



Turning to the Mystics

The Cloud of Unknowing

Listener Questions

with James Finley and Kirsan Oates

Jim Finley: Greetings. I'm Jim Finley.

Kirsten Oates: And I'm Kirsten Oates.

Jim Finley: Welcome to Turning to the Mystics.

Kirsten Oates: Welcome, everyone, to season five of Turning to the Mystics, where we've been turning to The Cloud of Unknowing and I'm here with Jim. And in today's episode, we're going to be addressing questions that have come in from people listening to the podcast. Welcome, Jim.

Jim Finley: Yes. Thank you and good morning. Yes, good.

Kirsten Oates: Well, we received a lot of amazing questions and reflections and notes of gratitude. So, thank you everyone who made the effort to send something in. And Jim, you were going to start with just some general reflections about what you read.

Jim Finley: Yes. In reading, I read through all of these couple times actually. And first of all, I was very encouraged by it because these are path questions. They're the kinds of questions or the kinds of things that people say who are on this path. And also, I noticed this is how we respond here because there were so many comments and questions. This will be a representative sample of some of the main categories. So, some had to do with practice itself, things that come up in the practice, practice questions. Others had to do, where it opens up feelings of trauma.

Jim Finley: There's also a concern about what about other mystical traditions other than the Christian traditions and also questions about different ways this relates to our life, daily life and so on. And so, we'll be moving through these categories, singling out questions that are representative of that and maybe some other things besides, but overall, very heartwarming questions. The sincerity of the engagement was lovely.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah, beautiful. And Jim, just a little recap on The Cloud, because all the questions we've chosen for this episode relate to The Cloud of Unknowing and people who are trying it out or asking questions about it. So, just a little recap, The Cloud is a little different. This mystic offers a method, a method of practice, but the emphasis... Well, correct me if I'm wrong. But what I hear from you in your teaching, the emphasis is not on the method. It's on the experience of God that the directee is longing for and how to support that longing.

Jim Finley: Yes. Each of these mystic teachers that we're doing, notice that all of them up until now, there's no method. Thomas Merton doesn't give a method, John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila, and so on. And among those mystics, what they're really looking for is how your devotional prayer and sincerity in prayer, on what point it starts to become mystical? And so, if you want to call it a method, it's how to discern that's happening and how to cooperate with it. In Guigo, there is a method, but notice the method doesn't start out as contemplation. It starts out as the foundations in which contemplation occurs, so the Lectio, the meditation, and the prayer. And then in that method of the contemplation is this unit to stay beyond method, because it's mystical, it's divine.

Jim Finley: So, what you have in The Cloud of Unknowing is right from the beginning, it's a method, but notice it's like Guigo. It's not a method you just decide to practice. It's a response in

the prologue to a taste of mystical love, a blind stirring of love in the hidden depths of your being. So, the method is a way to concretize the intention to stabilize in that mystical state. So, it's a method in that sense. So, it's very similar to say, artist who have to learn the principles of art school, but those principles are methods and service of the gift of art, which is beyond.

Jim Finley: Same with poets, there's the discipline of poetry, but that it's a discipline in the service of what transcends method. And we're going to see also a very similar method to this when we do *The Way of a Pilgrim*, the Jesus prayer is the method, but it's the same kind of method. It's a way to get beyond the close horizon, the conceptual thought, and finite feelings into this mystical state. So, that's the tone of it. I think that's my understanding.

Kirsten Oates: Thank you, Jim. I think that's really helpful to ground us as we reflect on these questions together. So, thank you for that. I want to begin with a question from Tamson, and she says, "I love *Turning to the Mystics* and I'm so grateful to be able to keep listening. I noticed that you are using he/him pronouns when you refer to the author of *The Cloud*. Given that they are anonymous, would it be possible that you please use she/her pronouns sometimes? I personally have preferred to see her as a female, given that we don't know."

Jim Finley: Yes. When I'm giving the talks and speaking of God, I always try to go back and forth like she, he, and so on. And sometimes maybe I should share some reflections on that on God and gender. And so, where I'm at is the first thing of course is we don't know. So, remember, the author, he or she, chose not to tell us. There's no indication. We don't know. I personally use he because for me, what it is, is this.

Jim Finley: When I sit and study and read, say St. John of the Cross, Thomas Merton, Guigo, later, we're going to do Meister Eckhart, and read the men in mystics, and compared to what it's like to sit with Teresa Avila and *The Interior Castle*, what it's going to be like to sit with Julian of Norwich, which we're going to do her next, Mechtilde of Magdeburg, one of the Beguines, Mirabai Starr talked about this too. There's like a feminine voice. And so, the voice of the author of *The Cloud* feels more masculine to me in my tone, just by sitting with these two. Because we don't know. And you prefer to think of the author of *The Cloud* as she, think of the author of *The Cloud* as she.

Jim Finley: It raises interesting questions about it's out of our gender is the union with God that transcends gender, but I transcend gender as a man. A woman transcends gender as a woman, but not to leave their gender behind, but the mystical dimensions of being a woman, of being a man. So, anyway, but that's why I do that. That's my own proclivity. That's why I use he.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. Thank you for sharing that, Jim. So, now some questions about *The Cloud*. So, one from Mark Dean, he says, "Do you think the four levels of the active and spiritual lives... There's two each of those, two active levels, two spiritual levels. ... correspond to the four stages of spiritual development, common, special, singular, perfect?"

Jim Finley: I do think so. See, I think what these levels are all about is that this mystical awakening stirs and meets us and awakens us where we are. And so, in the lowest level, not lowest in the sense of less, but in the beginnings of the act of life, likewise, in the beginnings with

the common life, the stirrings start within the stirrings of our day by day awareness of ourself in devotional sincerity. But then what happens is that the act of life that is actively, the act of life is achieving union with God through effort. It starts to become more and more passive as in more and more yielding to God acting in us. We have to actively choose to assume the stance that stays open to that, which then moves into the lower level of the mystical, of the spiritual, and finally, into the highest level.

