



Turning to the Mystics

Bonus: Meister Eckhart Resources

with James Finley and Kirsten Oates

Kirsten Oates: Welcome everyone to this special bonus episode to round out season seven of Turning to the Mystics where we've been turning to the German Mystic, Meister Eckhart. In this episode, Jim's going to present some additional resources for those who want to continue to study Meister Eckhart. And I know we've had a lot of requests from participants around what they could study next, so Jim, thank you so much for doing this today.

Jim Finley: Yes, I'm glad we're doing it. I hope it helps the listeners. Yes, let me, I'll just walk through this. I would say, first of all, considering the nature of the podcast, for many of you just listening to the talks on Eckhart is enough. And I mean, it's poetic and insightful and encouraging and it's nourishing and all of that. But for those of you that would be inclined to pursue it further on your own, I'd like to share some resources and also suggest how to use the resources in terms of the path. And so the resources, and there are other resources, but these are the main ones that I've used to varying degrees that have helped me.

First, I think a bridge to the podcast would be the little book by Cyprian Smith. The Spiritual Life as Taught by Meister Eckhart, The Way of Paradox, The Way of Paradox by Cyprian Smith. And it's like the podcast, it's very experiential, very simple, very direct to actually seeking to live by this experience of divine awakening. And the other source would also be similar is I did an audio set with Sounds True titled Meister Eckhart's Living Wisdom: Indestructible Joy in the Path of Letting Go. And so they're like maybe five hour, four hours of talk similar to the podcast. And so there'd be those two sources as a bridge similar to what we've done in the podcast.

The other sources are very helpful in the sense in which they give the academic background and sources of Eckhart. So for example, they'll give a sermon by Eckhart, and then in the sermon by Eckhart, they will show the background of the Augustinian neo-platonic influence, the Aristotelian optimistic Aquinas influence, the pseudo-dionyses, different sources, how Eckhart drew from all of those, and then how he put his own unique insight into that. And so these sources are very helpful, but because they're academic to some degree, we'll talk later about how to use these sources if you're so inclined, like how to be patient with it and benefit from it. So I'd like to share the ones that have most helped me in this way.

The first one is a Reiner Schurmann, A Wandering Joy, Meister Eckhart's Mystical Philosophy. I found it to be very good, and especially the middle section on the intensities of releasement, where he poetically walks through detachment and then how that leads to the birth of the word and the soul and how that leads to dehiscence or the breakthrough into the ground with excerpts from the sermons that demonstrate that process. He also, I think, does three sermons and he walks sentence by sentence through these sermons, quoting the resources, the background, where it's from and so on. I found that to be very helpful.

There's another resource that I found very helpful along the same way, and it is Bernard McGinn's book, The Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart. And we're pleased that Bernard McGinn's going to be a guest on the podcast on Mechtilde, but also he'll be weaving in Eckhart. And it is also very good, very insightful with his own insights into Eckhart's teachings and understanding the teachings. And I found that to be another source similar to Reiner Schurmann. The other sources are ones I've also enjoyed very much, but I've not studied as intensely as Reiner Schurmann and McGinn. One is Oliver Davies, Meister

Eckhart: Mystical Theologian, Robert Foreman: The Mystic as Theologian, and Richard Woods, Meister Eckhart: Master of Mystics. And I thought those are all very fine. You couldn't go wrong with any of them along these same lines like this.

Then, of course, there's the collective sermons themselves, like access to the sermons to read them. And in access to the sermons, there are several sources. One, Matthew Fox, who was a guest speaker on the podcast. His book, Breakthrough: Meister Eckhart's Creation, Spirituality, and New Translation is another way to get ahold of the actual translation. And you have his commentary, his insights into creation, spirituality. There's also the Paulist Press series on the mystics. Whenever there's a volume on that in all these mystics, I rely on them. And the one is that O.C. Walsh is the translator of the, let me find this, just a moment.

