



Meister Eckhart

Session 2
with James Finley

**Turning
to the
Mystics**

Jim Finley: Greetings. I'm Jim Finley. Welcome to Turning to the Mystics. Greetings, everyone, and welcome to our time together turning for guidance to the Christian mystic, Meister Eckhart. In this session, I want to begin by refining our reflections on a theme we've already begun to explore in Meister Eckhart's teachings, namely what it means to be real. Eckhart's saying that, "*To be real in the fullest possible sense is to be the infinity of reality itself.*"

If we define or understand reality in this sense, then only God is real. God is that by which we are. We are by virtue of our existence in God's infinity of existence. So if reality is understood in this way, then we, as creatures of God, of ourselves are nothing because we have no reality of ourself that we saw in the act of creation. What creation is is God's infinite presence presencing itself and giving itself away in and as the grace and the miracle of the very reality of ourself, the reality of others, the reality of all things in our eternal nothingness with our God.

So in some sense then, God's self-donating love, the *gelassenheit*, the pouring out of the generosity of God, that we are the generosity of God, that God's very presence is the gift and the miracle of our very presence and our nothingness without God, and this for Eckhart is the riddle that lies at the heart of the mystery of our existence, of our reality. So to quote from Meister Eckhart on this understanding of creation, "*Acting and becoming are one. God and I are one in this work. God acts and I become. Fire transforms all things it touches into its own nature. The wood does not change fire into itself, but the fire changes the wood into itself. In the same way, we are transformed into God so that we may know Him as He is.*"¹

Another quote, "*All creatures are mere nothingness. I do not say they are small or anything at all. They are mere nothingness. For what does not possess being is nothingness. But no creature has being, for being depends on the presence of God. Were God to withdraw it for an instant, all creatures would be annihilated.*"² I'd like to reflect on this. See, acting and becoming are one, and the act is this act of the infinite presence of God pouring itself out and giving itself away in and as the intimate immediacy of our very presence, the presence of others in all things.

That is the act. Eckhart says this act of this generosity is not an act that God performs. It's the act that God is. God is the act of infinite generosity, giving the fullness of the mystery of infinite reality away completely as our very reality, the reality of others in all things and our nothingness without God. This is another way of speaking of the ground. God's ground is my ground, and God's ground is my ground. Only here it's speaking of as a verb or as an energetic identity, that it's the act of infinite presence presencing itself. But the becoming is ours.

Our act is receiving the act of God's generosity giving the act. By the way, our receiving the act of God giving us a very reality is not an option. We can't say, "I'll pass on that one. I'm busy today." It's like you can't opt out of your next inhalation and have a good afternoon. You just can't do it. So what this means then is that we and God are bound together, like woven together in a point. My ground is God's ground and my God in infinite unity.

1 Eckhart and Reiner Schürmann, "Identity" in *Wandering Joy: Meister Eckhart's Mystical Philosophy* (Hudson, NY: Lindisfarne, 2001), p. 101-102.

2 Eckhart and Reiner Schürmann, "Living Without Why," in *Wandering Joy: Meister Eckhart's Mystical Philosophy* (Hudson, NY: Lindisfarne, 2001), p. 82-83.

A quote from Thomas Merton on this, this is a theme we could quote the mystics. All mystics have texts like this. This is Merton, *“At the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and by illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God, which is never at our disposal from which God disposes of our lives, which is inaccessible to the fantasies of our own mind or the brutalities of our own will. This little point of nothingness and of absolute poverty is the pure glory of God in us. It is, so to speak, His name written in us as our poverty, as our indigence, as our dependence, as our sonship. It is like a pure diamond blazing with the invisible light of heaven. It is in everybody, and if we could see it, we would see these billions of points of light coming together in the face and blaze of a sun that would make all the darkness and cruelty of life vanish completely. I have no program for this seeing. It is only given, but the gate of heaven is everywhere.”*³

So here’s a poetic understanding then. So when Jesus says, *“I came that you might have life and have it more abundantly,”* the life that He came to give us is the life that is at once God’s in our own, bound together in this union that TS Eliot talks about, the still point of the turning world, like the axis of the turning world. This axis, this ground, this meeting, this unit of mystery spins out like this around all reality, around all being, and is the reality of all things, the reality of everybody, the reality of every passing moment of our life like this.