Jim Finley: So, I think there's a certain way. It's very personal and it moves back and forth, but it just gives us an overall feeling or an understanding that can help us to realize where we are because that's what matters. God's always one with us where we are working. And the real goal here is not to have certain kinds of mystical experiences withholding us. It's really surrendering ourself over to the love of God and living in fidelity to that and then letting it grow as it grows. So, I do think it's a good insight. I do think they're related.

Kirsten Oates: This person is saying, they're feeling stuck at a particular level. How would you advise them?

Jim Finley: Well, you have to talk with this person to get a clear understanding, but this would be a thought. Let's say a person, they get a taste of the mystical. They read *The Cloud*, but they can just tell they're stuck in the active that as they experience it and achieving it, what they achieve it through fidelity to their own effort or through their thoughts or through their insights, through their inspirations, what the author of *The Cloud* calls the gifts of God, rather than God, naked, alone as God is in himself.

Jim Finley: So, my thought would be this, to consider this, is that if one is desiring the mystical and when realizes one is still very much caught up in thought and reflection and so on to really trust God in the transformation that's happening to you in that active way of life and knowing that God's oneness within you is you accepting yourself as you are, because God does. And the more we accept ourselves where we are, the more we can start to see the mystical dimensions of the act of life through that acceptance. Ever notice when you're in the presence of someone who says, they'll love you under conditions and you measure up to who they want you to be, it shuts us down.

Jim Finley: When we're with someone who accepts us just as we are, it opens us up to change. And so, I'd answer that way as being at peace and the humility, the path of humility of being graciously grateful for being in the act of life and the mystery of it, God's oneness with us and so on. And if you look real, real close, you can see the intimations of the depth dimension of that. And it's a subtlety of moving in sensitivity to that is how it becomes more inclusive or more overtly mystical, I think.

Kirsten Oates: That feels very encouraging, very encouraging. Thank you. A question from Patty. When I sit in meditation, I begin by offering my heart to God. I imagine being drenched in God's loving presence. I use different phrases at first. Be still and know I am God; or Lord Jesus Christ, son of the living God, your servant is listening; or I belong to you, something of that nature. But during my meditation, instead of using a word to ground me, I simply sit in the awareness of God's presence. When my mind wanders, I come back to that awareness. My question is, is this okay? I don't want to

be in my head thinking about being aware. Hopefully, that makes sense. Many thanks for the wisdom and for all you do.”

Jim Finley: No, exactly. That’s just what The Cloud is teaching, really. In other words, we start with the word that anchors us and the intentions of passing beyond thought into this union with love beyond thought. And so, every time thought arises, we keep returning to the word. We return to the word, but as we start to settle into it, we start to settle into this oneness with God in love. And the word falls away is not needed. That’s why I like that image. We’re talking about vultures earlier. You see these birds like over the ocean, too, the seagulls, you see it, where they ride the thermals. They just fly. And then every so often, as they lose a little altitude, they flap their wings a few times.

Jim Finley: So, you’re sitting in this presence and you realize there’s distractions. And so, you say, “Jesus, Jesus, Jesus,” like you flap your wings a few times to maintain altitude, but you’re really trying to use the word to get beyond all words. And I think it comes full circle. We use the word to get beyond words to discover the holiness of words, how God’s present, and the way we talk to each other and so forth. So, I think that’s exactly what The Cloud is suggesting. It really happens to us. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Okay. Next, I have a question from Sue. I tried for years to use silent or meditative prayer, finally giving up when my lack of progress would create such feelings of distress. It was counterproductive. I am venturing carefully into this world again. I find myself drawn to it on the one level, but anxious on the other. I wonder if you can help me by reframing some of what you say. You talk about noticing a thought as it arises, encouraging us to have no judgment of it and not dwelling on it or working it through. Just letting it be. That all makes sense, but I find that I do not even notice that a thought has arisen until what feels like quite a time later when I come back and I’m aware I have followed the thought without even being aware that I was doing so.

Kirsten Oates: And so, I have missed the chance to notice the thought arise. And now I beat myself up that I can’t even do that bit. Please don’t tell me I don’t need to. I am trying to tell myself that without much success. What I am hoping is that there might be a way you could help me find something kind I could say to myself when I come back to being present, find a way of it being okay that I lost the path so easily without even noticing I had started to stray. The way you so kindly treat us as listeners, learners and encourage us at whatever stage we are at makes me think that there is a way of talking to myself, which allows for me being someone who can barely hang on to being present for a few seconds, let alone a few minutes. Hoping you can help.

Jim Finley: Yeah, several things to consider, I think, would be to, “How would this person understand what it is about being in a wordless space beyond thought that causes anxiety?” And sometimes it has to do with the fear of being unguarded, that if you’re not vigilant. So, is there a trauma history or an abandonment history? Can I be safe and surrendered over and vulnerable at the same time? Because as soon as I enter into this unguarded space, anxiety arises. So, first, it would be learning where that comes from and maybe working with the part of the self that gets triggered like that.

Jim Finley: It's true that you weren't safe when that happened, but there's like the adult you and God's grace talking to the part that gets anxious, but I'm here for you. I'm here for you and God's here with us and so on. Another thing to consider is noticing when a thought arises. And then she realizes sometimes because she doesn't notice the thought arising until later, she noticed it arises. I think we're all like this. Sometimes I tried this once. I used to do this. I used to try to lie awake at night, falling asleep. And I used to try to watch myself fall asleep. So, I'm lying there watching, watching, watching, but there's a certain point when you fall asleep, you can't be there to watch yourself falling asleep.

Jim Finley: And so, I would put it this way. If you're not aware of thought's not arising, down in the unconscious right now, there's all the stirrings of the unconscious mind. There's a part of the mind right now that's writing the script for tonight's dreams. They're working on the script, setting up the props. It's all kinds of things that are going on. So, we're only concerned about what we're consciously aware of. Next, let's say we then become aware of our wondering mind as we become aware of the tenacity with which it wonders and goes.

