

Turning to the Mystics



Instructions for The Practice

with James Finley

Jim Finley: [music] Greetings. I'm Jim Finley

Kirsten Oates: And I'm Kirsten Oates.

Jim Finley: Welcome to Turning to the Mystics.

Kirsten Oates: Jim, I thought it might be helpful if we spent some time just going through what these practices are going to be like and what you're hoping they are going to be like for the people listening.

Jim Finley: Yes. You know, when I started leading retreats and then I started the contemplative prayer group at St. Monica's church what I tried to do was to be faithful to the kind of contemplative, like the archetypal infrastructure of contemplative community, like, to honor it. Because it's like, in a way, they're like these transcendental qualities of our being that we're learning to honor. And so, I understood it to have three aspects to this. The first is to find your practice and practice it. And a practice is any act faithfully entered into with your whole heart that takes you to the deeper place. As you learn to practice your practice, which is the daily meditation practice, eventually, little by little by little, all of life becomes practice; that as, you get habituated to that meditative mind day by day.

The next aspect of this is to find your teaching and follow it. And the teaching is the teaching that bears witness to the ancient way of the divinity of all things, like to the generosity of God pouring out as our life. And, secondly, offers guidance in it; see, trustworthy guidance in it. And so, as we learn to follow the teaching, eventually you come to realize that life is the teacher, and you're being taught by God to your attunement, to the unfolding of your life, the lives of the people around you, to the world.

And the third aspect is to find your community and enter it. And the community at the deepest level is your oneness with God. That is your ultimate identity. The next circle out from this meditative standpoint is just one other person in whose presence you know you're not alone on this path, that you bear witness to each other as seeking this path, which is like contemplative church. In Buddhism, it would be sangha, or ashram in different traditions. And so, as you gather so, eventually you discover then the whole world is your community. So, based on that, I set up my gatherings, say at St. Monica's Church, modeling this after it, that it has those aspects to it. So, with that said, then, what we're going to be doing here in these times together is I am going to be offering a text from a mystic and we'll be turning to the mystic as lectio.

Jim Finley: So, we'll be hearing the reverberations of God's voice in the mystic's voice speaking to us. And I'll be sharing with you how God speaks to me in the mystic's voice so that you, by listening to the mystic and listening to me, can realize how the mystic is speaking to you in this and, therefore, the reading and the reflection on the reading will be our lectio. But what I'll also be doing is that I'll be reflecting on what's received. I'll be sharing with you what's given to me as I sit with that. We're sending an invite to you to see what was given to you as you sit with that. And this will be our meditatio. This, this will be our meditation. And this is where, by the way, in the meditative process, if you're inclined to do so—because, like, to your own self be true—this is where you might be inclined to journal.

That's like a free associative, kind of, open exchange of processing within yourself: How would this reciprocity of this reflective consciousness back and forth between you and God occur? And this lectio, this meditatio, will then awaken and reawaken our desire to abide in this; that is, when we're in it, we experience it as a kind of a homecoming. You know, like we come to rest in us, and having rested in it, we seek to abide in it, see? And in that process of that desire to abide, in which is the prayer, we can begin to discover the inclination in the midst of all this, to pause, maybe mid-sentence, maybe not to say anything, maybe not to think anything, but to kind of unexplainably rest in this union beyond thought and beyond words. And in that union, there are moments that might be very intense, actually, but very often it's very, very subtle.

It's very, very delicate, and it kind of has its own rhythm to it just like an intimate conversation between two people. And as it dissipates, you return back to your lectio, you turn back to your meditatio and then all of a sudden, like, there it is again. So, it's an unforced way, a kind of moving with the graced rhythms of awakening.

And so, I would hope here that these sessions themselves would embody those qualities. But then at the very end, at the very end, when I lead us into the meditation as you are given to do so, I'll ring the bell, we'll bow, "Be still and know that I am God," and then just for one minute, ten minutes, fifteen minutes, whatever, just sit with what, what struck you about listening to the reflection, either in the mystic's words, my reflections on the words, or maybe something that awakened in you that it had nothing to do with what I said, just like grace kind of unexpected connection with something, and then just sit with that, like, to sit in God's presence in this kind of intimate, subtle kind of thing, and that's a very basic way of understanding meditation practice in this whole spectrum from lectio to contemplation.

