



Meister Eckhart

Session 1
with James Finley

**Turning
to the
Mystics**

James Finley: Greetings. I'm Jim Finley. Welcome to Turning To The Mystics.

Greetings everyone and welcome to our time here together turning for guidance to the Christian mystic Meister Eckhart.

One of the patterns that we've seen in the teachings of the mystics that they all share and express each in his or her own way is the importance of doing our homework in grounding ourself in psychological spiritual maturity. Because the mystical dimensions of experiencing, understanding and responding to God's oneness with us arises out of the ordinariness of our lives, out of the substance of the ordinariness of things, of just who we are day by day. Eckhart expresses this first in the level of human experience in which he responds to a series of questions presented to him.

*"Why do you love God? I don't know, because of God. Why do you love the truth? Because of the truth. Why do you love justice? Because of justice. Why do you love goodness? Because of goodness. Why do you live? My word, I do not know, but I'm happy to live."*¹

He says. I think here a lesson that he bears witness to in himself and he invites us to be faithful to is knowing just that life, for all of its troubles, that it's a gift to be alive and real in the world. That it's a gift and we should honor that gift, therefore, and watch over it and be responsible for it, and fidelity to the gift of life itself.

Notice too, there's a subtle point here in this passage because when he says, *"Why do you love God?"* He says, *"I don't know,"* Then answers, *"Because of God."* Then at the very end, *"Why do you live?"* He says, *"My word, I don't know, but I'm glad to be alive."* He is suggesting that in the gift of life itself and in the gift of our love for God, there's something in the love of God, our love for God that we don't know. There's something in the gift in the miracle of our life that we don't know. My word, I don't know. This I don't know is going to be very important for Eckhart. The mystery of the I don't know, and the hidden depths of what we do know.

A second aspect I think of Eckhart in building these foundations of psychological spiritual maturity is found in the beginnings of the first sermon in the collected sermons. The advent sermon. Meister Eckhart Bears witnessed that along with being grateful for the gift of being alive, that it's important that we become an introspective, reflective person. Like, know thyself. We know thyself that we... There's a kind of a meditative attentiveness to the inner architecture or the interiority of ourself that we become aware of that and responsible for it and aware of it.

Eckhart, in regards to that writes, *"Whatever the soul affects, she affects with her powers. What she understands, she understands with the intellect. What she remembers, she does that with the memory. If she would love, she does that with the will, unless she works with her powers and not with her essence. Every external act is linked within with some means."*² I'd like to reflect on this passage.

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- 1 Eckhart and Reiner Schürmann, "Living Without Why," in *Wandering Joy: Meister Eckhart's Mystical Philosophy* (Hudson, NY: Lindisfarne, 2001), p. 61.
 - 2 Eckhart and Maurice Walshe, "Sermon One", in *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart* (New York, NY, The Crossroads Publishing Co, 2009) p. 30

In the powers, this is a classical way of understanding the interiority of ourself, that it was very pervasive throughout the Middle Ages. We see it in all the mystics. It kind of runs through the background of their teachings. The power to understand refers then to our understanding self and all that it understands, and with memory it refers to our remembering self and all that our remembering self remembers. With love, it refers to our loving self and all that we love. That's how we work with our powers.

Then he says, *"And we should be grateful for the powers because it's the gift of being alive. It's the human experience."* We're using the powers right now by talking and reflecting and thinking and so on. He says, *"We work with our powers but not with our essence."* The essence is the hidden thing and the I don't know about why we love to be alive and the love of God. Because what's hidden is the essence of ourself, which is deeper than the powers. That it's qualitatively beyond what the powers can attain, what thought can comprehend, what words can say beyond memory because it's timeless and so on.

I'd like to give a hint about the essence, which he sometimes refers to as the spark of the soul, and more often we'll see as the ground of the soul. I might have shared this in one of our previous reflections together. I can't recall. When parents give the newborn infant, in terms of its powers, it's powerless. The developmental stages of emerging into conscious, reflective, adulthood hasn't even begun yet. It's like the essence of limit, it's so powerless. Yet in its powerlessness, when they clasp the infant to their breast, they're smitten by the infant. There's something precious about the presence of the infant that they don't understand and they don't need to understand it because it's not understandable in terms of their powers.

What's fascinating also is it isn't just that in clasping the infant in this way, as the essence, the essence transcending their powers awakens the essence in them and it awakens in them that which is capable of recognizing the essence. The infant reveals them to themselves as a mystery or a gift beyond what they can comprehend. Like this, it isn't just that they know that if they were to die in the act of saving the life of this infant, they would die in the truth, but they would know that if they would die in the truth, this essence within themselves, it's a deathless quality that wouldn't die.