Jim Finley: So, I think this is at the heart of this really. I'm going to say it as a prayer, is that Lord God, you understand infinitely more than I do, the way my mind wanders, so the way it does. I drift away. I drift away. I come back. I drift away, but I know no matter how much I drift away, you never drift away from me. And you're infinitely in love with me in the midst of my drifting waves. And I'm asking for the grace to put my confidence.

Kirsten Oates: I've got tears in my eyes.

Jim Finley: Yes, yes. I should say this too. I'm supposed to leave my phone on because if my daughters call me and I don't answer, they worry about me, that I fell. And so, that's not them. So, anyway, yes, we were right at the brink. By the way, look at our way. We're talking about our wayward ways. Was the phone call a rude interruption into this lovely moment or was God providentially present in the phone ringing? The contemplative life in the midst of the world, this is reality. What's the constancy of the rise and the fall of circumstance? What's the love that's ribboned to the rise and the fall of unforeseeability? These intrusions have their own lessons to them, I think.

Kirsten Oates: Yes, it's very similar to what Sue's describing, which I've experienced many times in meditation-

Jim Finley: Me, too.

Kirsten Oates: ... where you're suddenly somewhere else and you have to come back to your meditating.

Jim Finley: It reveals us to ourself. It's almost like saying this as a prayer. Lord God, look at me sitting here, how hard it is for me to do such a thing to be consistently present. No wonder I'm having so much trouble with everything else. I can't even be here, but I am here as I am. And so, really, it reveals us to ourselves because to become aware of how unaware you tend to be is a deeper way to be aware. It's the constancy of a love that sustains us in the inconsistency of our ways. I think this has a lot to do with the mystical touch really and the mercy and just with all this is about really. Otherwise, it's all us again.

Jim Finley: See, am I holy yet? Am I holy yet? Think I'll make it before the buzzer goes off? And so,

we're really opening up that it's impossible. In the impossibility of it all, God achieves in us a union, this infinite beyond what our finite efforts are even capable of, which is what all these teachings are about, how to taste that and live by it. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: What do you think God would be saying? You started saying that prayer. I've got tears flowing in my eyes. What do you think God would be saying?

Jim Finley: See, it is more from the heart center than the mind. We're touched by it. So, the tears, it gets to us, it accesses us in our heart, this heart, when the mind descends down into the heart. Then we would say, "I'd love to stay here," but the damn phone went off. It's like, "I could be so holy if I didn't have to live my life, if it wasn't for the rude interruptions, the holy me, I want to be." So how do I know that God's with me and is woven into the fabric of the very interruptions itself because it's life? That doesn't mean we shouldn't look for times to be as quiet as we can. We need those. And we should need to protect ourselves from it.

Jim Finley: So, for example, if my daughters didn't need to call me, so they don't worry about it, I turn my phone off. But for me, the holiness of the encounter is not to turn my phone off. And so, all things considered, what's the most loving thing I can do right now for my body, my mind, this person, this community? And if I live by this love, then in my sitting practice, I'm at the access of love. And throughout the day, where that access is permeates out to the whole turning wheel of life. That's the feeling of it for me.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah, beautiful. Okay. A question from Kimberly, how does one reconcile the nuance between non-attachment and the fear I might be withholding love? In other words, in an attempt not to cling or attach, can we risk withholding love? Is it because love as we know it is almost always has an agenda with it to satisfy our inner wounds or to get something out of it versus God's agape love, which is love just for love's sake?

Jim Finley: Yes, this is a subtle thing really. I think sometimes we can use non-attachment as a rationale, not to engage in the vulnerabilities of love. If we've been hurt by love, abandoned in love, betrayed by love, there can be a non-attachment, which feels safer, but really, this nonattachment is for the sake of radicalizing this vulnerability and love, really God's love for us in our vulnerabilities like this. We should know that if there's some truth to this, there was certainly that for me with my trauma history, when I went to the monastery, this cloistered monastery and with my trauma history. We didn't talk to each other. We used sign language. We didn't talk.

Jim Finley: For me, it was a perfect hiding place, because no one could get to me, chanting the Psalms and sign. God writes straight with crooked lines. So, the fact at one level I ran to a place of refuge, I knew that if I gave myself to God in that woundedness, God found me there and changed my life. So, I think it's a matter of being sensitive to these and I really think another food is this. How could I ask God to help me to become nonattached from my present understandings of what it is to love and be loved? For the sake of radicalizing my capacity to love and be loved, am I becoming not less, but more sensitive to suffering in the world? Am I becoming more not less understanding of the difficulties another person is going through in myself?

Jim Finley: And I think it's that bigger question of discernment, of a more habitual state where things

are becoming more habitually woven into love sensibilities or sensitivities. It's a learning curve. You just stay with it. And because even to see this is the path. So, even to see it and be concerned is itself a contemplative concern, to be with it.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah, beautiful. It sounds like, Jim, with what you just said, the non-attachment is more focused on not attaching to things that get in the way of God's presence taking us over.

Jim Finley: Yeah. I'm using an example. This applies to therapy too, but I want to apply to intimate relationship. Let's say the lover, the spouse, the intimate other is sharing something that you can tell matters very much to them. And let's say, you're already familiar with it because they talk about it a lot and you can see where they're at. And you already feel in your mind you have a helpful answer. So, you could interrupt them to give you your insight, but what you would do out of love, you would suspend saying that. You'd be nonattached from your own perception in order to be more present and give them a chance to tell their story.

Jim Finley: Then before you say anything, there'd be a moment where you'd pause, so that what you say is coming not just out of your conviction, but is coming out of an empathy with their concern. What could I say that would let them know that I see them, that they're not alone in their distress? And that would be none attachment in the service of meeting at a deeper level. Martin Buber says in I and Thou, "What often passes for dialogue is just interrupted monologue," which is interrupting each other. And people are arguing. You don't even let each other finish your sentences.

Jim Finley: So, there's non-attachment. It's suspending our perceptions and judgment in a sustained attentiveness infused with love, like waiting. But the fruit of it is it's in the service of and brings about this deep in capacity to be more present.

