

The Joyful, Never-ending Path of Not-Knowing

The following is a transcript of an [interview](#) with Francis Lucille recorded in November 2022 for the January 2023 edition of the 'Living in Not-Knowing' section of [The Awareness Podcast](#).

JB: Francis, it was my very first discussion with you about two and a half years ago that inspired the theme of 'living in not-knowing' for these podcasts, and that was at the first Pure Presence Conference. I asked you 'what is meant by living in not knowing?', and you said it means to not know what you are. Could you expand on that?

FL: To not know what you are phenomenally – as anything that has a name or shape, as anything that can be perceived, such as a body which is perceived through bodily sensations and also through external sense perceptions. As we see our hand, for instance. Such as a mind which is perceived through thoughts, or the experience of which is comprised of thoughts and other mentations. So most people would claim 'I know what I am'. 'I am this body, I'm John, I was born on that date, I am an American citizen' etc.

So if we believe that we know what we are, phenomenally, then we are in what I call 'ignorance', meaning ignorance of what we truly are. Because experientially we are the reality which is hearing these words right now, whatever this reality may be. Our most intimate experience of what we are is whatever it is which is hearing these words right now. Why? Because it is obviously nobody other than myself who is hearing these words right now. So that's what we are in the first place. In the second place we are many things – we are our gender, our body, our past history etc. But in order to know this, we need first to be this awareness which is hearing these words right now.

JB: Yes. I remember at the time, what was I got from your answer was instead of thinking 'I am awareness', just to stay with the recognition that's behind all that, behind all objective experience. So instead of conceptualizing ourselves as an object, it's going to a non-conceptual experience of ourselves.

FL: Yes, because there is a distinction to be made in fact between non-duality and non-dualism. Everything that ends in 'ism' is a theory, it's conceptual. So non-dualism is a theory according to which there is only one reality. If there is only one reality then the reality which is hearing these words right now is this one reality. So it's perfect. It's perfect not only intellectually but it's perfect because it can lead us, it points at the experience of what we are, as awareness. But it is different from non-duality, which is the *experience* of what we are. And the pure experience of what we are, is when we don't believe to be anything phenomenal. That which clouds, that which veils the experience of what we are, is a belief to be something else – a mind, a body, something which is knowable. So the experience you were referring to upon hearing what I had to say at that time, was in fact a shift from non-dualism – we are awareness, awareness is the reality, that's the theory – to the experience 'Oh, if I am awareness, I don't know myself phenomenally, so all I have to do is to stop believing that I can know myself phenomenally, including [*knowing myself*] as the concept of awareness or consciousness'.

JB: Yes. I remember when I first heard you say just be open to the possibility that there is just one consciousness, just one reality, and that is enough, you don't have to be 100% certain, I found that surprising initially. But as with science, we can do experiments and reach a practical level of certainty. We don't need to be absolutely certain in that way. But there's a kind of intuitive certainty isn't there?

FL: Yes, and in fact if we are absolutely certain that we don't know what we are, we somehow know something about what we are. We know our unknowability somehow. So we know something about what we are, but it's a kind of hidden knowledge. It's a negative knowledge. The metaphor I use is about a melody which we know but which we don't know how to sing. We don't know it well enough to be able to sing it. But if we hear someone singing it, and if this person sings a wrong note, we detect it. So we are in a strange situation whereby on one hand we don't know, we are not able to sing it. However, we are able to recognize that this note is not the right note. How could we know that this note is not the right note unless we knew the melody? So it's a hidden knowledge. The fact that we are not able to sing it doesn't imply we don't know it. So it is the same here.

The knowledge of awareness is a hidden knowledge in this sense, because we know with certainty that we have no evidence that awareness is dependent upon anything else, or that it is not real. So how could we know that unless already we knew something about awareness, because that's already something we know about awareness? And it is very mysterious because of the certainty it comes with. If I ask you 'are you aware in this moment?', if you tell me 'no, I'm not' I would say 'I'm having a conversation with you, aren't you hearing my words and understanding them?'. That's what I mean. So we are absolutely certain that we are aware and by the same token, if we investigate deeper into awareness, we discover that there are other certainties that get revealed as a result of this investigation. And the one I just mentioned is one of them.

To put it in a nutshell the content of awareness, meaning whatever can be perceived phenomenally, doesn't tell us anything about awareness itself. For instance, it doesn't tell us that awareness is limited, that it is dependent upon the body, that it is localized in space or in time etc. Whatever we perceive through awareness doesn't give us any solid information on awareness. That's why awareness defies modern science, because modern science is phenomenal science. Its base is made of theories which have their foundation and are verified or falsified through phenomenal facts. And the word phenomena is limiting. Awareness escapes these limitations by its very nature.