It's also true at the other end when we're at the deathbed of a dying parent, for example, and in their final moments, their powers are diminishing, they're just falling away like this. Yet when we sit with them at their bedside, there's something shines out, something unexplainable and deathless and boundaryless and beautiful. To be in the presence of the dying loved one, the essence is revealed. The preciousness, which being in their presence reveals the preciousness of ourself beyond our own powers. We're in the presence of something we cannot understand and for a moment it delivers us from the confines of the understandable, as if human understanding or human desire has the final say in what we're capable of because there's something we're not capable of that shines out in these moments.

I think another example of this too would be for an artist, is that for the artist there is in the craft of art that which they do understand. They know it by heart, they practice. The discipline of it. There is that about art. They can't just magically go and sit down and do it. It takes internalizing through their powers. They have to exercise their power. Yet they learned by experience. As long as they remain within what they're capable of bringing forth, it's not yet art. That somehow something they're not capable of bringing forth brings itself forth

through them and their surrender to it and they recognize that when it's happening and it graces them.

So too with poets, so too with all these transformative acts. They start out in the powers and they're the powers that kind of come to the edge of themselves and to a hidden essence that shines out through and transcends the powers. Eckhart's trying to invite us to become sensitive to this. Another way of saying it, I think, that in these moments where this hidden essence beyond the power shines forth, that in these moments when it's actually occurring, we might say that we're a momentary mystic when this happens. That it isn't just that we're in the presence of God, but somehow a primordial boundaryless presence is presenting itself and giving itself to us as our very presence, shining forth and transcending the powers of ourselves to recollect what's happening to us even while it happens.

It delivers us from the claustrophobic, one-dimensional world in which the powers are a gift, they're a gift. Compared to this boundaryless divinity, we see that they're infinitely less than what the soul longs to realize.

There's another way of saying this intuition that lies at the heart of Eckhart's teachings I think that he invites us to ponder, and he bears witness to it in his sermons just by the way he talks. Is that the abyss like depths of God, the secret thing that we're talking about, the abyss like depths of God, is by the generosity of God given to us as the abyss like depths of ourselves. That if we think of God as generosity, we are the generosity of God. We are the generosity of God because God gives this very ground of God, the boundaryless infinity, a noble ground of God by God, by the generosity of God gives that to us, so Eckhart says, "God's ground is my ground and my God is God's ground." There's already a communion in the ground of oneness.

I think too, I think this is worth noting too. Notice that he joined the Dominicans. He was a professor at the University of Paris. He taught theology there. You can read his Latin writing, scripture, commentaries. Eckhart kind of shines through those. In theology, he called this indicative speech. Indicative speech is the language that states what is. In indicative theology, like in the creed, we say God is eternal, God is love, God is trinity, God is mercy and so on. We can explore the history of those ideas through the Latin fathers and the Greek fathers and how we understand in scripture and so on. In the sermon he says it's imperative speech, and imperative speech doesn't state what is. It's a language addressed directly to the heart in the midst of a great turning. That somehow there's like a metamorphosis of the subjectivity itself going beyond its own powers into this ground.

Meister Eckhart, he's speaking of this awakening and he says, "*You know, this awakening of which I speak, you might experience it before you leave church here today.*" He said, "*You might experience it in the midst of this sermon.*" I think for us too in following the mystics in the podcast, is this is imperative speech. This intimate realization of this unitive ground might be well up in me as I speak of it. Intimations of it may well up in you as you listen to it. That we're bonded together in a resonance of it, kind of an interconnected state of the oneness of which we speak. An unexplainable oneness, but we sense that we're graced by it when it occurs like this.

Another way of looking at this for Eckhart also is important, is that on this life there is the gift of our humanity. There is the gift of our powers, our understanding, our loving, our willing, our feeling, all of that. There is also the gift of these powers illumined by faith. He was a priest. He's a Christian speaking in churches of faith. He says that, "When through faith, we hear Jesus telling us or in the scriptures that God loves us, through the power of the Spirit who dwells in our hearts, we're empowered to know and have an understanding that God does love us, which is the gift of faith." It's an obscure certainty in our heart. Gabriel Marcel says it's a primitive inner assurance. It's the understanding of devotional sincerity that the believer lives by. They can't explain, but they live by. It is a kind of understanding. They can talk about it in spiritual direction or share it. They can reflect upon it, deepen it through *Lectio Davina* and so on.

We live this life of faith, which are the powers illumined by grace, the essence of which is love. God is love. When we die and pass through the veil of death, we move from a veiled oneness with God to an unveiled oneness with God in glory, to live God's life as infinitely as God lives god's infinite life in our eternal nothingness without God. As we've seen throughout these talks, what happens with some people is that God decides not to wait until they're dead to begin to grant them unveiled glory. They're in their powers, they're still here in the midst of time, but in the midst of their powers, in the midst of time, they're granted a deep realization of an unveiled oneness. It's veiled because it's obscure, it's subtle, primitive, deep, vast and true. Eckhart's sermons are encouraging us to be open and receptive to the ways that we've experienced intimations that that's happening to us, how to discern what's happening, how to be faithful to it, and how to open ourselves to it.

