



# Meister Eckhart

Listener Questions: Part 3  
with James Finley and Kirsten Oates

**Turning  
to the  
Mystics**

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 the final episode of season seven of Turning to the Mystics where we've been turning to the German Mystic, Meister Eckhart. This session is part three of our question and response sessions where we've had a wonderful set of listener questions come in and we've been addressing them over the past few episodes. Welcome, Jim, to this final session.

Jim Finley: Yes, welcome. Good. Yeah, been a great season.

Kirsten Oates: You had some opening thoughts about the questions we've been getting.

Jim Finley: Yes. I wanted to make a clarification about a statement that I made last time. I'd like to clarify because it could be misunderstood. I made the observation that there's all these questions, but just to know that if we could get an answer to all our possible questions, it doesn't necessarily mean we have found our way to what Eckhart's inviting us to discover, and that's true. I said, "But we have to do it." I did a lot of it. How do I clarify this and how do I clari... Because it's in the consistency of clarifications that we get a broader base. That's really true. What I like to add is there's something more here, I think, in the very quality of these questions. It isn't that you're asking for information like an answer to a question, but rather in the asking of the question and in listening to the response, you're interiorly quicken with the joy of this or the mystery of this or the nearness of this.

Eckhart would say with the birthing of the word, like being birthed out of this engagement in the question. I think that's important to know what questions have that. How do I love you? Let me count the ways. It's like that. Anyway, I wanted to share that.

Kirsten Oates: Do you feel, Jim, it's just such a gift to read the questions. There's that resonance as you read the questions that just touch that place inside of you.

Jim Finley: Yeah, because the sincerity of the questions embodies the presence of the person asking it. They're not asking in some cavalier way or in a different way. It's so sincere and personal. It gives substance, brings us right to the heart of what Eckhart would have us present too.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. Wonderful. Okay, well let's turn to our first question. These questions, the theme is practice and embodiment. The first question is from Sharon. "I find Eckhart's language to be particularly meaningful to me at this time. Jim has been mentioning the idea of our nothingness without God since the beginning, and now I finally seem to catch a glimpse of what that means. I'm able to find meaning in the sense of seeing the divinity of all things, of experiencing life that way, unhindered as a goal. But when Jim talks about God's love of sensing this divine presence as love, something stops for me. For a moment I was able in a sitting session to imagine that sense of falling into a bamboos love and it is inviting and seductive even, but for some reason I can't embrace it as part of my sense of the divine. The, oh yes, the mystery yes, the taking on the suffering of humanity in Christ. Perhaps that's where the love comes in."

Jim Finley: I think this is what the path is like really, is that we listen to Eckhart's teachings and then there are moments we're graced with taste of the fullness of which he speaks like this. But then we discover that we're not yet completely ready or willing to completely surrender to it. Either we don't know how to or even what that would mean and so on. That's my sense of it, because you see, in the complete surrender to this, there's no control. There's no control. But to know that when there's no control on our part, we're being handed over to God in whose presence we're infinitely safe and fulfilled, but because we're just human being and not try to push our way through, which should be a form of attachment, like an attachment for unit of realization.

We sit at the cusp of the intention of more complete surrender to what we fleetingly tasted and as we just stay there, it ripens and transforms over time. It's the constancy of the sincerity of a complete self donating act in response to God's complete self donating act to us and giving a self away as our very life, as nothingness without God. The constancy of that intention is an ongoing transformative process as we go through the months and years of our life.

Kirsten Oates: Do you think too, Jim, depending on our experience of human love, the concept of love can be quite tainted and difficult to trust?

Jim Finley: That's really true. I do a lot of trauma works, with the childhood trauma. And if in the past we were abandoned or betrayed by the very people we depended on to keep us safe, something in us stores that up and it's vigilant not to risk it again and we can then project that risk sensitivity toward God. That's why I keep leaning into it, could heal that by accepting, knowing that God accepts the limitation of our inability to accept it. God accepts us in the inability to completely accept it in that, and God wouldn't want us to go beyond it because we could get re-traumatized. I think it's a very gentle intimate acceptance of oneself in the light of God's infinite acceptance of us as we are and as we're supposed to be.

Kirsten Oates: Next, there's a reflection from Peggy who says, "My husband recently died. In my grief, I find myself witnessing the limits of what the powers are able to grasp in the memory of him and the thoughts and feelings I have about the loss of him, all of which are real in a certain way. But I am aware that in my reflection of him through my powers, I am unable to grasp the essence of who he is now, the mysterious presence of his being which does not belong to me or my creation. I get glimpses of him in moments of being accessed by the ground in the still point, yet to detach from these images is painful. For until now it's been the way for me to experience him. Is this the dance of grief? Can you please give guidance about how Eckhart is trying to help me in this circumstance of my life?"

Jim Finley: Yes, since this is so subtle, all of this, and this the healing path, the memoir and invitation, my journal, exploration that I make of my own path, that heart a lot of those reflections. Here's one way that I understand it. I applied to my own sense of my wife who had passed away and so on and what you're saying. See, I think that when my wife was with me on the earthly plane, we're both alive here together. There was a lot in our patterns of togetherness, there was a deepening mutual understanding of each other through all of that. Even so, when we were together that way, there was always something in her that I didn't understand because it belonged completely to God and there was something in me she didn't understand [inaudible 00:08:09] to God. What we did understand about each other was radiating out

from that hidden place.