JB: Yes and you've talked many times about doing experiments to see the effect of living according to awareness being unlimited rather than the common assumption that that we are limited, or that there's more than one awareness. And I suppose there's a kind of practical argument that in our everyday life we have to use some model or another to think about and to interact with the physical world and with other people, animals, and things, because the mind only really works with models. So why not take the 'one reality' model and then see what happens, see what then changes?

FL: Yes, and when we understand that, there's an extraordinary openness because otherwise we feel that we cannot know anything about reality or awareness because it is not objective, it's non-phenomenal. So there is a route which is open, which is indirect verification. If we think about it, indirect verification is what we do in physics most of the time. Nobody has ever seen a particle. Nobody, because it's too tiny, and it is invisible to the naked eye. But we can see trajectories of particles that are materialized through some contraptions, such in your day it was bubble chambers. So you could see the trajectory materialise, but you never saw the particles. You saw the image of bubbles.

So it is true of everything. We only infer physical reality through indirect observations and measurements. We never saw the Big Bang, but we perceive the black-body radiation that is the remains of the light of these explosions. So it's the same here. We cannot verify directly, phenomenally, the truth of non-duality. But we can indirectly verify it by conducting experiments, the phenomenal outcome of which will falsify or verify the assumption.

JB: Yes. I remember when I was studying traditional Advaita, I came across the method of 'a thorn to remove a thorn'. And the idea was that the teacher offers you a different model which is better than your current model – closer to the truth, better in that sense – and you're meant to believe that one instead. And then later when you're ready, the master pulls the rug from under your feet, and you're given another new model, and you believe that one. And at some point, you're meant to throw away both the thorns. But that never really seemed to happen. Your approach is very different. You start with not-knowing.

FL: Well, it's not that different, because when we use words as we speak, if I say 'consciousness' if I say 'there is only one reality', the words are like thorns. If I say 'we have no evidence that consciousness is limited and that it is not universal' I use words 'consciousness', 'limited', 'universal' which I don't explain. But if they resonate in you, they act as pointers, and they lead to 'Oh yes that's true', to a moment of creativity, of understanding, at which point in fact the words have been jettisoned. At the moment of understanding of our true nature, all thorns are thrown back into the into the fireplace.

JB: Yes. So you're not expected to believe anything?

FL: No.

JB: I've wondered whether there is a place for religion and belief systems, or does real happiness require the abandonment of all beliefs?

FL: People come to the truth from many different directions. Some come from atheism, some come from agnosticism, and some come from religion. Each of these paths has its own limitations. First, atheism is a form of religion.

JB: Yes, very much so!

FL: As a result, all religions are a form of atheism. Agnosticism is kind of nice, but the problem with agnosticism is that it is implicitly phenomenal. In other words, 'I don't know anything about phenomena'. Whereas in non-duality there is a little twist to this. We don't know anything about phenomena – however, we don't care. We can know something about reality, and we do care. So this agnosticism is not absolute. It's like when Socrates is referred to as having said 'I know that I know nothing', but there is small-print that should accompany this statement by the sage, Socrates. He meant I know that phenomenally I cannot be certain of anything. However noumenally we can be certain that there is consciousness, and that there is reality. And we can be absolutely certain that there is reality, that there is being, that there is something rather nothing, and that we are conscious.

JB: When we're engaged in practical activities, where we're using relative knowledge – so knowledge of phenomena – and that's generally that's going to be based on a sort of conventional mental model of the universe, of how things work, the law of gravity, and so on, we treat that model as being true. But if we are really living in not-knowing then we know that it's just a model – it's not the reality of how things are. But somehow that gets temporarily forgotten when we're completely focusing on a practical task. Is that ignorance?

FL: No. Those days when I screw screws into the walls, everywhere, I'm not saying that screws in walls are non-existent. But as a physicist I know that what we call wall or what we call screw, if we look deep inside, doesn't look at all like a wall or like a screw.

JB: It's mostly empty space.

FL: Deep inside it doesn't look like anything at all. So the meanings and the knowledge that enables me to screw screws on the wall and attach stuff to the wall is relative knowledge. It's simply that you use it, and once you have used it, you put it back in the toolbox because it's not absolute. So we have to ask ourselves 'what is it that I know that I can be absolutely certain of?', and that's a different ballgame.

JB: So in a sense we're restricting our view when we're engaged in activities, but it then opens up to that global, one-reality view, when we relax.