Here's the thing, this is very close to the teachings of the Buddha on the noble truth of suffering and the origins of suffering. He's saying that, look, we're living in the powers, our understanding, our thoughts, our memories, our emotions and so on. Our powers are illumined by faith, they're illumined by faith, and there's illumination of faith, there is this awareness of the ground, the ground of God. There's like an awareness of it, like an intuition, like you're hearing of it right now, like it poetically rings true. It's a lovely thought. It's a lovely thought and it's a gift to be touched by the beauty of that thought.

He's saying that what happens here is, but what hides the fullness of the realization is possessiveness of heart. That the powers lay claim on us, is having the final say in who we are. There's this deep sense that we have that somehow we're real all by ourself, like my bodily self, I'm me. I'm right here, I'm real and I'm capable of attaining things and losing things and acquiring things. I have a history and a story. This is me. That substantiality of this perceived separate sense of myself cuts off access to this ground of this luminous thing of God being infinitely poured out and being given away. Another way of saying it is the infinite presence of God is presencing the infinity of itself in and as the gift and the miracle of the intimate immediacy of our very presence, the presence of others and the presence of all things and our nothingness without God.

That if we think of God as generosity, we are the generosity of God. We are the song

that God sings. It's just divinity in all directions. That the world is God's body and that a body for the love that's uttering it into being, but the powers to possessiveness of heart. This separate, this deep sense that we all have of, which is why we're afraid of dying or why we're afraid of self, that I'm nothing but the self things happen to. Eckhart is saying, what we're trying to grow into is if I'm even capable of attaining it or losing, it's infinitely less than what puts to rest the longness of my heart, which is this oneness.

He's trying to help us get an image of this so we can see this and this will help move us towards understanding the path of Meister Eckhart. Meister Eckhart is speaking about an image in a mirror. *"An image is not of itself, nor is it for itself. It has its origin in that of which it is the image to that it belongs properly with all that it is. It does not belong to what is foreign to this origin, nor does it owe anything to this. An image receives as being immediately from that at which it is an image, it has one being with it and it's the same being. Every image has two properties. The first is that it receives its being immediately from that of which it is an image without interference of the will. It's outgoing is indeed natural and it thrusts itself out of nature like a branch from a tree. When an image is cast on the mirror, our face will be reflected in it whether it likes it or not."*³

I'd like to reflect on this. The poetic image of this is imagine you're standing, looking at yourself for a full-length mirror and imagine this full-length image of yourself has been through a lot of therapy, has been to a lot of retreats, it's thought through a lot of things, and it's realized it's time to launch out on its own. That it no longer needs you. You try to explain to the image that it wouldn't go well for it because it's an image of you, so it's not going to go well for it without you. You're an image of me and you're going to go off on your own, this isn't going to work. The image says, *"No, you're trying to hold me back. You're trying to hold me back. I'm going to go off and be this autonomous self and find my destiny."*

To demonstrate your point to the image, you step halfway off the edge of the mirror and half the image disappears. It has a panic attack, has to go back on Xanax, goes back into therapy and says to the therapist. *"I'm not real. I'm not real."* Now the image is real, it just isn't real in the way it thought that it was real. Eckhart says a word like that.

It's not that we're not real, we're real, but we're not real the way we tend to imagine that we're real. See, we imagine that we're real as separate and unto ourself without realizing we are the manifestations of infinite love giving itself to us as our very life in our nothingness with our God. Eckhart says, *"If this is our understanding of ourself..."* That is if these images which he shares in his sermons, if they give us a kind of an interior understanding of our situation in our search for ultimate fulfillment and what hinders us from realizing that fulfillment, what is the path along which this fulfillment is to be realized?

That is, what is the way of life? Here I get a sense too that I think this is true of all these mystics. You get the feeling when we listen to Eckhart, you read his sermons out loud or you just read him, sit with his words, his insights. You get to feeling not only has he found his way to this, see what is the Eckhart says, *"How do I find my way to the joy that death does not have the power to destroy?"* He says, *"And that joy that death does not have the power to destroy is the deathless joy of God. The ground, given to us as the depths of our own ground. So how do I*

3 Eckhart and Reiner Schürmann, "Living Without Why," in *Wandering Joy: Meister Eckhart's Mystical Philosophy* (Hudson, NY: Lindisfarne, 2001), p. 91.

find my way to it? Because the powers, the possessiveness of heart, this ribbon through the powers is hindering me from finding my way to that.” Therefore he suggests to us in a path.

