were starving and living in a drain tile, maybe I'd look at it differently, I don't know.

But so far anyway, my sense is that true happiness, the deepest, most absolute happiness, really doesn't have anything to do with our circumstances. Does that make sense? I mean, both are true: there's a relative reality here that we have to honor and we have to be real about, and there's an absolute truth. That's the way reality is, isn't it? It's both, and it's not either- or. It's both-and, always.

Rick: Good, I wanted to elicit that from you. When you sit in the morning for several hours in silence, is it really complete absorption, or do you have this, "Oh, I think I want to have this for lunch," or "I should have called that guy yesterday?" Do little thoughts like that come up, or is it complete immersion in the absolute?

Francis: No, it's pretty immersed. It's like sinking into something. I don't know how to explain it or describe it. In a way, it's always here - that peace, that tranquility, that silence, it can't not be here! It's here right now. It's always here, right now, and that's just the way it is.

Rick: But when in the morning, when you do that, it's there exclusively?

Francis: Well then, I close my eyes and it's there exclusively. When there are no objects present anymore and when you close your eyes, what's there? It's just that awareness. That's what's there.

Rick: Yeah, but the average person who just closes their eyes, their mind's still buzzing along.

Francis: Yeah, well, something happens. I even have one point in that chapter, that there is no mind. And that's what's come to me, is that the idea of a mind - when we talk about mind, and I even use the word "mind" - relatively there's a mind, but on an absolute level, there is no entity called "the mind;" there's functioning, there's the thinking function.

Rick: On an absolute level there's nothing.

Francis: No.

Rick: ... [on a] totally absolute level - there's nobody either. But on a relative level, don't we have these faculties?

Francis: Well yeah, but my experience is that there's a thinking function. There's a thinking function that still functions fine. In fact, it functions even better now.

Rick: Just as there's a seeing function and a hearing function?

Francis: Yeah. There's a seeing function but there's not an entity there. What's a good example? I like analogies and metaphors and examples. I think it's really useful because all this stuff is so impossible to talk about, that if you just have a little metaphor, somebody might get a little... "Oh, yeah! I see." - they get a little glimpse.

Rick: Yeah, something will come to you.

Francis: Anyway, my experience is that there is no entity called "a mind." And I ran across this with Ramana and Nisargadatta and a few people I read that, "the mind is dead," and Jnani - "the mind is dead," and all this. And at first you hear that - I read that to a few people and they're like, "Oh, that sounds horrible," - you know... the mind is dead. Yeah, but the mind never existed!

I think what they're saying is like the snake and the rope thing. If you've got a snake... if you go into your garage, and I've got this in the book - it's a classical Advaita analogy, I certainly didn't make it up. I borrowed it from Ramana and he borrowed it...

Rick: And he borrowed it. It goes back thousands of years.

Francis: And it's just the idea that - and I try to make it contemporary - you go into your garage and you see this coiled-up snake at the corner. And you think, "Oh gosh! There's a big snake there." And then you jump back and you hit the light that's on the wall.

You turn on the light and then you realize, "Oh it's a rope. It's a rope I coiled up and put in the corner last September, and there it is." And so when you realize that the snake is not in the rope; that it's just a rope, well, did you kill the snake? Is the snake "dead?" Well yeah, figuratively speaking the snake is dead, but it's dead because it never was alive to begin with.

And I think that's what happens with the "ego death" and the "death of the mind" and all this stuff that these really respected, Jnani-realized teachers from India and so on, they talk about. And I think what they're really saying is you suddenly realize it never was to begin with. It's not that it was really real and then it died; it's the realization that it wasn't an entity to begin with.

Rick: Incidentally, you have brought the blessings of I don't know what, Jesus or something, on Fairfield, Iowa, because it's raining outside right now for the first time in I don't know how long - we've had this severe drought.

Francis: Well good!

Rick: There's always these stories in the Vedas about how some country is experiencing a severe drought, and they implore some saint to come visit them because they know that when he comes, then it's going to rain. So hey, thanks!

Francis: I'm not saying I'm some kind of saint, but I really would like to visit Fairfield, Iowa.

Rick: Oh, that would be great.

Francis: I find it fascinating. I think it's fascinating - Fairfield, Iowa. And I would love to come see what's going on there, and maybe move there. I don't have anything keeping me here, that's for sure.

Rick: Oh that would be great. Aren't you doing some kind of prison ministry there?

Francis: Well, I had several possibilities doing some chaplaincy jobs and they've fallen through, so I don't have a job yet. And I'm willing to go wherever I can to get a job. That's my background and my formal education, and I love, I love that work. I love that kind of ministry.

Rick: Cool. I didn't want to get you off the track, I wanted to ask the question, since you're talking about the rope and the snake and the mind never having existed, really, would you say that for all faculties? Or is there something about the mind and the ego which is more illusory than say, the senses? You know - the sight, hearing, taste, touch, smell? Aren't the mind and ego just relative faculties that are necessary for overall functioning, or is there really something less real about those than other faculties?

Francis: No, I think they exist in the form of functioning - as a human functioning. Where we go wrong as human beings is we conceptually make it into an entity. That's the basic human dysfunction in my opinion, is this conceptualization of reality, and then we believe that the concepts we have about something are the reality! And we miss the bus. We just don't get that, yeah - there's functioning here, there's seeing here, for example, there's tasting here, but there's no taster, there's no see-er, really.

That's where I think that idea of subject and object - you know, there's no see-er and no seen, there's just seeing. And it's really saying the see-er and the seen are one, they're not two different things. All there is is just the reality of seeing. Does that make sense? ... But there's no subject.

Rick: There's no little guy in there that is doing the seeing.

Francis: It's funny though, I think we think that. I think the "unenlightened" human consciousness is that we make up all these entities. We make up all these conceptual things and then we believe they're real. It's like, there's this story by Jack Cornfield, a Vipassana teacher, tells where his daughter drew this picture of a monster when she was six or seven, and then she put it on her wall in her room.

And then she said, "Daddy, I'm scared." And he said, "Why are you scared honey?"
And she said, "I'm scared of the monster." He said, "What monster are you scared of?"
She said, "That monster." And he said, "Honey, you drew that monster."

And we laughed at that, but we do that.

Rick: That's a great story, yeah.

Francis: We make these things up. Another person who is good at this is the Byron Katie "Work," where we make up these stories and we scare ourselves. We have these concepts and we take them to be real and they're not real at all; they're just concepts. They're real as concepts but...

Rick: That begs the question that, who is making up the story?