Kirsten Oates: That's really helpful, Jim. Thank you for providing that example. Yeah. That's helped me a lot. Thank you. There's a question from Ginty from the UK and she's doing meditation in a group setting. And so, she's asking during the meditation, she feels physical, mental, and emotional needs of others. And should she pray into these or let those go and return to the word? So how does it impact this practice when you're in a group?

Jim Finley: Well, I think first of all is that if we have the gift and we're inclined to do it and there's a group to sit with, one Zen master once said, "It's very hard to get one log burning in a fireplace, but you put three or four logs in." So, when we sit in a group, each one benefits from the communal energy of the group and everyone in the group benefits from you. The other side of it is as we sit there together in silence, especially if you're sensitive, like an empath or you're sensitive, you can pick up on your concerns about, "What's going on?" Each one sitting here has brought burdens here.

Jim Finley: I would say that sensitivity is a sensitivity to say by surrendering oneself over collectively into God sustaining us in this silence, the depth dimension of the healing is occurring. So, I think it's to be aware of it at one level, but then also, to not stay there. It led us to return back to the depths, because it's communal to the depths of God that the deaths of God touches all of us collectively, healing the roots of our concerns. The inverse is also true that when we meditate alone, we can never meditate alone because there's people all over the world.

- Jim Finley: Look at all these people listening to the podcast. We meditate alone in our homes, but when we're alone, we're not alone, because we belong to a community of seekers, which isn't dependent upon physical proximity. It's not dependent upon being together. So, we're all interconnected to each other in our solitude. And in our collectiveness, when we are together, there is this depth dimension of each of us, which we're with each other in that. Also, in my sitting group, what I used to do, we'd do sitting and walking meditation.
- Jim Finley: And at the end then, there would be a dialogue like these questions here. It's like we're doing here. And so, the sessions themselves are poetic and solitary, but then it raises up things and then we dialogue with each other. But our dialogues are always in the spirit of the depth dimension in which the questions arise. We're always meeting each other there. So, it's that interplay between those two realms, I think.
- Kirsten Oates: So, we're moving on to our next category, which is around negative feelings that might arise during the practice, people trying the practice, the method. And so, a summary question based on a number of questions is how do we deal with difficult thoughts or emotions that come up such as feelings of shame and self-criticism, feeling broken and damaged, unlovable and not good enough?
- Jim Finley: Yes. We can say that when we do engage in practices like this, like wordless practice, breath awareness, there's corollaries in yoga too, and [inaudible 00:31:08], and different things. But in these wordless practices, contemplative practices, what we're doing at the psychological levels, we're lowering our defenses, because normally, we're defended by the thoughts that we're having, our concerns that we're having. But when we let that fall into the background, what comes welling up are the things that we carry around inside of us. So, it depends on the intensity of what they are.
- Jim Finley: At one level, which is what often happens, you're aware that a memory comes up or a feeling with it around shame or fear, whatever it is. It's just like everything else. You're aware that it's arising. You would notice that there's a version to it and you might be tempted to push it away, but you don't push it away. Instead, what you do is you return to your word, which concretizes yourself in this love, this loving you through and through and through, shame and all, fear and all, anger and all. You do that.
- Jim Finley: But then after the sitting's over, then you go back to it and say, "What is it here that's going on with me?" Because maybe the traumatizing events have long since passed, but they got inside of me and they live in places in my body and they get activated and come out. So, how could I tend to the unfinished business of my woundedness and how could I deal with it? And that would depend on whatever. Yeah. And therefore, in that level, it's a gift when that happens, because it increases self-knowledge. But on the other hand, if there's a history of trauma and also, if there's problems in getting lost and intense motion, you're having a hard time getting out and getting overwhelmed and so on, always safety first when it gets that way. So, you don't practice this way.
- Jim Finley: It's too unguarded. And instead, return back to the Lectio, return to something that has more structure to it. And God's infinitely present in that. Every word of Jesus, God's infinitely present, and listening to that, taking it in, reflecting upon the spiritual teachings and so on. And stay with the more structured form, but again, insofar based on what the

details are, you get help with that to deal with that. And that's why you're taking care of yourself and taking care of yourself is you're joining God who gave your life to you as a gift to cherish and watch over and take care of and so on. So, those are some perspectives I have.

Kirsten Oates: Thank you, Jim. Ralph adds to that question by saying that the anxiety is spilling over to when he wakes up in the morning. So, he says, "Now, I wake up with anxiety. I pause and sit with it and it turns into intense feelings of shame and unworthiness. So, I sit with these feelings with compassion and care. It is very intense, but I have experienced how eventually these feelings ease up and get up." And so, his question is how to best continue with learning to accept what I am experiencing and have the faith that I am a beloved son of God and am truly loved.

Jim Finley: As you know, for a long time, there's this hypnagogic state as you're drifting off to sleep. I think there's another name for when you're waking up and it's an unguarded moment. So, to wake up and it's there, it shows you there's something inside and the thought hasn't showed up yet on the scene to keep it in the background. And so, one, it's just what this person's doing. That as soon as it occurs, as soon as you can bring this loving knowledge on board to contextualize the fear. And then at a secondary level, see what you can do to deal with that. I have to say something for myself too.

Jim Finley: When I was with Maureen, when I was just going through the five years of this intense therapy for my own trauma, she would fall asleep right away. And I would carry my little transistor radio with me. And into the bed in the dark, I put in earphones. There was a program here in LA that played spiritual talks all night, Krishnamurti and [inaudible]. I would listen in the dark on my earphones, because being alone in the dark was too much what it felt like being a little boy when I was powerless, when I was being traumatized. And I needed a human voice. And so, that's the intimacy of internalized trauma, but the inverse is the intimacy of internalized spiritual awakening, where there's two wrongs touch each other, like the alchemy of it all. So, yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. Thank you for sharing that, Jim. This is a question from Jillian. My question is, "How can The Cloud of Unknowing guide the healing of memory as we reflect on the experience of painful losses in our lives?"

Jim Finley: Read the question again. Read it again.