There are moments, of course, we’ve talked about this with each of the mystics, in which we’re given a glimpse of this. We’re given a taste of this oneness. For example, when we contemplate a fire. We gaze into the flames. In the contemplation of fire, we get intimations of this oneness. When we give ourselves over to the smell of a blood red rose, when we look up and see the sun moving across the sky, when we lie in the dark listening to our own breathing, there’s these intimations of this already perfectly holy communion that’s permeating completely and is the reality of this moment.

But here’s the struggle with this for us. In the intensity and density and complexity of life’s demands and the centrifugal force of our movement through the day, we spin out and away from the center. So in the last talk, we were talking about the powers of the soul and Eckhart. He said, *“Whatever the soul affects, she affects with her powers but not with her essence.”*⁴ See, not the ground. So there’s the power of understanding, our understanding self and all that we understand, our memory, our remembering self and all that we remember, our desiring, our loving self and all that we love, also through the senses, our seeing self and all that it sees or hearing self and all that we hear, all of this.

But the difficulty is that the powers have spun out and away from the ground. In spinning out and away from the ground, it buys into this illusion that we’re real without God. Remember in the previous talk about looking at an image of yourself in a full-length mirror, and this image of yourself is a conscious reflective image. It’s been through a lot of therapy, taking workshops, going on retreats. In time, it’s come to branch out on its own.

You try to explain to the image it won’t go well without you because it’s an image of you. The image says, “You’re trying to hold me back.” So you step halfway off the edge of the mirror. Half the image disappears, has a panic attack, goes back into therapy. Eckhart says this is like

3 Thomas Merton, “Conjectures of A Guilty Bystander” (Image, 1968), p. 155

4 Eckhart and Maurice Walshe, “Sermon One”, in *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart* (New York, NY, The Crossroads Publishing Co, 2009) p. 30

what it is with us. We're the manifested presence of God in our eternal nothingness without God. Yet, because we spin out and away from the ground, from the powers not in the luminous energy of the ground, it gives rise to a feeling that we're real and separate all by ourself.

Not only that, he says we're attached to that. Because we think it has the final say in who we are, we're afraid to let go of it, which is why we're afraid to die, which is why we're afraid that this won't turn out this way. This won't turn out that way because we're nothing but the self things happen to. We're nothing but how the circumstances we're in is going to turn out. This is our confusion, our deep confusion.

So Eckhart says then, *"If we think of the powers of the soul then illumined by faith,"* the gift of faith, he's a priest giving a sermon calmly. See, we understand illumined by faith, our understanding. We understand and realizing we're infinitely understood, and we're infinitely understood by the God who gives us the gift of our understanding. When we remember the power of memory, we remember, like God says in the scriptures, *"As a mother will never forget the child of her womb, I will never forget you forever."*

God will never, never, never, never forget us who we are. In knowing that we'll never, never be forgotten, we feel the foreverness of ourselves in God and the loving self and all that we love. We realize that God is love and out of love is giving itself away as our very life and our nothingness without God. In our very nothingness without God, God also gives us the gift of the power to love, that we might love God in return and love others and love all things. Eckhart says, *"This is the gift of our faith."*

But Eckhart says, in effect, it's difficult because of the centrifugal force of the momentum of our days and trying to experience all this through the powers estranged from the ground, which is actually permeating our powers completely through and through, but we don't know it. We don't know it. So we do believe. We do believe. We do know this is the gift of faith. And yet, it's hard. It's hard. So Eckhart is trying to encourage us, the journey of discipleship, this journey of constantly, Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief. Help my unbelief.