Francis: I'm not sure. They just come don't they, these stories. They come a lot less these days, for me, but I'm still capable of having a story come. But I, right away, see it's a story. Like, "Oh, that's a good one."

Rick: If ultimately we are not the author of our actions, and if there's some Divine intelligence which is orchestrating this whole thing, then maybe that's the one who has made up the stories.

Francis: Absolutely, it has to be.

Rick: He's made this whole universe, entered into it, plays the game, plays hide-and-seek with Himself?

Francis: Yeah, yeah, I think that's true. That's absolutely accurate in my experience, or at least my sense of things, I would say.

Rick: And for what purpose?

Francis: Yeah, that's a big question.

Rick: Expansion of happiness maybe?

Francis: I'm not sure. I don't know what the purpose is.

Rick: I mean, you talk about happiness and bliss and all that in your experience, could that have ever been there if one hadn't gone through this whole hide-and-seek game and come to an embodied realization?

Francis: Well, it's like that little analogy I had at the beginning, of the fish looking for the ocean. The fish finally finds the ocean because he realizes, "Well, the ocean is all around me and in me, and I am the ocean." And he suddenly realizes that, but maybe he had to look everywhere to find it before he could realize that.

It's all good, as the kids say. I don't judge it anymore. I see people on a frantic search, and they're going through their life and they're looking for happiness and I think, well that's perfect for them. Maybe they need to do that for a time, maybe several lifetimes. I don't know, who knows?

Rick: Maybe a thousand of them.

Francis: Yeah.

Rick: It seems an innate tendency, or it's the way we're wired.

Francis: Oh I think it is. I think because we are happiness, that's who we are, and we realize it before we realize it, really. We never don't realize that, on one level, and so that's why people are always looking for happiness, because they gotta have happiness!

It's just hard-wired into the consciousness that, of course you've got to have happiness; you are happiness! They're looking in all these different places for it and thinking they're going to find it in an object, and they won't, not ultimately anyway.

Rick: You had that great quote from Marilyn Monroe in your book: "Once you get what you want, you don't want it."

Francis: Yeah, I love that. I heard it, it was funny because I was in the monastery, I was a novice actually, and this guy who's a famous expert on Saint Bernard and an expert on Patristics and so on - he's from Australia, and he was giving us a talk and he said, (Francis starts speaking with an accent) "I have a quote from a very obscure saint that most people don't appreciate, but this quote is extremely wise."

And he says, "The quote is - and i want you to try to guess who it is after I tell you. The quote is, "Once you get what you want, you don't want it."" And everybody was throwing out..."Oh, I think that's Saint Teresa of Avila," "I think it's Teresa of Lisieux," "Mother Teresa" - everyone was throwing out all these things.

And he says, "No, that was spoken in 1951 by the blessed Marilyn Monroe." And everybody was like, "Oh okay." But I never forgot that quote. It just stuck. And then when I was writing that chapter on happiness, it just seemed to come out. There's a lot of wisdom in that, you know?

"Once you get what you want, you don't want it."

Rick: But you know, it seems to me that if your happiness isn't contingent upon the things you get, then you do appreciate the things you have.

Francis: Oh, sure.

Rick: Because you weren't hanging your hopes on getting a such-and-such. Like if I got a new bicycle for instance, it's not like I look forward to that with great anticipation and, "Oh it's going to be so wonderful;" it's like, "Oh, if I get a new bicycle, great, and I'll use it for years." So you don't have that addictive chasing.

Francis: Right. You're not looking for ultimate happiness in that object. You realize what it is, you realize the limitations of it and you enjoy it while it's there. It's like flowers. We bring flowers to people, women love to get flowers. My mom used to love to get flowers every birthday, any excuse to get her flowers and she would get into that, and yet you don't expect a flower to hang around for 20 years, do you?

You know the limitations, you know that... okay this is beautiful. You can just revel in the beauty of a flower, but you know in a couple of days it's not going to be there, and then you throw it away and that's fine, and I think everything is like that.

Everything in our life, we enjoy it while it's there. We don't deny! - that's the whole monastic thing, is denying the world, denying yourself. And I've been there, done that, kind of... I got the t-shirt. And

there's something to be said for that; I'm not knocking renunciation and all that, but it's very easy to get very attached to your renunciation. It's very easy to get some image of yourself as "the one who has denied himself," the holy saint whose given up everything for God. Well then, you're right back where you started, again.

The ego snuck in through the back door and now you've got a "holy ego," which is much harder to get rid of than a worldly ego. And the whole point is that the ego, the self, the concept of me... it just doesn't exist. It doesn't exist as a holy one, it doesn't exist as a worldly one, it doesn't exist as a rich one, it doesn't exist as a miserable failure, it doesn't exist as a great success; it's just not there.

Rick: But there must be some remnant of it. I mean, if someone says, "Hey Francis," you'd turn your head.

Francis: Oh yeah, absolutely!

Rick: So isn't there some sense of personal self?

Francis: Totally, totally, but I understand now what it is and what it isn't.

Rick: Ok. Elaborate on that.

Francis: It's temporary. It's a role I play. It's like that analogy I gave of Tevye in *Fiddler On the Roof*. I was in a lot of plays in high school and in college, and I was very involved in that kind of stuff. And a lot of times if you play a role and you're a good actor, you really get into it. You feel the role, you become that while you're on stage. And I think the things we do in life are our identity, our relative identity in life, we are that on a relative level, but that's not who we are on an absolute level.

When I played Tevye in *Fiddler On The Roof*, when I go home at night, or even when I'm on stage, I'm not going to be conflicted about my daughter marrying a Gentile because I'm sane, right? I know I'm not really Tevye. I am Tevye in one way, but in another way I'm not Tevye at all. And so you just play with that... enjoy it. Okay, fun, I get to sing (Francis sings)... whatever! I get to do all this stuff but I don't have to let it bother me.

The story of Tevye is the story of Tevye, that's the way my life is now too. The story of Francis is the story of Francis, and it's interesting, and I still have emotions that arise about it, and feelings. When you call my name I turn my head - like you say, but on another level, I never lose sight of the fact that that's not who I am, you know? That's not who you are, that's not who anybody is.

Rick: All the world is a stage.

Francis: Yeah, that's Shakespeare.

Rick: I think it's out of *King Lear* - "All the world's a stage and each man, in his time, plays many parts. He has his entrances and exits," and so on.

Francis: That's why Neo-Advaita, nondual fundamentalism stuff kind of gets me a little bit, because it's like if you were in a play and you got on stage, and you were playing the part of Tevye, for example, and you get up on the stage and you look at the audience - you know how Tevye does that - the "wall" thing, he breaks it down and talks to the audience in *Fiddler On The Roof*?