Kirsten Oates: How can The Cloud of Unknowing guide the healing of memory as we reflect on the experience of painful losses in our lives?

Jim Finley: Well, this is one approach that helps me. There's two phases to it. Let's say that painful memories are a horizontal line of our experience of ourself and our passage through time. And so, we have these internalized stories and memories, and then there's the emotions that come up when they reawaken. There's all that. This passage through time on the horizontal line of memory, that from birth to death is intersected in the middle by a vertical depth dimension of the abyss-like love of God welling up and pouring herself out, in and as our life on the horizontal line. And that infinite depth is an abyss of loving depth that's infinitely more real than all the painful memories.

Jim Finley: And so, by surrendering ourself over to that depth, sustaining us breath by breath by breath,

we're transcended from imagining that I'm only the self that things happen to. See, that's where it's scary. I'm only the self that things happen to. I'm only the self that can do it's best to get past painful memories. It gets absolutized. So, what this depth of love does it revitalizes into this infinite love.

Jim Finley: Then the next step is this. Then what we do is we then draw from that depth of love to touch the hurting memory with love so that it might dissolve in love. Because if all we do is surrender ourselves over to this depth of love, it's this detachment again. We're removing ourselves from it. So, we have to do love's work. We have to do love's work. And the love's work is that we turn to touch the hurting places with love. Now, when we turn to touch the hurting places with love, in that touch, some of the pain that we're touching flows to that touch back into us again and we can feel ourselves starting to get overwhelmed.

Jim Finley: So, we have to back away. We have to back away, not to keep running in the other direction, but to get regrounded in love to come back again, to continue touching the hurting place with love. Engaging in that work over and over and over again is what transforms us, I think, because it integrates the pain into the love and see this love that permeates it but doesn't take it away by itself. We have to actively work and cooperate with God to heal and work through these things and to help other people do the same.

Kirsten Oates: How does The Cloud of Unknowing help with that, Jim? Is there a specific way or is it more just the general capacity for love?

Jim Finley: It helps in this sense. Let's say we come and we bring to our prayer ourselves in the horizontal line. We sit in prayer, but what's The Cloud of Unknowing saying? Yes, you are on this horizontal line, but also, notice in a moment in the past, you were touched by a blind stirring of love. Maybe it came to you in intimacy with someone. Maybe it came to you in your death experience. Maybe it came to you in a solitary hour. Maybe it came to you, but there was a moment of quickening in your heart. It shined bright, it broke through. And that moment of your awakening is always there, but hidden away deep inside you because God's always there.

Jim Finley: So, when we practice the practice, we put ourselves in a stance that offers the least resistance to be overtaken by this depth like love that's always there and that's how it does it. It takes us beyond who we are in our passage through time as having the final say on who we are. Because notice when we're sitting in deep meditation, it's a timeless moment of time in the midst of time. This is why when we're really doing this sitting, you have to look and see how much time has passed, because in a way, you weren't in time. You were in this depth-like eternity, which is the depth of each moment of time. And the more it stabilizes us and gives us a grounding in that, that's how it heals it, I think.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah, I think that's answering Liz's question as well. I'll read it, but I think what you've just said is guidance for her also. She says, "I'm conscious that by temperament, I don't like to dwell on negative feelings, pain, or loss. And I'm trying to get better at not just skirting past those things, but ultimately, they are finite feelings. How can you tap into that sense of the infinite where all this pain will melt away without dismissing the pain as unimportant and not getting the healing self-knowledge that might come from the tears?"

- Jim Finley: Yeah. I would say this is a helpful word maybe. It doesn't melt away. It's like being free from the tyranny of the suffering in the midst of suffering. It doesn't melt away, but what it does by grounding us in this love that transcends the suffering is still there. It gives us a groundedness in that love to be present to that suffering, to accept it, to understand it, to walk through it, to sink it through, and to integrate a depth dimension with those feelings. It's like contemplative character transformation. It transforms our character by concretizing the step like love and the unfolding of our experience.
- Kirsten Oates: That's really helpful. So, maybe not so encouraging to Liz who admits that by temperament, she doesn't like to dwell on feelings of pain.
- Jim Finley: Oh, really? You know what? Me, too. It's not my favorite thing, but you know what, here's the thing about trauma. I don't like dwelling on feelings of pain, but there's part of me that does because it dwells. And it dwells because it can't help itself. It's this part of me that's stuck in the moment of the past that won't let me have the present. And it dwells there and ritualized trauma stays there. And so, how do we liberate that, like disengaged from it?
- Jim Finley: We disengaged from it only by engaging with it, working with it, working through it, seeing and accepting it, cathartic feeling, feeling the emotion, and to be set free by walking through it. The Buddhist have a saying, "I walked through the middle of the flames and found it was raining in there." And so, in the midst of our pain, there's this raining down of this grace that puts the pain into a context.
- Kirsten Oates: Thank you, Jim. This is a question I put in this category of people struggling for the unity, wanting the unity. And so, this is a question from Rita. What has struck me in the past few days is that I am still struggling with a lack of the felt sense of God in my life and that is what I am seeking. Whereas I think that perhaps the point is to move beyond seeking that reassurance to a place of just giving myself to the unknowable, taking the risk of opening myself to challenge.
- Kirsten Oates: I realized that I spend so much of my time holding onto a very closed off part of myself, which is afraid to be open, to be vulnerable, to take risks. I find it so hard to let go of the tangible, the incarnate, indeed because the alternative is unknown and at times seems less appealing than the present here and now. Is there any other advice you can give as to how to make this shift?
- Jim Finley: As you know, it was coming to me now when we were doing St. John of the Cross about longing. And he's echoing the Song of Songs, the scripture and says, "Where have you gone beloved and left me moaning? I went out looking for you and you were gone." And so, the whole dark night of the soul is the loss of the unitive experience, which you know it is loss because you fleetingly tasted it. And having tasted it, you know your life is forever incomplete without it. And so, the longing is the path. It perpetuates it. Next, what helps is to know that this longing is an echo of God's infinite longing for us. God longs for us, and we might say, God longs for us, so long for him. It's like longing meets the longing and has transcended in the longing.
- Jim Finley: The next thing is that in the midst of this longing for this union, somehow the longing for the union is itself the union experienced as the longing. And this is where you get to

the second part about accepting the longing. There is this imperative to consummate this longing that I don't understand. And by my finite efforts, I'm powerless to consummate. And therefore, I sit in my powerlessness, in my finite abilities to actualize this infinite consummation that I long for. And by sitting quietly and patiently with all my heart, the consummation we long for arises. And I think it arises unexpectedly, like we didn't see the nearness of it. That's why I think we might start crying or it silences us. We're blindsided by its nearness.