This is depending on God's mercy to guide us and sustain us and so on and efficacious unto holiness. As we grow in this day by day walk with this obscure certainty in our heart in the midst of the confounding, unresolved things that happen to us, we walk our walk. In walking our walk, we grow in holiness. We grow in maturity. We grow in the understanding of God's ways as the years go by and so on.

Now, as we continue on in this way, Eckhart says what happens is that our reflective consciousness, illumined by grace, becomes more and more translucent to the point where the ground starts shining through. It's like we're at the edge of ourself. Eckhart talks about living at the rim of eternity. We're at the edge of ourself. We're still in the powers. We're still in the powers. We're still in the day by day. But our heart has become so refined with love and the loss of love, with darkness and light and the ups and the downs, leaning and trusting in God. The boundaries and the ground starts shining through.

So Eckhart says in this Evans sermon, he quotes scripture, the Book of Wisdom, *“In the middle of the night when all things were in a quiet silence, there was spoken to me a hidden word. It came like a thief, by stealth.”* So I’m going along in the day by day, and then there’s this word. It comes like a thief by stealth. I didn’t see it coming, the ground. It’s the sense of the ground. Why does he call it a word when it is hidden? The nature of the word is to reveal what is hidden. It revealed itself to me and shone forth before me, declaring something to me and making God known to me. Therefore, it’s called a word. Yet, what it was remained hidden from me. This was a stealthy coming, in a whispering stillness to reveal itself. See, just because it is hidden, one must and should and always pursue it. It shone forth, and yet it was hidden. We are meant to yearn and sigh for it.”⁵ So we get this little glimmer in our heart, like it shimmers and shines of the intimations of the ground.

We can tell that it’s happening, but we know not what to make of it. But we can feel the immensity of it where it’s so sovereign and all-pervasive like this. So I know not what to make of it, but I know it is revealing itself to me. This ground is God’s ground and my ground like the oneness that is the depth dimensions of my powers and their nothingness without this ground.

Eckhart continues, *“There’s a fine saying of one of the pagan masters to another about this. He said, ‘I’m aware of something in me which shines in my understanding. I can clearly perceive that it is something, but what it may be I cannot grasp. Yet, I think if I could only seize it, I should know all truth.’ To which the other master replied, ‘Follow it boldly. For if you could seize it, you would possess the sum total of all good and have eternal life.’*

*“Saint Augustine spoke in the same sense. I’m aware of something within me that gleams and flashes before my soul. Were this perfected and fully established in me, that would surely be eternal life. It hides. It shows itself. It comes like a thief with intent to take and steal all things from the soul. But by emerging and showing itself a little, it aims to lure the soul and draw her towards herself, to rob her and deprive her of herself.”*⁶

I’d like to reflect on this. It comes like a thief to steal the soul from herself. In this sense, I think, that in being graced with the taste of the ground, this point veers, this turning, this hidden axis, this spinning out permeating all things. To be touched by this is to know that you’re experiencing not just that your life will be forever incomplete without this, but you know that you’re being drawn into that which is the very fullness of God being completely given to you in your nothingness without God.

So I think Eckhart then is addressing a very delicate place for us, all of us. I think at least for me when I hear Eckhart talk like this, I can feel the ... It isn’t just that it’s poetically beautiful, but I can tell that he’s trying to put words to something that I have already in some sense already know to be true but have forgotten. I tend to forget it. I know it’s true. In hearing of it, I’m awakened by the desire for it.

5 Eckhart and Maurice Walshe, “Sermon One”, in *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart* (New York, NY, The Crossroads Publishing Co, 2009) p. 34-35

6 Eckhart and Maurice Walshe, “Sermon One”, in *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart* (New York, NY, The Crossroads Publishing Co, 2009) p. 35

So Eckhart says of this experience, he says, *“You may have this experience of which I speak, this glimmer and shine of the ground.”* He said, *“You may have it.”* He’s speaking at the mass. *“You may be graced with it before you leave church here today. You may be graced of it as you listen to this sermon.”* I would say this then for us, the reason we’re turned to Eckhart for guidance like this is as we turn to him for guidance, we realize that maybe, just perhaps, as I share these thoughts with you, I might be graced with it as I speak with you.