Rick: It's been a long time. I only saw the movie and that was like 40 years ago.

Francis: It's a little technique they use in theater a lot, where the character suddenly breaks the sort-of illusion of the play going on, and he starts addressing the audience. And Tevye would do this..."Well, should I let her do this or shouldn't I?" And he goes back and forth.

Rick: Yeah, yeah, "...on the other hand."

Francis: Yeah. "...on the other hand, maybe she's right..." and blah blah blah. Well, it's like those that are totally like "...there's no one home," "...there's no doer..." - I totally get that! I get that there's no doer, I get that there's no one here. But on another level, there is someone here! - there is a doer.

It's like if you were playing the role of Tevye and you got up on stage, and you suddenly gave this big speech to the audience... "You know what? I want you all to realize I'm not really Tevye and these women are not really my daughters. In fact, that's my girlfriend over there and she couldn't be my girlfriend and my daughter at the same time," and he got up. Well, the director would be so pissed-off at you! You'd be ruining the play!

And I think that sometimes, when people get so stuck in this absolute view like, "That's all there is..." it's like, yeah, in a way that *is* all there is, but there is this relative world we live in, and most people live only in that world. Most people don't even have any clue about this absolute level, and if we go around insisting that they don't use personal pronouns and stuff like that...to me it just seems funny. I don't think it really points to this absolute reality; I think it just makes people think you're weird, you know?

If you insist on all this nondual language and all... because let's face it, language doesn't get it anyway! Language can only point poorly, it doesn't somehow capture this reality that we're talking about today. So who cares what language? Use normal language.

Rick: I think it's kind of an immature level of teaching, and many of them have actually evolved out of it. Some of them who have actually spoken to Krishna Gauchi and some others who sort-of tease themselves about how they used to be when they first came back from Lucknow, and how they used this convoluted way of not identifying that there's any individuality here.

Francis: I totally get that because I went through 4 or 5 months of just hardly being able to speak, and so I understand the sense that language doesn't accurately point, at all. I understand that sense of things.

Rick: You try to speak in alignment with that...

Francis: You try but you can't really. How could you? You just can't. So language is limited but it is what we have to communicate with, at least so far, so might as well use it.

Rick: Yeah, your point is well-taken and as you know, it's been kind-of a theme in these interviews - and you sent me a long email about it, that we could talk about at this point - one point we've already touched upon that comes up is, since there's actually no person present, whose left to do spiritual practices?

And you mentioned that to you, it's like saying if there's no person present, who is there to eat food, or breathe, or whatever? And maybe we can summarize it as a 'confusion of levels' fallacy, where on some

levels "...fine! There's no person. Got it." But that doesn't obviate levels on which there is a practical utility to doing this, that, or the other thing.

Francis: In fact, the realization of that drastically changes the way you move through the relative world. If you realize the absolute view, then the relative is then relative, right? It's not absolute anymore. So when bad things happen to you for example, or death of a loved one, these are things that happen to people. And believe me, I deal with this in my profession. I had to comfort people who have lost loved ones, I had to be there for people or be present to people to try to bring some comfort and some peace to them, and so I'm not minimizing those things; those are things that impact people.

But when you have this absolute view, then you see it for what it is. That doesn't mean that the normal human emotions don't arise - you can still grieve, you can still feel a sense of loss - all that stuff. In fact, in some ways it's even more acute, because you're more open. This opens you up so that nothing is threatening anymore, because you are the spacious awareness in which everything arises and ceases. So whatever arises is welcomed! It's like, "Ok, that's arising, that's interesting," you know?

Rick: And I'm sure you're not saying to these people whom you are counseling, "Oh, nobody dies, there's no need for grief, yada yada yada."

Francis: No, no, because they're, at that moment, dealing with emotions that are arising. Yes, arising in the absolute spaciousness, but they're dealing with something that is relative. So I have to be on their level to deal with them.

It's like a dream-thing. They say if you're in a dream and there's a tiger chasing you, you need to dream a gun to shoot the tiger. A real gun won't deal with the dream-tiger, it doesn't work that way, or a dream-gun won't deal with a real tiger in your everyday life, you know?

So if I'm on a level with somebody and they're really in the relative world, and they're dealing with something there, then I have to come down to that - well, not "come down," that's not the right...but you know what I mean; I have to deal with them on that level.

Rick: Yeah, render unto Caesar what is Caesar's; just deal with the level according to that which the situation demands.

Francis: Yeah. I love this concept that Ken Wilber talks about. He talks about these different phases of development, of consciousness, and so on, but each phase includes the lower phase. It doesn't negate the lower phase; it just transcends it. So when you get the absolute view, you transcend the relative view. The relative is still there!

Rick: Yeah, absolutely. Let's say you had a 20-story building and you keep going up a floor. And each time you go up another floor you have a wider vista, but that vista doesn't negate the lesser vistas from the lower floors; it just includes it and extends it.

Francis: Absolutely, yeah, it's the same idea. There's no problem with the relative! It's fine, it's just not absolute, that's all.

Rick: Yeah, so if you could make a concluding point on this whole point we've just been covering, in a nutshell, what would it be? Or if you want, I'll make one.

Francis: I think I would just point to that Heart Sutra: "Form is emptiness, emptiness is form." I think that says it all. There's no problem with it.

Rick: Then let's see...there was more to your email here. "Point 2: There also seems to be the idea that the eternal presence of awareness or consciousness means that we are all already awakened, or many would probably prefer to say, "Impersonal awakesness is simply present, so there's no need to do or become anything whatsoever."

And you say, "Well, I would concur on an absolute level, these are both true enough statements; it's the practical, relative application that is being made with these statements that is not a very skillful means of applying these truths."

Francis: Right, because I think that if you look at what is spiritual practice, really? If you boil it down, the really good spiritual practices that seem to rally work in peoples' lives, what they are is just a kind-of resting in that awareness that's already present. It's a pointing to the ability to shift one's attention to rest in that awareness.

It's never not-present, it's always here and now, and all you need to do is to realize. It's like the fish looking for the ocean, all he needs to do is relax and realize that the ocean is all around him, and in him, and he is the ocean.

Rick: Yeah, but that could be easier said than done.

Francis: Yeah.

Rick: Maybe...I don't know about the fish but most people in the world are very caught up in the play.

Francis: Yep! That's why things like instructions about, "if a thought arises, let it go and just come back to your simple sense of awareness" - that's a kind of meditational instruction. And some people could say, "Well, you're doing, there's a doer there. Who is doing that?" - and so on.