FL: There are two stages, if you will. There is one in which we discover the ultimate reality of pure consciousness. But then there is a second moment during which we realize that having realized the reality of consciousness and the unicity of this reality, then whatever appears in the world, the mind, the body, is an expression made out of this reality. So then we don't have to wait for the manifestation to disappear, for reality to shine again, because it is shining as this world, as this body, as this mind, at every moment already. So that's very important. That's the only way to be stable in this discovery, otherwise there is always nostalgia in the presence of the manifestation to return home to the unmanifested, and then there is no stability. The moment there is this nostalgia there is psychological misery.

So in one of the traditions I come from which is Kashmiri Shaivism, the emphasis is on the reality of the world. The world is real as an expression of the totality. The world is real. The world is an illusion only if it is seen as independent from awareness.

JB: Yes. There's a belief that's quite prevalent in non-dual circles that the mind is the cause of all our problems. It's bad, or it needs purifying, or we need to get rid of our thoughts. And as you say, to experience what we are, we do need to go beyond the mind because it's not a phenomenal experience. But I feel that the mind does have a useful role to play in the in the spiritual path. Do you agree with that?

FL: Definitely. There are thoughts that are useful, that are celebratory and that are effective in the spiritual progress, so to speak, that is achieved through the investigation of our true nature. So all of these thoughts – practical thoughts, celebratory thoughts that come out of joy, out of enthusiasm, and thoughts that pertain to questions that revolve around 'what is reality?', 'what is my reality?', 'what am I?', 'what is awareness?' 'what is God?' etc. All of these thoughts shouldn't be stopped. They should be allowed to follow their own course.

Practical thoughts, once they have fulfilled the mission, so to speak, they stop naturally. For example, 'I have run out of gas in my car, it's time to stop at the next gas station'. OK, we do that, we stop at the next gas station, we fill up. And then what happens to the thought 'I have to stop at the gas station'? It doesn't reoccur, unless we have Alzheimer's, but in most cases the thought is gone because it was just practical. Whereas in contra-distinction with this, problematic thoughts that come from ignorance of our true nature repeat themselves. They have been with us for years and they keep reoccurring. They seem to be endless. So these are the thoughts that are problematic, and what these thoughts – with no exception – have in common, is the belief that we, awareness, are dependent upon this mortal, limited body-mind. If we didn't have this belief, these thoughts would just vanish, just as the thought 'I have to fill up the tank' vanishes after paying a visit to the gas station.

JB: So what should we do about the thoughts that are repeating, that come from ignorance?

FL: Well, we should first observe their origin. We should convince ourselves, through our observation, that they simply wouldn't be there unless we believe ourselves to be a separate identity. So then we don't have to deal with them any longer. We have to deal with the belief. What do I believe to be? Am I 'I', consciousness, or am I the body?

Let's assume that, for the sake of the argument, that they [*consciousness and body*] don't come as a unit, that the potential is that they are independent. Then in this case, what do I believe to be – consciousness or the body? That's the first question to answer. The example I use is let's say you pass away and you come to St Peter at the pearly gates and he says 'OK, you are not that good, but you are not that bad, so we are going to give you a choice. Either you keep the body or you keep awareness, but you cannot keep both. What do you choose?' And what *do* you choose? Obviously, what's the use of the body without awareness? Whereas I can see a lot of uses of awareness without the body. So obviously we choose awareness, which shows that if it was the case by a miracle that awareness is not dependent on the body, we feel that we are awareness rather than the body.

Then the next question is 'well, how do I know that awareness is dependent upon the body? What's the evidence?'. And then the investigation moves to this second stage, and we discover that all the evidence we believe to have, in fact is not determinative, that it is somehow bogus and that we have no evidence that consciousness, as we experience it, is dependent upon the body. We have some experience that the mind, the world, and the body are interdependent. These three, yes – the thoughts can manifest in the body and through the body in the world. Conversely, the world can manifest through the body – let's say I ingest some hallucinogenic substance and then in turn it changes my thoughts. So there is this interdependency between world, body and mind. But awareness? No evidence. No evidence even that awareness changes. So as a result, no evidence it is impermanent, no evidence that it is not real.

So these are just pointers that I throw up. Each of them requires hours perhaps of thinking about. But at some point we reach the absolute conviction, the absolute certainty, that there is no evidence that awareness is limited and dependent upon the body. We are not necessarily going to reach the opposite conviction, although it is a possibility, but perhaps not for everybody. And ultimately it doesn't matter, because the fact that it is there as a possibility opens the door to the experimental verification or falsification we spoke about earlier on in this conversation.