Jim Finley: And here, what we also realized was they're all along. The unit of mystery is ultimately real. It was just hidden and buried under, internalized this and that. And so, it's experiential salvation. I mean, that's really the thing. And it's so different how each one of us experiences that. Sometimes it's very, very subtle. It comes and then it goes away again. It comes back. And so, we're really just giving ourselves over to the path and knowing that we are being transformed on God's terms and not on our terms. And we just walk the walk.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah, that's helpful. That's very encouraging. Thank you, Jim. A question from Jenny, I have just listened to the second dialogue in which James said that everything is eternal. This was taken to be a comforting thought and in many ways it is, but not in all ways. Does that mean that the Holocaust is eternal, that Ukraine is eternally bombarded by Russia, that things we might regret saying or doing are eternal?

Jim Finley: Yes. First of all, the intuition is if God knows that we're here having this conversation and God never forgets and not only that, God knowing that we're here is the reality of us being here. So, when we die and go into God, we'll go into having this conversation forever. Everything real is forever, but then it raises this question. What about then the moments of trauma? Because if they're forever experienced as they were when the trauma was occurring, we'd be in hell. We'd be eternally trapped. Just because something was too sad to be true doesn't mean it's not true. Just because things seemed to be in our hopeless doesn't mean they're not hopeless. And that's trauma, but here's I'm thinking what it is really.

Jim Finley: In the Christian terms that when Jesus rose from the dead, he rose with his wounds. So, it's the eternality of suffering conquered by the infinite love of God, which is glory. It's the glory that's there. So, the wounds are there, but they're transfigured. They're transfigured in this love. And I think that's the mystery of it. What we're trying to realize now I think in sitting prayer is that even now is transfigured in love.

Jim Finley: And so, freedom from the tyranny of suffering in the midst of suffering. What is it? Like Merton, it is not subject to the brutalities of our own will. Jesus spoke of finding the pearl of great price hidden in a field. And that pearl of great price is being invisibly loved by this infinite love that loves us so at every moment of our life, including the moment of our death. So, we're trying to find our way to that to be mystically present to the unfolding of circumstances. It's a mystery, but yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. Take a breath after that one. Yeah. Thank you, Jim. It is the mystery of the cross. I've heard you say that a number of times. That really brings that to life, that mystery. Yeah.

Jim Finley: And then that's why I say too, I think, in the Christian language, we tend to think of the life of Jesus, the death of Jesus, and the resurrection of Jesus as three phases. And that's how

they're presented in the story, because that's how we experience it. But what if the life of Jesus, the death of Jesus, the resurrection of Jesus are collapsed as the true nature of every moment of our life? Because notice, every moment of our life is a moment that's passed. In other words, in this present moment, I'm aware that I just passed beyond the moment that just was. But unless I passed beyond the moment of just was, I couldn't have entered into this moment and this moment is opening out upon the moment that's coming right towards me. See?

Jim Finley: And so, unless I let go of a reality, it's me letting go into the next moment. And so, every moment is life and death and that's inhaling and exhaling and breath awareness too. That's the eternality of the fleetness of the true nature of the present moment, I think. Yeah. And it's how a lot of trauma is being stuck in the past and a lot of it is anticipatory anxiety about the future. So, we're so concerned about the future, so burdened by the past, we don't get to be present. But the present is a fleeting present. It is the eternality of what's perpetually fleeting but never passes away. We're trying to find our way to the sense of that, I think. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: This is a good timing to ask Pam's question, which is to you, Jim, what is your experience of feeling the love of God during contemplation as a result of your many years of this practice?

Jim Finley: I guess I'd put it this way for me. The last number of years has been this way for me, because it's gone through phases for me since I was in the monastery really. Here's what it is for me, I think. When I was in the monastery, I was in silence for six years, chanting the songs. And what it felt like to me in this pervasive silence was somehow dropping down into the presence of God, the presence of God that's the infinity of the sun moving across the sky, of me inhaling and exhaling, of me looking this way and that. God's the infinity of the concrete immediacy of the unfolding of things. And in that silence, I was able to be habitually established, like the God nature of the nature of every moment.

Jim Finley: So, what I feel when I said, I get up in the morning and write six hours a day about things like this, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, or my book, and what I experience it is I'll be trying to put words to this and putting words to it in a sustained solitary silence in which I drop down into this presence of God. And I become unexplainably... I can't explain it. I can't explain it. It's like God's intimately giving herself away in the intimate immediacy of the concreteness of me sitting there just as I am. And I can get up and walk around, look out the door, and know that underneath it all, it's like that for me. That's what it is. And then I also know that when I'm not that way, sometimes I'm not because I'm upset or sad or something, I then know that God's infinitely present as me not being there. It has its own role to play.

Jim Finley: Sometimes Maureen and I, she'd sing on in the kitchen. I used to say there was a stone and it had carved in it. Our love is rock solid. And sometimes we'd get in arguments and we'd have a talk and say, "It's so important that we're not exempt from the human experience. It isn't a holiness beyond the darkness of this world. It's the depth and the holiness of the darkness of this world." So, our human vulnerability, the divinity of our vulnerability is the context in which this presence of God keeps deepening. So, those are some of the ways I would try to put words to it, I guess.

Kirsten Oates: Wow. That's really helpful to hear that. Thank you for sharing. Well, we're going to turn to

a voicemail, but this is a good time, I think, just to thank Corey, our producer, who was the one to gather all these questions and emails and voicemails and put them together for us with such care. And I know he responds to people as well. So, Corey, thanks for all that amazing work. And we're ready to hear the voicemail.