Well, all it's doing is it's pointing to the ability that we all naturally, innately, have to rest in being-ness. Just to rest there! And there's no doing in being; being is just being! And spiritual practice is just a way to point people to that ability that is innate within them - to simply rest in their beingness.

And I don't see any problem, there doesn't have to be a doer, necessarily. A lot of times, yes. In the early phases of meditation and so on, there is definitely a sense of, "I'm going to do this. I'm going to conquer this technique. I'm going to be the best meditator that ever was!" - you know? And I went through that. I mean, we all go thought that.

Rick: But if you're doing that, chances are you're going to be straining.

Francis: Yeah, definitely, you're going to be straining.

Rick: And that strain isn't necessarily going to be very fruitful.

Francis: Maybe the fruitfulness of it is [that] you wear it out! You wear out the straining and then you realize, "Well that's not it. I strained and strained and strained, and all I did was create a headache." And then you realize, "Well, that must not be it." So then you lighten up a little bit and you don't strain as much, and you just kind-of rest in the awareness.

I don't think anything is really "lost" in the journey, you know? Everything we do, even the mistakes we make, we learn something from it. It somehow points us, ultimately, in the right direction, in one way or another.

Rick: The Gita says, "No effort is lost and no obstacle exists."

Francis: Right, right. That says it really well.

Rick: It's funny, when I was interviewing Andrew Cohen a few weeks ago, he was talking about when he had been spending some time with Papaji. And he had kind-of settled into this very profound, easy, natural state. And then he went home that evening and "tried" to meditate, so to speak, and he immediately got a splitting headache.

Francis: He couldn't do it anymore.

Rick: My sense was, when I heard him say that, he had been in the habit of an effortful practice, which stuck out like a sore thumb in that easy, natural state, which Papaji had evoked in him.

Francis: Right, right, that's good. Yeah, I think that's true.

Rick: There's a verse in The Vedas somewhere, I don't know where, where it says, "Be easy to us, with gentle effort."

Francis: Yeah, that's beautiful. You know so many beautiful quotes.

Rick: Oh, you know, I've got a limited little picnic basket-full.

Francis: Oh, seems like a lot to me.

Rick: I'm not somebody like Ken Wilber or something; he's a walking Encyclopedia. In fact, if you listen to enough of these interviews, you'll hear me using the same things over and over again.

Francis: I've listened to a number of them now. I've listened to probably... I would say 20.

Rick: Cool. Now it's interesting with regard to this whole topic of practice, let's say a person is in a really agitated, miserable state - very confused and conflicted and unhappy and so on - and they begin a spiritual practice. Obviously when they sit down to do it, they aren't going to sink into the kind of state that you experience for several hours each morning; there's going to be a lot of turmoil going on. Would you, as a teacher, have any kind of advice for them on how to deal with that?

Francis: Well you know, of course you have to deal with each person in reality, that's right in front of you, with an actual face on, and so on and so on. So there's not a pat answer, but my general sense of what I would do in a situation like that, would be to give them a mantra or something. To give them some kind

of calming technique and just say, "Just sit quietly, just in a chair, however you're comfortable, and just use this word. And when your mind starts to wander into all the turmoil and all your problems and so on, kind of let go of that for now. You can go back to that later, it'll still be there after your meditation, after 20 minutes or so. But in the meantime, just rest in that word. Just breathe it in, breathe it out."

It's like the idea of when you take a course in Spanish, say, and you've got Spanish I, Spanish II, Spanish III. You know you need to take Spanish I before you can take Spanish II, and you need to take Spanish II before you can take Spanish III, that's the best way to learn Spanish.

And with this, I think that the essence of spiritual practice that really goes deep, is this idea of what's often called 'self-inquiry', or I would call it 'self-abiding' or 'self-investigation' - it's just this resting in the awareness, in the spacious awareness that's already present, all the time. But in order to do that it's better if the mind is a bit calm - it's not agitated. If the mind is agitated, you can't just automatically go to rest in that awareness that's already present, because the mind is covering it over, it's obscured by all the activity in the mind and in the head. So I would say, get that quieted down a little.

It's proven - like TM, they've done all kinds of scientific research about how this affects blood pressure and heart rate and calms you, and all this stuff that proves that physiologically, even, there's an effect from all of this. And I would say that the best route for a person like that would be to get into a calming practice like that, and then eventually introduce the idea of resting in awareness. But first do this preliminary, kind of 'level 1' thing, does that make sense?

Rick: Yeah, absolutely.

Francis: Yeah, that's the way I would approach that.

Rick: Yeah, and not to be discouraged, not to feel like you're failing because your experience doesn't seem to match that of such-and-such a teacher that you listen to, who just seems so serene and settled and clear, you know? Not to feel like you're doing something wrong, but to just realize that, as they say, a journey of a thousand miles begins with one step.

Francis: Absolutely, and you know, another thing I might suggest to a person like that - and I have actually suggested this to people like that - one day it just came to me. I was talking to this woman and she was very much in turmoil. And she just kept saying, "I'm a failure, I'm just a big failure. I'm just the biggest failure, I'm a spiritual failure. I've been at this stuff for years and years and nothing's happened, and I'm just this big failure. I'm never aware, I can't be aware."

And I said, "Ok, but there's something in you, there's somebody there that's aware of the fact that you're not aware! There's something in you that's aware of the idea that you are a failure. So that's there, right? I mean, you know, that has to be there! So just try to turn your attention to that. Just sort of shift your attention and be aware of that which is aware that you're not aware!" And she got it!

She was like, "Oh, yeah, I see what you mean! It has to be there doesn't it?" And I said, "Yeah!" So in that sense, even the most unspiritual stuff we experience, that is arising, all of it points back to that spacious, absolutely open awareness, doesn't it? It can't help but do that because that's what it's arising out of!

Rick: Yeah.

Francis: The turmoil in my thinking and all that, what's that arising in? It has no choice; it has to arise in the spacious awareness, right? So even that points, even that points. In that sense, everything that we experience, everything that we experience in life, points to this awareness, which is beyond experience, which is the ground of all experience, you could say. It can't help but point to it!

Rick: Great. So I would say that the take-away point from the discussion we were having for the last 20 minutes or so is, just because we have an understanding that ultimately there is no person, doesn't mean that spiritual practices are irrelevant or unnecessary; there may come a time when they are.

Francis: Sure! Sure, there is a time when they aren't needed.

Rick: But don't jump the gun, you know?