And then my thought would be then as each meditation comes to an end, whether it's one minute or a half an hour, you'd ask God for the grace not to break the thread of that connectedness as you go through the day, see, that you'd have an underlying, habituated sense of the constancy of that. And, of course, the thread will break many times during the day because of reactivity, and we keep an eye on our heart, see, we watch it, because we know that although we break the thread from our end that it's never broken from God's, see? And the constancy of the love that loves us in our wavering ways is the gratitude.

Jim Finley: So, we come back as you're so inclined, and then the next day you'd listen to the same meditation again. And you'd repeat the same process: you sit with it again, open to it again, the lectio, the meditatio, ask not to break the thread. And so, by the end of the week it will have been one week of learning to live a contemplative way of life. Because what we seek to do then, is we seek to live this way. And we seek to live this way that we might share it with others by the way we're present to them, the way we listen to them, the way we're real with them, the way we're vulnerable with them, the way we care about them. And we can be a healing presence in the midst of the world, see? Like that. So, that's my sense of meditation.

Kirsten Oates: So, Jim, can you take us through the elements of the practice that come after your talk and reflection?

Jim Finley: So, what I suggest to the people is that we sit straight, and we fold our hands, palms together as in prayer, and while seated, we bow. So, following the teachings of the Sōtō Zen master

Shunryū Suzuki, that when we bow, we give ourselves up. If ever you get to a place in life for the only thing you can do is bow, you should do it. So, in the light of these traditions, the least and the most we can do is to bow in profound gratitude for the gift of being awakened to this path, the gift to being a human being, the gift of being alive and real in the world illumined by faith. And so, we bow, so the body prays in the bow. Then, I say, “While this way is universal, because we’re all children of God created by God in the image and likeness of God, we’re praying here within the Christian Tradition of that Universal Way.”

Jim Finley: And so, in the light of that then, I begin with Scripture, with the psalms: “Be still and know that I am God,” and the person meditating is invited quietly to repeat that after me. Then I take one word off each time until we just say the word “be.” And then I ring the bell three times. And then the person then would sit, based on their inclinations and based on the situation they’re in at the time, they may just sit for a minute, that they have a half hour, they would sit, they would just kind of let it follow their own givens in their life. And then at the end of that time, I ring the bell once. When the bell becomes silent, we fold our hands, and we bow in gratitude for the way, being drawn along this way, this infinite love transforming us into itself unexplainably. And then echoing when responding to Jesus when asked, “How should we pray?” He said, “Say Abba, Father.”

And then we’ll say The Lord’s Prayer together, slowly, and I’ll say it. At the end of that, I’ll say, “Mary, mother of contemplatives, pray for us.” The response will be, “Pray for us.” And we looked on Mary in these traditions as an archetype of the contemplative soul: “He has looked on His servant in her nothingness henceforth all generations will call me blessed.” And then I’ll name two Christian saints, two mystics, to give witness that we’re sitting here together in the mystical lineage of the Christian Tradition, one with the mystical lineage of all the world’s great religions, and that’s the practice.

Now, in terms, then, of this, “pray for us,” especially for those who aren’t in the Catholic Tradition of Christianity or not in Christianity at all. But how this is true in the other traditions, for example, in Buddhism, this would be veneration of the ancestors, and

Jim Finley: Hinduism and also indigenous people, this strong sense of um the ancestors being one with us. In the Catholic Tradition, one way of looking at it is this, is that when we’re created by God in the image and likeness of God, God, in creating us, did not have to think up when God—let’s make this personal, because it’s personal to each one of us—when God created you, God did not have to think up who you might be. From all eternity, God eternally contemplates who you eternally are hidden with Christ in God before the origins of the universe. This is the unborn you that never began, because God never, never, never, never, never has not known who you eternally are, who God eternally contemplates you to be. And since everything in God is God, this is the divinity of you, which is the person that you are.

So, when God creates you, makes that real in time and space, like the “Let it be,” God creating stones, and trees, and stars, and you, and me, God takes this capacity, the you

that never, never began, which is also the deathless you which will never die because God will never, never, never not know who you eternally are, that divine identity is a capacity to be actualized by living it, like an infinite zero pregnant with God. And God then endows that person that we are, that birthless, deathless presence of the person, with a human nature because all things are created according to their nature. And so, with our human nature we're endowed, of course with the gift of reason and all the complexities and gifts of being a human being. But the most noble capacity of the human nature is the capacity to recognize the person. That is, I can intimately realize that through the generosity of God, the depths of God, is given to me as the depths of myself, that I am a *capax Dei*; I'm a capacity for God. That capacity is actualized, it's awakened in my nature, which is spiritual experience, it's the spiritual awakening, which the mystics will be talking about. It's at the heart of the gospel.