Jim Finley: Good. Yes. Thanks, Corey.

Miguel: Thank you, Jim and Kirsten. Miguel here in Olympia, Washington. First time caller, longtime listener. I have a comment and a question. I'm 70 years old and have been practicing silent prayer since I was 15 years old. But every time I sit, although I've logged thousands of hours, I feel like it is the first time. I really enjoyed the way you, Jim, have unpacked The Cloud. And I thought the image of the eagle silently soaring and the occasional flap of the wing is a great metaphor for the use of the prayer word.

Miguel: I also love the simple distinction you made between thought and thinking. As Thomas Keating said, God's first language is silence and everything else is a poor translation. My question is it seems that most of the major world religions have some practice of silence. Jim, how do you think The Cloud's Christian intention of practice differs from the intention of the Buddhist Vipassana practice? Thank you and I'm looking forward to season six.

Jim Finley: Yes. Let me say first, I want to speak of silence in the Christian language first, some thoughts, I think there's different kinds of silence. One's going on is a Zen retreat with this Jesuit priest from the Netherlands. I can't think of his name right now. And he said, "There's imposed silence in which you don't speak, because you're not allowed to." And I thought too, that has two versions of it. There's imposed speech where you're threatened. If you say anything, you'll regret it. But there's also the imposed speech out of courtesy, like in a church or religious service or at a memorial service, whatever. So, it imposes a courtesy that you freely accept.

Jim Finley: There's another kind of silence then, which is the deepening of that chosen silence. And that deepening of the chosen silence, it opens out on eternal silence. So, meditative mind, the meditative practices is a chosen silence that opens us up to this eternal silence. And we've tasted the eternal silence in moments that we're silence. Like Merton, we turned to see a flock of birds descending. And as if out of the corner of our eye, we send something in their dissent. It's primordial vast and true and we're silenced by it. Meaning, there are no words that can account for it like that.

Jim Finley: And so, what we do then is we take those moments where we're silenced with the silence of God in which the silence of God is speaking the universe into existence, the self-donating, the birds, the air, everything. So, the practice then is a practice of freely choosing that stance where the intention is leaning into that silence, which is really to listen. The first words of The Rule of St. Benedict, "Listen, my child, to the words of the master. And if today, you hear his voice, harden not your heart." So, our silence is that we might listen.

Jim Finley: Thomas Burton once said in a talk to the monks of the monastery, he said, "Sometimes we tend to think we're real because we make noise, but we should never forget that all of our noise came out of eternal silence. It is very, very quickly going to return to it." He said, "Everything that stands up and shouts about itself is an illusion." But then there are words

that come out of silence. They don't interrupt it. They come out of it and deepen it, which are the words of prayer, the words of love, the words of crying out in suffering, the words of seek to console, the words of poets and philosophers. And so, all these contemplative traditions, see Merton saw this.

Jim Finley: When Thich Nhat Hanh came to visit Merton when he was still in Vietnam, they recognized each other, because Thich Nhat Hanh was seeking in the Dharma of the Buddha and Merton was seeking in mystical Catholicism. They met at a point of convergence of this divinized consciousness. And when Bede Griffiths came from India from the Ashra and the kabbalah, Abraham Joshua Heschel came to visit Merton, there's this convergence where people given over to the contemplative dimensions of the divine and their tradition that transcends their tradition, they recognize each other.

Jim Finley: And so, I found in my life, Merton introduced me to yoga and he introduced me to Buddhism. And I've also been deeply affected by the Sufi way. I found it very enriching to know these different dialects for transformation. And so, I would say that's the affinity. Some people aren't, but if you're so inclined and you taste the richness of these paths, that can be woven into your path as part of your inner landscape.

Kirsten Oates: Brian had a question about that. I came to centering prayer by a mindfulness of breathing practice, which is more about focusing your attention on the breath. Whereas centering prayer is about releasing attention from your thoughts and being receptive to divine presence. I'm wondering if you have any guidance on wise ways to combine the lessons of the mystics and centering prayer with mindfulness, present moment awareness.

Jim Finley: Yes, this is my understanding, but I say this because it's not my tradition. I was more influenced by Zen Master Dogen and the Soto tradition, which is different than the Vipassana tradition. So, I can't speak of it experientially, but this is my understanding of it. Yes, Vipassana practice is mindfulness of thought arising, but just like the seven steps to your right mindfulness, the eightfold path of the Buddha is right concentration. So, we begin by focusing on thought, but what happens as it deepens that you as the observer as the thought and the thought that you're observing mutually disappear as the dharma field itself. As long as you're still there to observe it, you're still on the way.

Jim Finley: But when you pass into thought, into an awareness that transcends thought, that's revealed in thought, that's my understanding of the enlightenment experience. Otherwise, yeah. There's a Buddhist story in *The Gateless Barrier*. It's a lovely Buddhist text. And this person has this awakening, this mystical awakening. And he's sitting there in the community telling the Zen master about this awakening. And there's a boy standing in the doorway that helps the community. And the master says, "What is it that you've been awakened to? Bear witness to it." And he points to the little boy. He says, "Ask him, he'll tell you all about it." So, it's like that. Those are words, but they're words that bear witness to a unity beyond what words can say, which is spiritual language really.

Kirsten Oates: Teresita asks, "How can we bring this into the world? How do we bring this union into the social construct of our world? How do we model this to help others? So, they find their contemplative self. What would it be like to be a contemplative politician, scientist, or author?"