Francis: No, no, it's like that old analogy the Buddha used about crossing the river with a boat. You cross the river with the boat, but when you're in the middle of the river you don't discard the boat. You keep the boat till you cross the river, then you leave the boat and you go and walk, to go to where you're going on land. You don't need the boat anymore, it would be kind of a burden then, to be holding onto the boat. But when you're in the middle of the river, I would not advise discarding your boat at that point in your journey. That's the point where the boat is useful.

And I think it's the same thing in the spiritual journey. There's a time and a place for everything, as it says in Ecclesiastes. And I think where people...I don't know why people...I don't know, t's hard to say why, why you hear that so much. I mean, on one level I can see why they're saying, "Well it's already all here so therefore you don't need to do anything." It's like yeah, on one level that's true, but on the other hand, as Satya would say, it's not.

Rick: Well personally, I think that the reason you hear it so much is that a lot of the people who present themselves as teachers are primarily, they have an intellectual familiarity - possibly, and in many cases probably - supplemented with some genuine experience, but it just hasn't ripened to the point where it's completely comprehensive and capable of incorporating all levels of experience, such as to meet any person on their own level and teach accordingly.

Francis: Well gee I hope that's not true, because you know, you can only take somebody as far as you've come, you can't even point to anything further than what you've already seen. So if you haven't seen much and you just have an intellectual, conceptual notion of these things, then you can maybe help somebody with a good conceptual notion, but that's not going to be...well, it doesn't hurt, but I don't think it's going to be that helpful, ultimately.

Rick: Well I guess the proof of the pudding would be how common, or how genuine and abiding are the realizations in the people who listen to these teachers. And I haven't done any scientific kind of survey by any means, but that would be an interesting question to ask.

Francis: You know, I was just talking to - actually hooked up on Skype - with Trip Overholt, and I saw him on your show. And he had actually referred somebody to me and I just got in contact with him saying, "Thank you for referring this person to me, and I think I may be of some benefit to them."

And anyway, we ended up Skyping and talking, and he said he was at this - I won't say what it was but it was like a big conference of, you know, this kind of thing with teachers and things present, and this pretty well-known teacher was in the front giving a talk.

And Trip, well, you know Trip, I don't know, he seems pretty spontaneous, and he just got up and he said, "I just turned to the room and said, "How many people here have had a personal, direct seeing of this spacious awareness that this guy is talking about?"" And he said there was like 120 people in the room and maybe 4 people raised their hands.

And I was kind of shocked by that, I was like, "Wow." Well, I kind of thought that - see, in my milieu, it's like there's not a lot of people that I ran across that had had even a glimpse of all this stuff. And a few people I was working with sort of began to get glimpses, but I just didn't run across it. But when I first heard about all this non-dual scene with all these teachers and stuff, then I thought, "Well I'll bet a lot of these people are waking up." And I think a lot of them are, but maybe not as many as sometimes we think, I don't know.

Rick: Yeah, well that's an interesting anecdote and points to what I was saying, that words don't suffice. It's not sufficient to listen to somebody talk about it or to read books about it, I mean, something has to be done to make it a living, experiential reality.

Francis: Right, and I think little, simple practices that point to this awareness that you already are – yes, but they point you to it so that you can have a direct realization of it yourself. I think it's useful, I think practices are, I'm all for spiritual practice. And I think all the really great teachers, like Ramana and people like that, they certainly encouraged people to do practices. And if it's good enough for Ramana, it's good enough for me, I would say.

Rick: Well it's interesting, some people would say, "Well hey, in your case, you've already had this realization and it's permanent, nothing seems to perturb it. Why do you bother sitting for 2 or 3 hours in the morning?"

Francis: I don't know, it's just fun. I love to just be in that silence and fully - just in that alone. You know, there's something just sort of spontaneously ... I just find myself doing that. It's not like a practice, it's not like a program or something.

Rick: You're just drawn to it.

Francis: Yeah! Yeah, and in fact, when I'm just going through my life, if I'm not engaged in something where I have to be doing some thought about it or there has to be some sort of conceptual thing going on with it, that's kind of where I'm at, I'm just resting in that.

Rick: Settled in that.

Francis: Yeah, and just enjoying it. Why not?

Rick: I would expect that not only is it intrinsically enjoyable and fulfilling, but that it would have some long-term effect - culturing something or other.

Francis: Yeah, I would suspect so too. You know, I often thought when I was a Trappist, because you're off in the country secluded in this place, and you're not doing any kind of work in the world; you're just praying and doing contemplative stuff and being a monk - and I often wondered about that. There was a guy in the factory when I was a novice, and he actually had had a very bad sort of mental breakdown early on - I think in the fifties - and was schizophrenic, paranoid schizophrenic. And he was a monk, and he was in the infirmary, and I used to clean his room all the time.

And he never spoke, he just sat in his room all the time. But at night, you'd go by his room and you'd hear him chanting these prayers and things, and I used to think about that. And I would go past this brother's room, and I'd hear him doing this little Latin chanting in there, and I'd - it would often occur to me and I would just wonder, "I wonder what that's doing in the world. Maybe he's the one keeping the whole thing going," you know? Maybe he's just the most important person on the whole face of the planet.

And you know, our human appraisal of that is, "Oh he's useless, he's living this useless life. He's this paranoid schizophrenic stuck in a Trappist monastery somewhere, and what good is he doing?" And yet maybe - no, not maybe - I'm pretty sure we don't see the whole picture at all. Maybe some yogi somewhere in the Himalayas is sitting in a cave staring at a wall, and he's the one keeping the whole thing running, you know? Who knows?

Rick: A lot of people have said that - Yogananda and other - said that [there's] a lot of people squirreled away that you never see, but they're actually having a huge impact on the world.

Francis: I suspect that's true, I really do.

Rick: Yeah, couple of times during this interview you've become emotional, which is great. Have you found, since your awakening perhaps, that there's a kind of deeper and deeper emotional quality developing?

Francis: You know, for many years, since I was probably 13 or 14 years old, I had a very deep devotional quality to my spiritual life. And I loved Jesus, I just had this really strong sense of devotion to Jesus and - sorry about the table...keeps shaking. There's now a dog under it so he's shaking it.

Rick: Well, they're doing a lot of fracking in Ohio and it's causing earthquakes.

Francis: Maybe, I don't know. Is that when you take off the top off the mountain?

Rick: No, that's a whole thing where they get natural gas from deep in the ground, but they're messing up a lot of... there's a whole movie about it called *Gasland*, which you can see if you want to know about it.

Francis: Oh yeah, I'll have to watch it. But um, now what was I saying?

Rick: We were talking about devotion and you were...