As you listen, you might be graced with it too, that somehow there’s something being shared here that no one can explain. It’s this hidden ground. This point veers, this turning, this deep turning that permeates out and illuminates and is the very reality of the ground. But because the ground, because the powers are spinning out and away and estranged from it, we’re in this dilemma because this rings true to me.

But the way I am when I’m sitting in meditation isn’t the way I am when I’m sitting in rush hour. The way that I am when I’m reading Meister Eckhart isn’t the way that I am when I drop something on the floor and smashes, and it’s a big mess. And then the phone rings, and we lose our way. We lose our balance in the contingencies of things like this. How do I stabilize in this? Really, this is the seeker’s question. I think Eckhart is really talking to us graced with this dilemma.

It’s a gift to live in this dilemma. It’s a gift. But it would be just a tease if he didn’t show us the way to be healed from the dilemma. So he offers a way. This is the situation. He’s diagnosing the situation of the grace nature of the seeker’s dilemma, so near, yet so far away. I seek to close the circle. What is the path? So this vision, this way of understanding things then illumines the path along which by following this path, we are transformed by God into God unexplainably forever and ever and ever, day by day, day by day, not in the full light of glory when we pass through the veil of death into glory.

But we’re delivered from the dilemma in our passage through time like a sweet dilemma in our heart, unexplainably resolved in the midst of ongoing dilemmas. There’s a paradoxical unraveling that keeps laying bear a wholeness that permeates the unraveling itself. He’s trying to say, “How do we do this?” We’re right at the edge of spiritual direction now. This is so personal, so preeminently personal. It’s so hard even to find words to say this.

Here now we’re going to see the path of Meister Eckhart as detachment. Remember the image yesterday too about the last time we were talking? So he’s going to point out a path of detachment, and that’s what we’ll be looking at next time. We’ll be looking at this next time. What is this path? But what I want to look at with you now too, so you can see where all this is headed. He said, “The path of detachment then is the path in which we’re delivered from this dilemma, where the ground, this point veers. The center shines bright.”

He’s going to refer to it as the birth of the Word in the soul. That’s what he talks about. So this is how the opening lines of the sermon begins then with the birth. So this is the dilemma. This is the path. The birth of the Word in the soul is his poetic metaphor for what life starts to look like through the eyes of one so delivered through the path of detachment, which is kind of this mystical state. Don’t forget too, for him, he wasn’t cloistered.

He found this in the midst of the world, long journeys on foot, administrative duties,

different conflicts of all sorts. So it's available for us. There's a very practical kind of intimate thing that he offered that's always available to us. He just helps us to see it and, with God's grace, to be faithful to it so we might be transformed in this birth. Here's how Eckhart then begins on the birth, which is the fruition of this detachment we're talking about.

*"Here in time, we are celebrating the eternal birth, which God the Father bore and bears unceasingly in eternity. Because the same birth is now born in time ..."*⁷ This is an Advent sermon on the birth of Christ in Bethlehem. *"Because the same birth is now born in time in human nature, St. Augustine says, 'What does it avail me that this birth is always happening if it does not happen in me? That it should happen in me is what matters.'*⁸

So here's my thought then on this. He's celebrating the Eucharist and Advent, Christmas coming. So the birth of Christ then is in a moment of time in which Christ is born in Bethlehem. In a scripture text, when all things lay in the midst of silence, then they're descended down into me from on high from the royal throne, a secret Word. This sermon is about that Word. And so the silence then in this moment of time is the silence of the night in Bethlehem when Christ was born as the silence."