Oh yes, Bernard McGinn is the editor of the Paulist Press series. It's Meister Eckhart, Teacher and Preacher, and he gives his own introduction. It's very fine. And then there's a number of the sermons there in that translation. There's another volume also by McGinn, The Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart. There's a few sermons there, but a lot of it is on his trial and other essays that he did. So there's a few more sermons there in terms of access to the actual sermons like this. And also there's the complete mystical teachings of Meister Eckhart in one volume. And those teachings are O.C. Walsh's translation, The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart. It's very fine with a lovely introduction, but it's expensive. I think it's almost a hundred dollars. So you have to really be committed to detachment to get that. But it's lovely to have it, if you're into it.

And so anyway, that's it. So I would say those are the sources.

Kirsten Oates: Wonderful, wonderful.

Jim Finley: And now, I'd like to say a few words about using them if you're so inclined, how I've used them, how I found them helpful is two different levels. One, that you would take the text and say Reiner Schurmann, for example, on starting out with the itinerary of detachment, having a virgin mind. And you would have a notebook next to you for notes, and you would underline passage and you would read a few paragraphs. And on your outline as you read and in your notes, you'd single out one, two or three or four sentences that strike you where you think that that insight into what Eckhart means by detachment. See, to be free of all images is when you were not yet. What's that mean like this? And then also you're going to find things you don't understand and put a line and put question marks in the margin and let it be for now.

As you keep going and you go back around, there'll be less and less question marks. You have to be patient with it. Also, especially with some of the texts where they give the Greek and the Latin. Just skip that, don't worry about the Greek and the Latin because they translate it for you. Don't be disheartened by it. And so it's slow going and you kind of have to enjoy it. You kind of have to enjoy internalizing this kind of, because Eckhart was a theologian. Eckhart was taught at the University of Paris, but he was very scholarly. Held the chair that Thomas Aquinas held at the University of Paris, but it was scholarly, theological work in the service of transformation that transcends conceptual theology. But he used the discipline of theology to artistically move beyond it and reinforce it. And so if that so pleases you, light a candle will sit down, get out your notebook and go through Bernard McGinn's book or the

other.

And it might take you, as you outline that book, it might take you a year to go through that. It'd be a year well spent. And when you're done, take a break and go back and do it again. Just keep repeating it, go to another one. And this way you kind of internal ... along with the actual sermons, and in this way, little by little, Eckhart becomes your teacher. You know your way around the inner landscape of Eckhart and internalizing his teaching as your guide. And my last thought is personalizing this. How to use this helps me is, how to use it is first to start with a sitting. I say do a 15 minute sit in silence and then do the study. Like I said, read it. And in the study of reading it, put the boxes on the page.

So you would take two or three paragraphs and you would outline the paragraphs by hand, Roman numeral one, capital letter A, capital letter B, it's like this. So you get the infrastructure of the paragraph, then put another box underneath that and write, how have I or am I experiencing this, or how have I or am I understanding what he's trying to help me understand here? The third box is, what's it asking out of me? And the last box is, if I were to say it, how would I say it? Because the best way to learn something is to imagine teaching it, because you can't teach it helpfully unless you know it.

So be very happy with a lot of empty boxes, be very happy with it. But you're doing the inner work of internalizing the detailed, intuitive, awakened mind of the master, Meister Eckhart. And then after you've done that for maybe half hour or an hour, whatever time allows, then do another sitting, do another sitting. And then at the end of this sitting, ask God for the grace to internalize the intimate realization of what these words are about. And Reiner Schurmann says, for example, he's commenting on translating Meister Eckhart from the German into English. And he says, "We should never forget, in the work of translation, that Eckhart was translating the unsayable into words without betraying the unsayable". Like that, see. And so anyway, those are the sources and those are the ones that have helped me. And in terms of sharing these podcasts with you, this is how I've, over the years, I'm sharing the fruit of how I've sat with these mystics over the years and passing on to you how they might enrich your own life. Those are my thoughts.

Kirsten Oates: Wonderful. So helpful, Jim. All those books sit on your bookshelf currently.

Jim Finley: They do. Along with others. Yes, they do. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Well worn.