Francis: Yeah! I used to have a strong, strong devotional sense - and I have, all my life really. And then once, when this discovery of this spacious awareness sort of "hit me," for 4 or 5 months I was immersed in love, I was immersed in absolute love. So from that sense, I was in the devotion, but it didn't have any kind of personal characteristic to it.

And then the interesting thing now is that I've come back to the point where I have a very personal devotion. And again, because of this integration of the relative and the absolute, I see absolutely no issue with that. It's like yeah, it's just the absolute playing the game of duality.

It's like if you love your wife, well, in one sense there is no wife, you know? Her name is just a word, it doesn't... you know, you can say all that. And yet there's this wonderful dance that goes on between lovers, isn't there? That they love each other, they enjoy each other - they celebrate that, and there's something about that that's really very valid.

And I think it's the same in the spiritual. You look at somebody like Ramana, he had all this devotion to Arunachala. He circumambulated this mountain, he talked about it as his "father," he used all this imagery that it was Shiva and all this stuff, you know? And I think that in all these really, really highly realized people - Jnanis - they really get it. They totally got it.

And there's a sense that, like this relative-absolute thing, there's no problem whatsoever between having this absolute view and really abiding and resting in that, *and* being very devotional and being a bhakta-person. It's like, I don't see... there's no problem with it in my view.

Rick: Well, all the great teachers of Advaita were that way. I mean, Shankara was very devotional - wrote all kinds of beautiful, devotional hymns, and all. He was known to have said, "The intellect imagines duality for the sake of devotion." And then of course you mentioned Ramana and Nisargadatta, he would do pujas every night, you know, Gayathri mantra and all kinds of devotional practices.

Francis: Yeah! So the answer to that is, "Yes, I'm very devotional." And by the way, I don't feel somehow compelled to share with everybody what my devotions are and to get them to accept my devotions; my devotions are my devotions.

On that relative level, this body here, this mind here has certain devotions that appeal to me and I do them, but you have to find your own way in that.

Rick: I was just curious as to whether your awakening or your realization had somehow fueled a more profound quality of devotion than had been possible before you really knew who you were.

Francis: I would say so.

Rick: To put it in these terms like, if you don't know who you are, who is it that's going to be devoted to whatever, you know? But it seems like self-realization could actually be the foundation for a much richer type of devotion, so something.

Francis: Well it is, because ultimately your devotion is directed toward the self that you are! - so how wonderful that is? I mean, for all these years I was seeking God, seeking God, seeking intimacy with God, and then I realized that it's all right here. And that's what happens to me when I get a little emotional, it's like the realization of that becomes fully there, and it's overwhelming.

I mean, the only way you can describe it is that you're just adrift in this big sea of bliss and love, and you realize that it's so intimate, that it's who you actually are. And there's something so intimate and so beautiful about that.

Rick: Did you ever read the Upanishads at all?

Francis: I have a little bit. I have [read] some Vedic stuff. I have read the Bhagavad Gita. I've read some things in that tradition – yeah, and I love it.

Rick: There's a whole section in the - how do you pronounce it - the Brigivhad Upanishad? - where it goes through a whole lot of things that people typically love. And it says that, "It is not for the sake of the wife that the wife is dear, but for the sake of the self that the wife is dear. It is not for the sake of the son that the son is dear, but for the sake of the self that the son is dear," and it kind of ticks off a whole checklist like that.

Francis: Wow, that's beautiful.

Rick: Drills home the point.

Francis: You know, what kind of great marriage counseling thing could that be? Your devotion to your spouse is your devotion to the Supreme Self. That's like Mother Teresa's thing - that she saw Christ in everyone. She was saying that Jesus, that she had all this sense of devotion to, and kind of a bhakti devotion to, was in the poor and the suffering that she ministered to.

Rick: Yeah, she would actually see Jesus - she was like washing Jesus's feet, curing Jesus's wounds or whatever - yeah.

Francis: Right, right. That's my sense too when I deal with people suffering, I see in them the suffering Christ, or I see the Divine in them. And you know, sometimes it just absolutely melts - my heart melts to people.

Rick: That's sweet.

Francis: Yeah, it's very...it's such an honor to be able to engage people on that level - at the level of their pain and suffering, to be present. To just be presence for them. You don't even have to say anything, you know? It's just being presence, and that creates a space!

Sometimes I've even seen that visibly - people changing, like on their death beds. And you are just - you're very aware that you're this spacious presence that this death is arising in. And you see this sort of peace come - just descend on the room, and you know, it's just beautiful. And it's drastically changed my ministry, what I've been involved in in ministry, it's on a completely different level than it was.

Rick: That's neat. I bet you people really get a different kind of effect from you than they used to.

Francis: Well people, yeah, people say that. My own community, when this happened, even though I didn't really talk about it in my community, several of the brothers came to me and said, "What's going on with you?" One brother said, "You're shining like the sun." And I was like... and then I shined more!

I had one guy walk up to me, I was waiting in a doctor's office and this guy walked up to me and he goes, "What's with you?" And I was like, "What?" And he said, "What's going on with you? You just seem so happy." And I said... I didn't know what to say.

It was at that point where I couldn't really speak and I just said, "I don't know, I am happy." I didn't know what to tell him.

Rick: Very sweet. Yeah, kind of gives you an inkling of what the society might be like if this sort of thing was the norm rather than the exception.

Francis: Oh wow, yeah. Well isn't that - that may be part of the whole "evolutionary enlightenment" thing that Andrew Kahn was talking about. And I don't know a lot about that, and a lot of that seems a little over my head; I'm not the most bright person, I don't think, but it seems a little complicated sort of - on an intellectual level. But my sense of what I did get of what he was saying, was that that's kind of what he's pointing to, that enlightenment is *not*, and it clearly isn't, a personal thing!

There are no enlightened people - I mean strictly speaking. We use that term to be able to talk about this, but on an absolute level there is no enlightened person or unenlightened person.

Rick: Right.

Francis: In the book I use this example, and it just came to me. It's like talking about curly-haired unicorns and straight-haired unicorns - you know, enlightened and unenlightened people.

Rick: Yeah, but you're speaking from the absolute view, on a relative view there are.

Francis: Absolutely, and I'm not negating it at all. I'm not one of these absolutist, fundamentalist people, I think that's clear - I would hope.

Rick: Oh yeah, sure.

Francis: But I mean, when some of these people make these absolute statements, I can totally get where they're coming from. I totally understand, very deeply, that yeah, on an absolute level, ultimately, what you're saying is absolutely correct. But I think that we have to just recognize that we have to move through this relative world. That seems to be the way it's set up, isn't it?