And then in the awakening, I say, "yes" to it, because love is never imposed. It's always offered. So, I awaken to this love that gives itself to me. And I then respond by giving myself in love to the love that gives itself to me. And in that reciprocity of love, my destiny is fulfilled on this earth. Now, this love, this love bond, which is our deepest identity, Oh God, identified with us as a person. It was also woven into our love for each other; that is, we're siblings of the infinite. We're brothers and sisters of infinite love. And so, we experience the love of God in and through our love for each other. We're bonded together in this love fabric, which is the deathless nature of love in our passage through time. Now, in our passage through time, born in time to realize this, we disappear. See, we disappear into death.

Mechthilde of Magdeburg says, God says to her, "Do not fear your death for when that moment comes to, I will take in my breath and your soul will come to me like a needle to a magnet." See? So, when God inhales and takes us, we go back home, like, lesson learned. We're on this earth to learn to love. That love in God, in death, so the dead aren't dead. They're not annihilated, they're consummated. And they don't go anywhere, because in God, we live and move and have our being. We're all interwoven. All the dead are here. All the angels are here. We live in an interconnected interiority of God's life. And the saints who have given themselves to God in an extraordinary way, who are in God, they're even having a heightened sense of the receptivity to us and, therefore, to pray to the saints, like the intercession of the saints. So, in a way, it's an unmediated divine union. We are the direct manifestation of God's manifested

Jim Finley: presence. But there's also the mediations of unmanifested presence through our love for each other. And so, to pray to the saint, like, "pray for us" as a kind of act of devotional sincerity, to those who are in God interceding with us to help and guide us to God. And that's kind of the intuition behind the litany of the saints and praying to the saints to guide us.

Kirsten Oates: That's really beautiful. You made a statement in there about the body prays. Could you just talk a little bit more about that?

Jim Finley: Yes. Actually, you see more of this and yoga overtly, and you also see it in Buddhism on the emphasis on the breath. But it's also very much grounded in Christianity as

incarnate infinity in the body. So, when we pray, our whole being prays; our whole being prays. So, in the Catholic Tradition, we make the sign of the cross, we fold our hands in prayer, there's like bodily postures of reverence. And in that bodily posture of reverence, the body is praying. And so, when we bow then, the bow itself is the prayer. It's a kind of a liturgy of the body expressing the intention to give oneself to God who is infinitely given to us. And so, there's that sense of the holiness of the body.

Kirsten Oates: Mmm (affirmative). Beautiful. And it's a way of grounding ourselves more fully in our entire being, which is where we find God, more in the entirety of our being than just [inaudible]

Jim Finley: It really is. And I think also what's true is sometimes when I lead these meditation retreats and there's usually twenty minutes of shared, silent prayer, so it'd be anywhere from sixty to one-hundred and fifty people just sitting there in complete silence. And there's a kind of a communal reverence of the communal sincerity of sitting in that kind of reverential attentiveness that's grounded in the body. And so, I think that's the feeling to it. I mentioned, too, about once I shared that there was a story that there was a ballet dancer who came from New York to see Merton after Merton wrote *The Seven Storey Mountain* when his autobiography went on the New York Times best sellers list, and people were contacting him. And this ballet dancer from New York, I think, was like an atheist, or whatever.

Anyway, he told Merton, he said—he was at the Mass with the monks celebrating the Eucharist—he said, “I just don't get the Mass. I don't get it.” And so, then Merton said, “Well,” he said, “the Mass is really kind of a ballet.” So, that liturgical, like that ceremonial, liturgical rhythm, like all of reality in miniature acting out the love of God that permeates—It's parallel to the Japanese tea ceremony. It's a very prescribed ritual of the body—you hold it in a certain way, you drink it in a certain way—and it bears witness to the Divine Order that permeates the complexity of all things. And so, the body celebrates that. And, also, we'll see in these mystics, too, we go more and more deeply into our body. It's hidden in the ground of the body that embodies the love that we manifest in the world.

Kirsten Oates: So, for this community, this online community, we might recognize ourselves in a community of people even though we can't see each other and be with each other, but that sense you described that when we sit, we sit not only with each other in this online community but also with the communion of the saints, and all of those passed, we're all in community together, and we might open our bodies to that experience.