JB: When you say that it may not be available to everyone or may not happen for everyone, what does that depend on? That for some of us there can be a sort of moment of recognition, a moment of realization, but for others maybe not? That that might not be available to them?

FL: Yes, but ultimately it doesn't matter. Not everybody is absolutely certain that they are aware, which I find kind of preposterous. But I've had people come to me and say 'no, I don't know what you're talking about, I'm not certain that there is awareness, I'm not certain of being aware, I'm not certain that my true nature is awareness'. So I'm not assuming that everything I say is self-evident. It's self-evident for some; not for all. So in the same way, if I say 'there is only one reality', for some people it is going to be absolute evidence, as strong as the evidence 'I am conscious'. For others, no. So the point is if someone through this form of understanding has reached the absolute certainty 1) 'I am conscious', 2) 'consciousness is real', 3) 'there is only one reality', they don't really need to conduct the experiment, because of the absolute certainties they have reached. I call that the path of the mathematician versus the path of the physicist.

The mathematician reaches certainties that are totally detached from experiments being conducted in the world. Whereas the physicist, has a theory, he uses mathematics on this theory, but then he

has to verify the theory in the world. And no matter how beautiful the maths are in the theory, if it gets falsified through experimentation, it belongs to the trash can. So that's a difference, whereas one can be absolutely convinced mathematically.

So that's a metaphor for these two possibilities that are open to each of us. Some people upon hearing what I say 'there is only one reality' and 'this reality is your reality', they get it. That's it. But others say they need more. So then the path of experimentation is open to them.

JB: I like your analogy of the mathematician because it feels to me like that understanding comes from the same place as when you're trying to solve a mathematical problem. You're trying to find a proof for something. You're not thinking, but you're in that kind of contemplative space, and it's like being in the space of contemplating reality isn't it and somehow coming at it from all sorts of different angles but without any conceptualization, just allowing the mind to be completely free, not logical thinking in any way.

FL: I think there are still phenomenal representations but they are more perhaps more visual ...

JB: ...Yes, rather than words.

FL: But who knows because it's very difficult to know how another mind ... Because I thought that all mathematics was a result of some kind of visualization in space. But there was this Fields Medallist, Laurent Schwartz, he was teaching at the École Polytechnique, and he would say that he was not visualizing mathematical theories in space. His approach was different. So I don't know what it was, because in my case it was more some kind of space, but his was not.

JB: Yes. I see mathematics in a kind of space as well, so I can't imagine what it's like.

[PAUSE]

I remember you saying recently that living in not knowing is not just about what the mind believes, it's also about the body. Can you say some more about that?

FL: It is not knowing I am this here and not that there. Because if I'm not in this not-knowing, it means I know something I am phenomenally, so I am in ignorance. In a sense the totality of the world that appears, of the manifestation, is 'me', is my body. So there might be leftovers of ignorance in the patterns of perception of the body and the world that prevent this seamless continuity between the body and the world from being experienced. The feeling 'I am here as this body, I'm not there'.

JB: And obviously the yoga meditations that you do on your retreats address that and also the sense of borderlessness of the body. In other words, whether you feel 'I end at my skin' or whether you feel 'my body is the universe'. And whether you feel that what I am is located inside here in a place, a location in space.

So are there any other ways? Some of the people listening to this podcast won't be familiar with those, so are there any other simple things people can do to explore the body and its borderlessness?

FL: It's difficult to do without proper guidance. That's why I've never shot videos of the teaching of the yoga. All we can do is give a general guiding principle. And the guiding principle is this: in your own honesty, in your own integrity, with your eyes closed first, and then with your eyes open, do you perceive the world that surrounds you as being your body, yes or no? If no, why? What is there that seems to tell you otherwise? You awareness, of course. Not you this human body and this

computer in front of me, in front of it, I should say – there is a separation, there is a distance, that is not in question. But the question is between me and awareness. How do I know I am located here, localized here? And then as consciousness, either everything is me or nothing is me, as reality. So do I experience the phenomenal world that surrounds this body as being me too? I know I experience this body as being me, because of this intimacy I have with it. But do I experience this world as being me?

People may object and say 'Oh yes, but my body is always with me when I wake up, but the landscape is not always the same, I may be traveling at that time'. But that's not true. Because the landscape of your body changes all the time. Let's assume you have a toothache or a headache, but on the other hand you wake up in the same bedroom. So everything that you perceive phenomenally changes or doesn't change – it depends. So there is no real solid way to determine 'this is me, that is not me' other than the belief I, consciousness, am this body here and not that out there. But what is a rationale for making this first decision of ignorance? There is no rationale. It's an irrational decision.