Next, he says, *"Here in time, in this moment of time, we are celebrating the eternal birth which God the Father bore and bears unceasingly in eternity."* So Meister Eckhart then turns to understanding on the nature of the Trinity, that in the Trinitarian understanding of God, that God is Father, God is mother, God is origin, is infinitely expressing as logos, the infinity of Himself as the Word. So the Gospel of John begins, "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God."

So John of the Cross takes that Trinitarian understanding of God eternally speaking Himself as the Word and refers to God the Father as a woman in labor, that through all eternity, God's giving birth to God in eternity and God giving birth to God in eternity, so now the silence is the silence of heaven. It's the eternal silence of a celestial silence. We're listening to this as Saint Augustine says, "It's very nice to hear that Christ, the Word, is born in Bethlehem." It's also nice to know the birth is happening forever in God. That's nice.

It's also nice when Eckhart says, *"In eternity, because the same birth is born in time,"* that is he says, *"in human nature."* So it's not a moment of time. It's our temporal existence of the passage of time from birth to death, that God's born in me in my passage through time. God's entwined with my temporality as I move through time and passage to death. But I can't experience it.

So Augustine says, "This is very lovely. It's nice to know God's being born in me right now in every moment. It's a lovely thought. But what good does it do to me if it doesn't happen in me? What's all this beautiful talk about if I can't walk around in it and breathe it and touch it and live by it every day so that I can know this birthing is expressing itself perfectly every time I stand up and every time I sit down, every time I look at the palms of my own hands? What is this?"

7 Eckhart and Maurice Walshe, "Sermon One", in *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart* (New York, NY, The Crossroads Publishing Co, 2009) p. 29

8 Eckhart and Maurice Walshe, "Sermon One", in *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart* (New York, NY, The Crossroads Publishing Co, 2009) p. 29

So Meister Eckhart is saying that the problem lies in possessiveness of heart. The problem lies in the fact that the powers are spun out and away from this ground. It seeks to affect what it affects to its powers by attaining to understand, to grasp, to love, to be, and all of that. And then not only that, we're attached to possessiveness of heart. Remember then every so often the ground shines. Also, in a previous reflection we talked about the powers of the soul.

We talked about the mother holding her newborn infant. In terms of the powers, the infant's powers, its powers haven't even developed yet to the powers. The infant can't sit up. Infant can't talk, can't roll over by itself, can't talk with her. It's like the essence of limit. And yet when she clasps the infant to her breast, there's something so precious about the infant. She's so smitten by it because it's the ground shining out from the infant.

Next in the meditation, it isn't just that she senses the ground shining out, but it reveals her to herself as capable of recognizing that ground. She knows not what to make of it, but she realizes it anyway. That's the thing. Another thing about her, she knows the same thing is true of her as well, but it's buried under the intensity of her powers, attaining things, exiled from the ground. So there are these flash points of oneness. And then there's the dilemma of the powers reinstating their claim on our life, removed from the ground. So how do we resolve this dilemma?

It's a very intimate question, and that's what I want to look at here. For the birth of the Word in the soul is a state of being liberated to a path of detachment where, little by little or all at once, there is the welling up of God, being born and lying awake at night, listening to our breathing or looking out the window or taking a sip of tea or drifting off to sleep at night, waking up in the morning. We can learn to live in an habitual state of this birthing, intimately realized that the divinity of our ordinariness, incarnate infinity intimately realized.

He's inviting us to follow this path that we might come to live in this birthing as an habitual underlying sensitivity and might share it with others in the ways that we're called to share it with others day by day. So let's end with a meditation. I'd like you to fold your hands and bow.

Slowly say the Lord's Prayer together. Our Father who art 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 into temptation, but deliver us from evil. Amen. Mary, Mother of Contemplatives, pray for us. Meister Eckhart, pray for us. Mechthild of Magdeburg, pray for us. Blessings.

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 podcasts@cac.org or send us a voicemail. All of this information can be found in the show notes. We'll see you again soon.