Jim Finley: Yes. Exactly. You know, when I lead these retreats, the meals are in silence as the sittings. And as the time grows in our time together, there's like a growing sense of gratitude for the gift of being with each other, kind of gathered together each in our own unique way for this one intention of deepening this union. And so, there it's concretized in being with each other.

It's important to realize though, that when you then go to your home to sit in practice, that when you're sitting in practice, in the interiority of things, you're sitting with people who are sitting in prayer all over the world. Not only that, it extends out further. When we sit in practice, we're sitting in oneness with the holiness of the human family, that the whole family is all woven together in God.

And when we sit in this prayer, we draw close to this all-encompassing center where we're all held together in the love of God. I think that also extends out then to everyone throughout the world. People we've never met. Thomas Merton once said, "Perhaps the people whose lives we will touch the most deeply are people we will not meet until after we are dead." That we're all interconnected with each other. And then it extends out to those who are what we call dead or "in God." And so, the living and the dead, the saints, all who sit, those who don't sit, the whole human family. So, we're celebrating divine interconnectedness, like we're celebrating the unity of all things so that we can give witness to it by the way we treat each other. By the way we, as the Buddhists would say, "the way we treat all sentient beings, the way we treat the gift of the earth." Yeah.

I'll say, too, that let's say you're sitting, and you come out into the living room and your husband, or your wife, or your little boy, or little girl is there, you sit with them; that is, you sit in the depths of the preciousness of who they are, unexplainably. And, therefore, it deepens our bonds with the gift of daily interactions with the people that we live with every day.

Kirsten Oates: Hmm. It sounds like we can find a sense of sacred ground or holy ground in our own home, on our own chair, or on our own cushion.

Jim Finley: That's it. That's what I meant, too, when I say that we sit still because there's no place to go, see? And so, T.S. Eliot talks about the axis of the turning world, the still point, and we're sitting at the axis of the turning world, and we sit there, And then as that spirals out, it configures itself in the unique configurations of our relationships, our situation, our shifting givens. We start to see the divinity of these constantly shifting patterns and our life as something holy. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: So, Jim, you'll be offering a weekly reflection for eight weeks, say, on Thomas Merton, how can we use that as a daily practice? So, can we listen to this same talk over a seven-day period? Is that helpful to us?

Jim Finley: Yes. Here would be one way to do it. There would be the initial time you listen to it, and there would be the first time you'd sit with it. And then, what you might do after you sit with it in prayer, meditation, if you're so inclined, you might want to journal, you might want to write out what came to you, or what questions it raises, or how does it bear upon your life, or where are you at with it? Then the next day, you'd listen to it again. And after you sit with it, you journal again, see, where are you at with it, like this. So, by the end of the end of the week, you would have sat with that first meditation seven times. And what you will find if you choose to do this, if you read your journal reflection, the seventh one, it'll be different than the first one. And it will be because it's "path talk." You know what I mean? There's this kind of deepening through sustained exposure where repetition's not redundancy.

Someone once said, when we sing a hymn, we sing a joyful hymn unto the Lord; when chanting, we deepen the capacity to listen. So, this is a kind of a chanting or, or mantra. It's a kind of a language, a deepening receptivity to this presence of God in our life. And that

would really be a very nice, practical way to get our grounded-ness in this, really.

Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Wonderful. Just to close off this section, you have mentioned a few times that when you do this in retreat form or when you've done it with your sitting group, there's always a question and response time. And although we can't do that live every time you lead a practice, we are going to do it intermittently throughout this podcast. So, we really encourage people to send their questions, and concerns, and we'll take some time to address them throughout the podcast.

Jim Finley: Yes, exactly. And I would say, too, we're kind of finding our way here on the mechanics on exactly how we're going to do it. But also, how I think of it is as you listen to these reflections, it's really more listening to the tonal quality of what's being said, like, there's a certain rhythm, or a certain kind of intimate depth, and it touches you in a way that it uniquely touches who you are in relationship to this in your situation. And it can give rise to questions like the "what about," which are the seekers' questions, they're path questions, like, how does it relate to this? [music] How does it relate to that? So, there will be an opportunity then at the end of each of these sections, on each mystic, there will be an opportunity to share with each other at that level, these questions.

Kirsten Oates: Thank you for listening to this episode of Turning to The Mystics, a podcast created by the Center for Action and Contemplation. Please consider rating it, writing a review, or sharing it with a friend who might be interested in learning and practicing with this online community. To learn more about the work of James Finley, please visit.

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