Rick: Yeah, it's not like they're incorrect, as you say, but there's no practical utility to it.

Francis: Yeah, like there's nothing you can really apply it to.

Rick: Yeah. Did you ever see the movie *Zeitgeist*?

Francis: No.

Rick: That'll kind of rock your world a little bit. I just watched it last week, it's very interesting. The first part of the movie, they go into how there are at least a dozen traditions that they mention, which had, basically, the story of Jesus, but it wasn't Jesus, you know?

Francis: Yeah.

Rick: ...Born of a virgin, went through this that and the other thing, had twelve disciples, got crucified, rose from the dead after three days... And the whole movie kind of calls into question whether there actually was

a historic Jesus, or whether it's just a rehashing of an ancient archetype that has been going around the world in many cultures.

The reason I mention it is because I just saw that movie, and I was wondering what a religious person such as yourself would say to such a thing.

Francis: Well, if you'd asked me that probably twelve years ago or something, I might have said something different than I would today. But today I would say that...I mean, my insight about Jesus now is that all the things that the Christian religion has said about Jesus - if you look at just a simple creed for example, it says, "I believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty. Maker of heaven and earth, of all that is seen and unseen. I believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father."

This is a beautiful, beautiful phrase – this next one: "God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten not made, one in being with the Father. Through him all things were made." And what I saw after this happened was that that's true of everybody; all those things we say about Jesus, are who we really are. How beautiful is that?!

Rick: Yeah.

Francis: God from God, Light from Light - it's beautiful.

Rick: It's great. Well we could do a whole interview just about religious stuff, you know?

Francis: Probably, because my sense of the Gospel and what religious things are has radically shifted, I'd have to say!

Rick: Yeah, in fact that would be an interesting thing for you to do, is to write some books giving a, sort of, your take on traditional religious teachings, putting them in the light of Vedanta or, non-dual... Swami Vivekananda, I believe, and also Yogananda, tried to do that - took certain scriptures and tried to comment on them in light of...

Francis: Yeah! I read some of that stuff they wrote, it's very interesting.

Rick: In case you don't get a job, [that will] keep you busy.

Francis: Yeah, better get a job pretty soon, the money is going (makes a sound like elevator going down).

Rick: Yeah right, what money? There's no money.

Francis: No, but on a relative level... on the other hand, you need a job! I'm not worried about it, I'm sure it will all work out. It'll all come out in the wash, as they say.

Rick: Yeah, but it's interesting on this point that, there's this one guy in particular, I know many stories like this, where people who've devoted their life to spiritual practice and spiritual stuff, and then they start getting old, their health starts breaking down, they realize they have no money.

Ram Das was a case in point, he kept giving everything away, and then they think, "Oh, what am I going to do?" And they're kind of in trouble, so it's good to keep it all in balance.

Francis: Yea, I think you need to keep it all in balance, and you need to just have common sense. Like I said, the absolute does not negate that relative level. Like Ken Wilber has these stages, all the stages exist, and when you go to the next stage, the lower stages don't cease to exist; they're still there. You just move through them differently, you see them differently, you know?

Rick: Yeah, well, moving toward a conclusion.

Francis: Aww.

Rick: Well, we can keep going, but um.

Francis: I don't care.

Rick: In fact, if there are things that were kind of in the back of your mind that we haven't discussed, feel free to bring them up. But um, one thing I was going to ask is, do you have any sense of where this might be going for you? I mean, based upon the trajectory that you've seen in your life in the last 3 or 4 years, is there kind of any inkling of where you might be, like 3, 4, or 30 or 40 years from now? - other than dead...if I go out that far!

Francis: I'm 53 now, so...

Rick: Oh, you can last another 40, no sweat.

Francis: Yeah, who knows, I'm pretty healthy. But you know, I really am already functioning, I think, as a spiritual teacher, I guess. I don't have an identity as a spiritual teacher, I mean, that's not who I am at all, of course, you know? There seems to be that role there and I seem to have something to say, at least people tell me that. I was giving a lot of spiritual direction as a monk, and a lot of people seemed to be profoundly affected by that, and helped, and I love that, that's what I've given my whole life to.

I love sharing this with people. I have a passion for this, and I think to do what your passion is makes sense to me. I don't have a lot of concerns about the money part, but I'd like to be able to put bread on my table, you know, and do all that.

But what I'll be doing in 3 years? I mean, who knows, you know? I'm open to how it unfolds, and I'm kind of just as curious as you are, or anybody else, I suppose, but I don't really have a clear, clear sense of *how* it's all going to unfold. I just, I trust that the people I need to meet, I'll meet, the people that need to hear me will hear me, and they'll do what they'll do and I'll do what I do, and it will all just kind of flow together somehow. That sounds maybe very hippie-like, or something, but...

Rick: Naw, it's kind of cool. Well you know there are a number of teachers these days who are pretty active, well-known teachers who didn't really have - well Eckhart Tolle is a case-in-point - who didn't really have some kind of organizational scheme in mind, that they were going to do what they ended up doing, but one thing led to the next, you know?

He was sitting on a park bench feeding the pigeons, trying to get himself a little bit integrated. Someone would sit down next to him, they'd start talking, next thing you knew he was having little sessions with people. Long story short, he's on the Oprah Show.

Francis: I'm not planning on being on the Oprah Show anytime soon. I think that that's sort of the way that that kind of stuff happens if it's authentic, doesn't it?

Rick: Yeah. What I'm thinking is actually, there might be somebody who's watching this, for instance, who might have a little Satsang thing, or something in their vicinity - whether they have people come in and teach - and they might like to send you a plane ticket and have you come out, you know? Cover your expenses and have you give a talk, and you know, that might parlay into something else. So if anybody is listening - and I suspect you'd be amenable to that...

Francis: Yeah, sure, why not?

Rick: Yeah, get in touch with Francis. I think you'd be a very entertaining, and I don't mean that in a trivial sense - very interesting guy to sit and listen to give a talk or retreat, or something.

Francis: Well actually, in fact, I have done a lot of that in my life. I've given retreats, I've given talks, I've preached, I've done counseling with people - all the things that spiritual teachers do, I've spent half my life doing already.

Rick: But now there's a new dimension to it.

Francis: There's a new dimension to it and I don't know where my... well, I don't know if I should say this on this public forum, but I don't really know where my relationship to the Church and all that is going to go, you know?

At the moment I'm...I don't know, it's a mystery to me. I certainly, my theology has certainly shifted, quite a bit, so we'll see what happens with that.