Jim Finley: Yes. The McGinn book and the Schurmann book, actually, the covers fell off because what I did really like with the sermons, I outlined the books by hand. I wrote out the books by hand, along with the boxes. Several times, really, to almost memorize the background. So then when I go back to the sermons again, it's very similar to doing deep work with scripture where you take the scriptures by getting into the word as a living prayerful word, but it have several commentary, the Anchor Bible, different Jerusalem Bible, different ones. And so what is the Greek meaning of this? Or what

is the Hebrew meaning in the Psalms of this? And it's almost becoming a studying scripture and then using it to enrich the prayer, using it to enrich your experience of the word of God. I think it also, when we sit this way, we're mirroring the mystic's own mind because the Mystic Eckhart, for example, we may not be anywhere near what his intellectual acumen or his ability.

We also might not be anywhere near the extent to which there was this mystical unit of state. But when we sit this way, we're echoing what he did, we're echoing what he did. And through the grace of God, there can be intimate realizations given to us by God. They go beyond academic prowess and academic thing. And I think that would please Eckhart. I love the saying of the Taoist sages. They say that when we study the mystics in this way, it's like our forehead is pressed up against the mystic's forehead and the mystic's eyebrows and our eyebrows are entangled with each other this way. And I like that imagery of the kind of entanglement of where we walk around internalizing these timeless teachings.

Kirsten Oates: Beautiful. And Jim, do you feel people are drawn to their teachers? So there might be a lot of people on the podcast who are just looking forward to Mechtild and onto the next. But there might be some people who just feel, oh, I don't want to let Eckhart go. There's something really drawing me to that work.

Jim Finley: Yeah. See, my thought is this. We stay with the podcasts because there's the momentum of the constant reverberations that each mystic in his or her own way reverberates this unit of state and how to be true to it. And then what we realized, we listened to this is certain mystics we find very interesting, that was beautiful. But certain ones we feel drawn to, it's very personal. And we say this reflection's on the cloud, like centering prayer -- Merton, whatever. And so we were doing both simultaneously, were looking across the mystics, getting the universality of the language, and then settling deeply in like being mentored at a very deep level with one of the mystics. And then sometimes we move on to another, to be mentored by another like this. So many mystics, so little time. There's all of this. And you won't live long enough to master any of it, but over time, it masters you. You're grateful for it. I think that's the nature of it, I think.

Kirsten Oates: Lovely. And just to set expectations, it took you a while to really deeply understand Meister Eckhart, Jim.

Jim Finley: It did. Matter of fact, I shared this in the memoir I think, I can't remember. Is that for some reason, one would really help for me, I was introduced to all of this by Thomas Merton living in the monastery. So I was living in silence, chanting the Psalms. I was committing myself to this way of life, and therefore, it was very conducive to these mystical teachings when I started. And Merton led me into how to read these texts and live with it. But it's not easy. In other words, it is beautiful, but it's not evident. You know what I mean? And so the very discipline, like an inter-discipline of sitting with the text and so on. So for me, for some reason, St. John of the Cross and Teresa and the Cloud, I think, and Guigo were all kind of innately resonant with me. But when I read Eckhart, it wasn't. I read it. I only had Black. They only had one translation available at the time. I thought it was beautiful, but I didn't know how to.

It took me a while to realize why, what that was.

But then after I left and continued this practice and was in my doctoral studies, then I read, oh, I think there's a book I didn't put on the list. C.F. Kelley, *Divine Knowledge in Meister Eckhart*. That was the first one I read. I should add that to the list. In *divinis on knowledge in God*. And I went through that with a friend of mine for about a year. And then when I discovered Reiner Schurmann, and then again, little by little the clarity came, but it took time. But once it clicked, once I saw where, then he kind of joined the others for me in terms of my comfort level with what he's saying.

Kirsten Oates: And your appreciation too-

Jim Finley: Exactly.

Kirsten Oates: Of his giftedness.

Jim Finley: Appreciation, exactly. And gratitude for it. I also think there's something else to be encouraging with this is sometimes I've worked with people one-on-one with the spiritual direction, they want to walk through a text paragraph by paragraph. I find that very rewarding really. And a lot of it really is, you can see the person sincerely struggling, like something's there, and they're actually going through the process of struggling to find the words to say or to take it in. And that's how we learn. That's how we learn, by getting comfortable with that, almost being grateful for that process. Until you get acclimated to it, it actually transforms your mind, I think. And like Gabriel Marcel, where he says, "A certain attitude must be brought to the portals of thought humility." And it's in that sense of humility, the clarity comes like this. And that's the nature of it, I think.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah, that's wonderful. I like the way when you offer the questions to ask that there's a question around experience, because transforming the mind is also connecting it into the way we experience these things, isn't it?