What’s interesting with him, there are two things about Eckhart One, again, he was not cloistered like Thomas Merton or Teresa Avila or Guigo II. He was out in the midst of the busy. He came to all this in the midst of the world, the demands of the academy at the University of Paris. He had administrative duties. He was also spiritual director, guidance for people. It was in the midst of all this business. There were also accusations against him for heresy. There’s a series of trials going on. By the way, Reiner Schürmann points out that he thinks it’s at the heart of these trials, is that the theologians who were critiquing his work... There were other issues too involved in this, political issues. They thought he was speaking indicatively. They thought he was saying like theology. He said, *“No, they don’t realize I’m speaking imperatively, like poetry, like Jesus spoke, called follow me.”*

Jesus didn’t give lectures. He told stories and modeled for the way to be like this. Since that was at the heart of their, it was all part of his story. This is possible for us in the midst of the world. You have your life, I have mine. Cell phones go off, all kinds of crazy things happen. How do we find our way to this in the midst of all these complexities? For him, he says what this is really, and I’m going to look at this in the next talk then. What this says, he said it’s a path of detachment. That’s what it is.

Here, as a very brief setting, by detachment would mean this. The intention is not to let the conditions you’re living in have the final say in determining the conditions of your innermost sense, of the depths of your heart. Likewise, no matter how past conditions have been internalized through traumas, abandonments and the unresolved matters of your heart, do not let those unresolved things that you go through, the things you’re trying to sort out and get past, don’t let them hinder the deep inner abiding of this deep depth of yourself. This utterly beyond and totally is ribboned through those very things. Don’t get stopped where something has the authority to name who you are, because that only love has the authority to name who you are.

Eckhart would say one problem is that we tend to absolutize the relative. We absolutize the contingency and we relativize the absolute, so we have it upside down. We’re trying to turn it up. We’re trying to get things in this priority of the ultimacy of love, transcending, utterly permeating and giving itself to us unexplainably forever, breath by breath, by breath.

What he does then, it’s a very practical mysticism. He’s going to give a litany of real practical examples of ways we all trip up, and he kind of sheds light on them and then suggests a way to practice a meditative. Here is the word *gelassenheit*. The word *gelassenheit*, the root word of the word *gelassenheit*, height is to be released, to be released, to let be. We’re to be released from all that hinders us from finding our way to the joy that death does not have the power to destroy. The attachment happens in the immediacy of daily life, the little tripping points in our heart. He points them out. We’re to recognize them, accept ourselves in them, and take a deep breath and ask for the grace to read through them and beyond them to the love that’s sustaining us unexplainably, transcending the tripping place even as we’re tripping.

In the fifth century, when St. Benedict first started monastic life, someone asked him, *“What do you monks do in the monastery all day?”* St. Benedict said, *“Fall down and get up. Fall down*

and get up. Fall down and get up.” That the tripping place, the falling place, if we let it, the tripping place is where the frailty, deeply accepted, is realized and we’re falling into oceanic mercy. Taking us to itself as invincibly precious in our wayward ways. It’s the unwavering love that utterly permeates the wavering ways of our heart and the ways of this world. He gives very practical points about strategies of the heart to do this.

Another example I have of this, say that you love someone very much, like the beloved, the dear friend, the brother, the sister, someone you’re really close to. Let’s say in the honesty of the relationship, you realize because of your love for this person, you’re very solicitous to not intentionally do anything that would cause them distress or hurt. Notice these things would cause stress or hurt by the internalized patterns in your heart. Withholding closeness, being quick to anger, pretending that you’re really listening and you’re really not, whatever. You’re aware of these patterns that compromise the union that you long for. You accept them and actively work on being released from them, *gelassenheit*.

What you find as you go through this, as the weeks and months and years go by, is it ripens, which will be the point of the next talk also. This is what he calls the birth of the word in the soul. The birth of the word in the soul is the experiential realization of this infinite love welling up through, transcending and wholly permeating the moment just as it is. The *gelassenheit*. The freedom of the birth of the word in the soul.

Well in there. As usual, let’s end with us sitting. I’d like you to sit straight and fold your hands and bow. Repeat after me.

Be still and know I am God.

Be still and know I am.

Be still and know.

Be still.

Be.

Bow. We’ll slowly say the Lord’s prayer together. Our Father, who heart in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not unto temptation, but deliver us from evil. Amen. Merry mother of contemplatives pray for us. Meister Eckhart, pray for us. Mechtild of Magdeburg, pray for us. Bless us.

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’re planning to do episodes that answer your questions, so if you have a question, please email us at podcasts@cac.org, or send us a voicemail at cac.org/voicemails. All of this information can be found in the show notes. We’ll see you again soon.