JB: It seems to me that living in not knowing is very closely connected with living in not doing, which is the sort of body side of it, I guess. And so things just happen. Physical activity just happens, mental activity just happens, and it's all a part of an integrated, universal happening.

FL: Yes, there are many activities that we would do in exactly the same manner no matter whether we believe to be a separate and limited consciousness or not. The case in point, filling up the tank when it is empty or almost empty. Everybody will do that. So there are many activities like brushing your teeth, waking up in the morning you're thirsty, you make tea or whatever. It has nothing to do with ignorance. So these are activities. But what we don't understand – most of us – is that nobody does these activities. All of our activities are the ways the universe functions. We are not separate islands in the universe – even if we are from the UK!

JB: Yes it it's a very different feeling from 'I've got to get this done' or 'I did this well'.

FL: Well, we can have these feelings – 'I have to do that otherwise I'm going to be stranded in the middle of the freeway', or 'I need to do that, otherwise I'm going to freeze tonight'. So yes, we can be driven, but it's impersonal. We do things, they have to be done, we do that. That's it.

But for instance, things we *don't* do is to criticize other people for being like this or like that. Because there are no people. So judging people doesn't make sense, because there are no people. So we don't do that, we don't judge people.

JB: I've realized that seeing and feeling the full implications of this teaching takes an awful lot longer than just the basic understanding.

FL: Yes.

JB: And there's a process of discovering more and more consequences of that. And what you've just said was one of them for me. Just the understanding there's no separate me that chooses my thoughts – that was something I understood very clearly and felt very clearly quite a number of years ago. But it took me several years before I saw those implications: no one is guilty, other people are not guilty for what they've done, everything is just happening, thoughts just arise, actions just arise. And it's those sorts of implications which seem to take an awful lot longer to recognise.

FL: It's a lifetime assignment. And of course, we live in an era of instant gratification and you can find that in some neo-Advaita type of teaching in which the claim is 'Oh, the goal is not happiness'. The

claim is just to understand, and we have to be happy with that. No, the goal is happiness, and happiness is something that is worth seeking.

My teacher told me once 'Francis, you'll be very happy some day'. And he was right. You have the first glimpse of the truth, and then it's a lifetime assignment. As a young child, still a very young teenager of about 12 or 13, I was in Germany, and that was my first opera, it was The Magic Flute. There is a moment when Tamino walks on stage playing the flute and of course the soloist in the orchestra plays this solo, this melody. I was so touched by the beauty. And then you practise the flute for 40 or 50 years ...

JB: So yes, there's no real end point, there's always more to discover.

FL: But the beauty is that it converges with life. People believe when they are in ignorance that there are two things: there is their life, and then there is a spiritual practice that will make them better at living their life. So at some point they can stop the practice altogether because now they are enlightened and they can keep living their life. Whereas in fact it is just the opposite. You have your life in the beginning, and then you begin to practise. But the practice merges with your life, and your life becomes a practice. So you never stop practising. That's just the opposite. You practise all the time, but this practice is enjoyable. So if you do spiritual practice, make sure that your practice comes from enthusiasm. Because if it doesn't, you're on the wrong path. Because you will first have to stop it. So you may as well stop it right away. You will have to stop it because how could more efforts, more suffering take you closer to the effortless state you are seeking? Just a little bit of intelligence is going to tell you 'no, no, I am moving away from the goal here'.

JB: Yes. So it's not a path of self-improvement.

FL: It has to come from enthusiasm, it has to come from love. That's Grace, to have been at the receiving end of the most extraordinary gift, to be interested in this. That's the most beautiful gift one could ever receive. So that's true Grace. Other than that, if we stay in the Indian tradition, let's say, you can stay in the individual betterment business for thousands of lifetimes. You know there is a Sanskrit text called the Tripura Rahasya and in the beginning they say that the ones who are practising on their own – they are doing mantra, japa, yoga or whatever – in fact it's kind of useless up until the Goddess thinks 'OK, this poor guy, he's been meditating upon me lifetime after lifetime, not knowing that it is useless, so I'm going to pour mercy on this soul and send him an Advaita teacher.

JB: I remember you talking about living without regrets, and I've always loved that that expression.

FL: And not looking back. Because every time you look back, you're in ignorance because you look back at this separate entity who was there experiencing that. If you look back, look back as awareness, but not as a person. But awareness is never in the past. The moment you look at yourself as someone who was in the past instead of being this current and timeless awareness, you're in ignorance. So it's better not to. And it's better also not to allow people around you to drag you there, but often they are very insistent!

JB: Yes, they can be!

Thank you, Francis. It's been a lovely discussion. And thank you all for listening.