Jim Finley: That's right. It's a very big point actually to realize this is not expository writing. You're not presenting a thesis or a theory or a theorem or a conclusion. That has a place. There are books about it, academic books, but it's really an experience, but it's a certain kind of experience, see. It's a certain kind of intimate taste of the nearness of the infinite, unexplainably one with you forever, and your nothingness without the infinite. It's experiencing that. And then the mystics try to help you understand what's happening to you, how to cooperate with that, how to find your way through the obstacles of letting it transform you into itself of learning. And that's really the pedagogy of the mystics. They're all about that. Because it becomes a living transformation, it turns you into itself. It becomes the habitual state of your ordinary mind. And that's who these mystics were. They just breathed it.

Kirsten Oates: That's a good reminder. And also the reminder to have patience for ourselves. That even though we might be drawn to it, it's still challenging and it still takes patience and humility and time.

Jim Finley: Another thought too on this, let's say you're really drawn to this, and let's say you are starting to read Reiner Schurmann and you're really touched by the beauty of it and perplexed by the

subtlety of it. And let's say you faithfully sit this way, you take it to your sitting, you breathe it, you walk with it. And let's say you're on your deathbed, still trying to get past paragraph four, and you can't see anymore. Someone's reading it to you. Great job. Because that it's about it, it's really being sensitive to that perspective, I think. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. Beautiful. That brought a tear to my eye. I'm so grateful to have you, Jim, to guide us into those things and a community of people around you and us to live life out this way.

Jim Finley: Yes, I hope I model on how to be deeply confident about being deeply perplexed. You know what I mean?

Kirsten Oates: I think I model that way better. Maybe I model being deeply perplexed and mildly confident.

Jim Finley: I said this before with Thomas Merton, where he says, "There's certain things in life we have to accept when we go crazy inside. And there're the very things we can't explain to anybody, including ourself." So it's moving from explaining to surrendering or explaining to yielding or explaining to move into a deeper way of understanding what it means to understand. And that's really, I think, the pedagogy of this. And everyone, we're at the edge of spiritual direction now because this is very personal, how each of us follows this path in so far as we're inclined to do so.

Kirsten Oates: Thank you, Jim, and thank you so much for sharing those resources and giving guidance, and what an appropriate way to offer people further resources into Eckhart. And someone who's confident and not perplexed about helping our listeners is Corey, and he will put the list of the resources that you just went through into the show notes so that people can be very clear on the books you recommended. So thanks again, Jim, and thank you, Corey.

Jim Finley: Yes.

Kirsten Oates: Before we leave, I just wanted to say how excited we are to be joining our listeners again in a few weeks, Jim, to start our season eight Mystic Mechtilde of Magdeburg.

Jim Finley: Yes. And I love her so much. She's so good. And as you'll see, too, very poetic and also very similar to Julianne of Norwich, in that, unlike Eckhart, these other mystics that share the insight, then they want to help us find our way along the path. She doesn't help us find her way along the path. She just shares out of the radical intimacy of her own heart. But then when we're drawn by the beauty of what she says, she's mentoring us. There's a very fact we're touched by it. She is communicating it. So it's a wonderful interface between Eckhart and Mechtilde and Julianne. So I look forward to those sessions with the people.

Kirsten Oates: For those people who loved Eckhart and feel drawn to Eckhart, this is a student of Eckhart's. And so we can see how Eckhart's work can translate into just a different chrism and a different way of helping people along the path.

Jim Finley: That's right. We'll see that. The Dominicans, Meister Eckhart is a Dominicans, although the beginnings, this spiritual movement, these women were in that, Mechtilde was part of, the Dominicans supported them. And so it is an interesting interface between these two modes of transformation, the mode of the mind transforming mind, like in Eckhart, through

detachment. And then the mode of a love transforming love, the transcending love, and how those two touch each other. So it's an insightful interface between the two.

Kirsten Oates: Yes, what a fabulous year for Turning to the Mystics. So thank you again, Jim, and thank you Corey for keeping us all on track. This has been great. Thank you.