Rick: Good.

Francis: Some people are concerned about that. I have very close friends that are wonderful, beautiful people who love me, and they're very, very in the church, and they're concerned about me. I'm a little heretical, I suppose, in some ways.

Rick: Yeah, personally, I think that independence of thought and kind of an independent spirit is characteristic of evolving spirituality. It's like at a certain point, the chick no longer is quite at home in the incubator. It needs to step out and start pecking around in the barnyard a bit.

Francis: Well you know, I'm sure that the Universe, or God, or Consciousness, or whatever label you want to put on all this -It has some plan, because I was definitely guided to leave the monastic life. I mean, it was just very clear to me that this is not the form for this person to be in anymore.

And I don't know why, I didn't have a plan. It wasn't like, "I don't want to do this, I want to do that," it wasn't like that; it was just clear that I needed to put myself in another situation. And I'm trusting that it will unfold as things go on and develop, and we'll see what happens.

Rick: Good.

Francis: Yeah.

Rick: It works that way, doesn't it?

Francis: Yeah. I think that's the... you know, I don't make decisions. I know when I was thinking about leaving and I was encouraged to go on a retreat. I went on this retreat and the person I was working with was what we call an Ignation director. So they do this whole form that was developed by Saint Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Jesuit Order, and it's a whole, kind of complicated process of discernment. And you reflect on Scripture, and you go through this kind of conceptual thinking about... good points of this decision and making the decision in your imagination, and then living with the results of that, and all this kind of stuff!

And I just looked at this director and I was like, "This ain't gonna happen." I mean, I said, "I just don't make decisions anymore. Life lives me and I let it live me, and I know what I need to do when I need to, but I don't know beforehand, and to do this would be laughable. I just can't imagine doing a process like that."

So he said, "Well just be quiet this week and we'll see what arises." And what arose was that, yeah, you need to leave, it's time for you to leave. And so I just went in and told him and he said, "Well you seem at peace about it." I said, "I'm totally at peace about it!" And he said, "Well, what can I say?"

Rick: That's great, good. Well let's conclude. So Maharishi once said, "You always feel like talking to an old monk."

Francis: Is that what I am, an old monk?

Rick: Well no, drop the adjective "old".

Francis: Middle-aged monk. If we're concluding, I want to say something to you.

Rick: Sure.

Francis: I really, really appreciate your kindness in having me on here. It's an opportunity for me to share, and that's what I love. I love to share this with people and it's my passion in life. And I just have so much compassion for people, and this - what we've been talking about - is the key to happiness and love and all the things that people want in their life. And I hope [that] somehow or other, my life can be a vehicle for that, for people, so thank you.

Rick: Well it is being and I'm sure it will continue to be, more and more. So it's not a big kindness; it's just I knew you'd be a good guest, and I kind of jumped at the opportunity of having this conversation.

Francis: Yeah, I don't even know how it started exactly.

Rick: Well, you emailed me and...

Francis: I just know that I like your show. I had no idea that you ... I thought that you only asked like famous teachers to come on your show, at first; I didn't know.

Rick: Well I try to keep a balance. It's fun to talk to the famous teachers, but I really want to continue to talk to people that no one has ever heard of, because sometimes the famous ones are really good at talking, and that's one of the reasons why you like to talk to them, because they have their act together, in terms of articulating this, but it's not necessarily always that way. And some of my favorite interviews that I've done are with just regular people that don't have any public role whatsoever.

Francis: Yeah, the other thing I want to say is, I want to express my gratefulness to Scott Kiloby, because I got in contact with him through your show and he's been such a help to me in helping me to come to a sense of understanding about all this stuff.

And I haven't really even a lot of contact with him but it's just been very affirming, and I just think the world of him. I think he's a great teacher and really has helped me.

Rick: Yeah, no, Scott's great. Hopefully you'll be able to come out to the Science & Non-Duality conference in October.

Francis: I hope so.

Rick: Scott will be there and I'll be there, and all kinds of people ... get to meet some of these folks.

Francis: Yeah, I hope I'll have money by then.

Rick: Well, maybe somebody will listen to this and send you enough money to get to the conference.

Francis: That'd be fantastic, yeah.

Rick: And me too! I've got a 'Donate' button on www.BATGAP.com

Francis: Oh, you're in the same boat I am.

Rick: Yeah, people send in donations from time to time, it helps finance things like that.

Francis: I'm surprised the Oprah Network hasn't wanted to pick up your show, because it's really fascinating.

Rick: Oprah herself does something like this.

Francis: Does she?

Rick: She sits down and talks to Llewellyn Vaughn-Lee and Deepak Chopra and various people, and has these kinds of conversations. But hey, Oprah Network, if you're listening, I'm available. Oprah can still do her thing and we'll have another show.

Francis: Yeah, why not?

Rick: Alright, good. So let me make a couple of concluding remarks. I've had one guy who complains, "Why don't you just let your guests go? Why do you make them sit there while you make concluding remarks?" And the reason is that if I let you go, then I've got to disconnect the connection, and it won't be recording anymore.

Francis: Oh, right, right. I'm fine to sit here.

Rick: I'm sure you are, but for the benefit of those who have been listening or watching, you've been listening to an interview on a show that we call *Buddha At The Gas Pump*, and it's an ongoing series - there's a new one each week.

So if you are listening on YouTube, you can subscribe to this YouTube channel. You'll be notified by YouTube when a new one is posted. Or you also may wish to go to www.batgap.com where they're all archived, and where you'll also see a link to an audio podcast. Many people prefer to just listen to this in audio.

And you also see a little discussion group there that crops up around each interview, which many times becomes quite lively. I encourage people to try to keep the discussions somewhat relevant to each specific interview, and there's a 'General Discussion' tab for those who wish to just sort of talk about anything under the sun, but I'm not going to police it; I don't even have time to read them all, so you know, have at it, have fun.

So that about covers it. Next week I'm going to be speaking to a gentleman named Howard Falco, who had a very spontaneous and profound awakening - sounds like he's going to be an interesting guy. And the week after that, Anita Moorjani who is quite well-known, who was at death's door with cancer, full of tumors the size of lemons, and had this near-death experience and woke up out of it and tumors went away. And she had this profound awakening, so that'll be interesting.

Oh and one more thing, if you'd like to be notified of all these things by email, there's a button on www.BATGAP.com - a tab where you click and you can sign up for a newsletter, and you get an email about once a week, each time a new one is posted.

So, thanks for listening or watching, and we'll see you or you'll hear from us next week.

Francis: Bye.

Rick: Bye.

{BATGAP theme music plays}