- Jim Finley: Yeah. Let's say I'm sitting in my practice. And in the practice, I realize that what I'm sitting in is the desire to deepen my awareness of the divinity, of the intimate immediacy of all things. God so loved the world that he sent his only begotten son, the divinity that permeates the human experience throughout the whole world. So, let's say later in the day, I'm sitting in a meeting and people are sitting around the table. And I'm listening or trying to resolve something for the service that this group provides for the world or the product, whatever it is, the problem. And you sit there and you say, "I guess I could blurt out something. I could share my opinion," but instead, I could pause for a minute.
- Jim Finley: I can meditate and say, "What could I say right now that would have the best possible chance of being helpful when I really think about it? How could I say it and what would be the way in which I would say it that would have the highest chance of being received and to see where it goes?" And I think that's the contemplative dimensions of the business place. That's the contemporary.
- Jim Finley: So, a politician would be, "What is politics? It's the science of the possible. It's the science of policies that ideally promote the good of the community. So, my commitment to the political order, could I be committed to policies that do that?" And it opened an exchange. The key to democracy is this dialogue. And how can we actively meet in the middle for the sake of the common good and not give in to ideological confrontation? Because that's the problem. It turns into that.
- Jim Finley: So, how could I not be part of the problem? By not getting into that polarity, but trying to stay the middle course that includes both as I hold my own perspective, but deeply respectful of the other, what truth it contains and how can we move forward together, and not be disheartened by the tenacity of collective brokenness in the political order, to just not be disheartened by it. And if you do get disheartened by it, quit, you're not meant to be there. We weren't put on this earth to let other people tear down our capacity to enjoy the groundedness of our own life. And we could love our neighbor as ourself, not instead of ourself.
- Kirsten Oates: Saskia asks about, "What does it mean to love God for God's sake alone?"
- Jim Finley: And the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* eases, "Well, what is this cloud?" He poses a question. The reader's asking a question. And he says, "I don't know. Your very question draws me into *The Cloud*. I'm inviting you to enter." I might put it this way. I would say it's a way of being in the presence of a love that is loving me into the present moment. To be at the deathbed of a dying loved one is very clear. Our next breath belongs more to God than to us. And I'm sitting in the presence of this love that's giving itself out as every beat of my heart. It's pouring itself out as the unexplainable miracle, the immediacy of myself. And I can be so touched by the nearness of this generosity and this is where I'm silenced.
- Jim Finley: I lean into letting it have its way with me. I lean into letting it have its way with me, that it might transform me into itself. It's precisely what you can't say. That's why I think contemplative spiritual direction is two people sitting in a room together, dialoging about what neither one can say, but they recognize in the intonations of the longing what it is that's being discussed. And I think when we listen to these mystics, it feels that way. You know what I mean? You just get this feeling that these people, they're people for whom everything

they say counts, because it's coming from the same place and with the same intention to help us find our way to this, so that we might in turn pass it on to others.

Kirsten Oates: Last question, Jim, and you used this phrase earlier. So, I do want to just get to this question before we finish. Helene, I think it is, says, "In a recent episode, you mentioned the contemplative transformation of personality. I wonder if you could discuss this further."

Jim Finley: Yeah. Related to this question, I want to relate it about the Enneagram and so on. Let's say my personality is the intricate patterns of the givens of my felt sense of who I am. It's my temperament, my style, my sensitivities, my lack of sensitivities, the things that attract and draw me and fascinate me, the things that I'm working on, not just what I'm working on, but the way in which I work on the things that I'm working on, my personality. And so, in a way, when I sit in prayer, it's in my personality, I come upon the identity deeper than my personality. Then my personality, Merton calls it, our exterior self, but in the depths of my personality is I dropped down in silence.

Jim Finley: In the depths of my personality, I dropped down into an identity that is God being identified with me in the mystery of who I am, but that deepening mystery of God identified with me then wells up and illumines my personality. And it brings about my own unique temperament, my own unique way of being faithful to or embodying this transfigured way of life, but embodying it as me. Another way I put it too sometimes is that of all the millions and millions of people on this earth, not a single one of those people is you, not a single one. And all the people that have ever lived, not a single one of those people was you. And all the people yet to be born, not a single one of them is going to be you. That you're the only you there is. So, if you don't be you, nobody will.

Jim Finley: And so, we transcend ourself to drop into this uniqueness of ourself that is our unique portal or opening that opens that up on the uniqueness of everybody. That's why the more I understand myself and these interior realms, the more I understand everybody, because every one of us is a unique edition of the same story. We're this invincible preciousness that we're trying to find our way back to, to be faithful to it. And so, in this interconnectedness with myself, I enter interconnectedness of empathic union with the underlying patterns of everybody like that, I think.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. Wow. That's beautiful and timely to hear that as we've sat with questions listeners are sitting with, because we're all woven into those questions.

Jim Finley: Yeah. Another thought too I have is haecceitas. Duns Scotus had this idea. Gerard Manley Hopkins was struck by this about thisness that each leaf is alone the leaf that it alone is. And so, the divinity is the uniqueness of each twig and leaf and pebble and stone and us. And notice too, if you love someone very, very much someone who's passed over, a spouse or a grandmother or a grandfather, when you look back, what's endearing about it is the way they laughed or there's a certain way they tended to say things. It's certain pattern. It's unimitable. It can't be imitated, which is somehow though. And then we're trying to find that in ourself to appreciate and feel that and share that and be that.

Kirsten Oates: Oh, that's so helpful. And really then, these listener questions are like unique portals into this path as we're all trying to find out a way to-

- Jim Finley: And notice also, the questions are revealing themselves to us because of the sincerity. And when they do, they enrich all of us. And the response, everyone benefits from it. So, this is contemplative community being actualized here.
- Kirsten Oates: Yeah, what a gift. And Jim, thank you so much for this wonderful season on The Cloud. It's been just a joy to be in dialogue with you about it and to sit with these questions today has been a real gift.
- Jim Finley: Yeah. And then after our break, when we do Julian of Norwich, she's a lovely mystic. It'll be delightful to do her then move on to Eckhart. And so, we're on a journey here today. So, it's good.
- Kirsten Oates: Yeah, it's wonderful. It's a real gift. Thank you for everything, Jim. We appreciate your unique portal.
- Jim Finley: Thanks.
- Kirsten Oates: Thank you for listening to this episode of Turning to the Mystics, a podcast created by the Center for Action and Contemplation. We'll see you again soon.