Even when we were together physically, there was a way we were beyond being together physically. We were united in the Godhead, in the ground like this and then we express it through our love. Then when she died, one, there's a mystery of death itself where the person just disappears like this and then you get a sense that they're still with us because we're all eternal. The body dies, but through time we're to come upon the timeless nature of God's infinite love, this eternal, and we get little flashes, that doesn't mean we understand the beloved who's crossed over, but we never did understand. But the point is this, we don't understand ourselves either, but God infinitely understands both of us and our inability to understand, like Thomas Merton is saying, "In the spiritual realm, to understand is to know that we're infinitely understood."

We live with that which is a deeper kind of understanding. It's very paradoxical because it's a deeper way of understanding born of acknowledging the limits of our understanding.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah.

Jim Finley: It's like humility, it gives heart knowledge. Pascal, "The heart has reasons of which the mind knows nothing." It's unfigureoutable, but in our heart we can live with the truth of it. Detachment can bring us to that. It can enrich this unexplainable, mysterious unit of sense of life and death with the beloved.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah, that kind of acceptance, it feels as Peggy's pointing to very different to what it might feel like to know someone in the powers using Eckhart's language. It's a big transition.

Jim Finley: Yes, because we know in reflective consciousness we would know it all. But what we know in the powers is knowing that which transcends the powers because if it was completely within the powers, the beloved would be reducible to our understanding of or our conclusions about our... The beloved isn't reducible to any of that. It's in the powers we can sense the presence of the beloved that transcends the powers, which is a kind of a prayer state of consciousness, a sense of reverential awe.

Kirsten Oates: Oh, I think that's helpful. Thank you for that question, Peggy. I know grief is something every one of us will face it at some point in our life. The next question is from Helene. "I have found Eckhart's teaching on the ground of being transforming as a truth, an image, and as a practice. I've been using the word ground or ground of being as a mantra throughout my day and have been using the word ground with my exhales in breath practice, as I imagine the breath bringing me to this ground. I was wondering if you had other practical suggestions for working with this teaching in daily life. I so want to strengthen my understanding of this teaching and not forget." I thought it was nice, Jim, to just share this practice that Helene had come upon like an archetypal practice arising in her...

Jim Finley: Yes.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. Beautiful.

Jim Finley: It is beautiful. I thought it would be this. First of all, it's a gift to have a practice like that. You practice your practice and does that. But then what we could also do is extend the word ground like a mantra throughout everything that we do. For example, if I'm sitting down and I stand up and stay ground, I know that God's the infinite ground of the gift of standing. And when I sit, I say ground because as the infinite ground welling up and giving itself away as the gift of sitting, as the gift of standing. As I slip off to sleep each night, I could quietly say to myself ground, because God's the infinite ground of the mystery of passing beyond time and space into the dream self of the inner self.

And when I wake up, there's a hymn God woke me up this morning. I woke up this morning, I say ground because unless God was welling up and giving itself away and pouring itself out as a gift to waking up, I wouldn't wake up. A lot of people went to bed last night, didn't wake up this morning. They had big plans today too. They dying in their sleep was their gift saying ground. It could be continued throughout the whole day, washing dishes, walking around. Sherman says, "Eckhart's trying to help us understand what happens to a person when they discover the same." Everything is the ground, is abyss like ground welling up and giving itself as the concreteness of each passing moment and thus he's inviting us to habituate the ground nature of the details of each moment.

Kirsten Oates: Did you just come up with that? What a great practice.

Jim Finley: I just thought of it just now. I think we do it unconsciously. Sometimes it helps to formalize it as a word, and then as it gets deeper, the word disappears, like you don't need the word anymore. When you get reactive and so on, you can use the word to get reinstated again. Even in the upsetting thing that threw me the infinite ground of God is welling up and giving itself to me is the deathless beauty of myself in the midst of this unresolved thing, and this too shall pass. When I was going through graduate school, there was a student, a person in this school, in a scripture there's this phrase, "And it came to pass." And the person says, "And it came, why to pass?"

It came to pass, but why? To pass, so it's in its passing. It lays bare that which never passes like the endless falling away of everything laying bare, that which never falls away. That's another way of putting this too about the ground.

Kirsten Oates: Well, I'm inspired by that practice you just shared. I'm going to start that one myself.

Jim Finley: Okay, please.

Kirsten Oates: Next question is from Lee, "What if on the mystical path, intensive bodily experiences of warmth and fire in the heart area and in the whole body arise? What if with a growing love inside, sadness without reason arises, together with this love and a feeling or experience of just beingness? I think of St. John of the Cross and Teresa of Ávila for example. In other traditions there is the concept of kundalini. Are there any bodily experiences described by Meister Eckhart? If not, why would that be?"

Jim Finley: Well, first of all, I think it's true. I want to say, first of all, that if we sit quietly with all our heart and just keep leaning into it faithfully, there are these deep transitions happening in our state of consciousness giving rise to perceptions of the body, perceptions of time, of fire, of warmth, of light. And the Buddhist say there are 10,000 worlds and I've traveled through them all, as we go down through all these layers, they're there all the time, but we live in a very narrow bandwidth of awareness. But in deep meditative sitting, it just extends out and we ride the waves of that and integrate that and so on. My sense is that Eckhart doesn't talk about the bodily expressions of that, but rather directly. Rather he's always talking about the mind. He's always talking about the mind, that by the mind... Notice in the itinerary of detachment that the birth of the word is a paradoxical knowledge of passing beyond all concepts.

It's not intellectualizing anything. It's not an idea, it's just the opposite to be bare of all images of when I was not yet. I think what happens then and what goes with it is the distinction between feeling and mind. What it brings with it is the wholeness of our being, our memory, our feelings, all of it. The boundaryless manifestations of what's hidden from us by the boundaries we impose upon it by ideological thinking and possessiveness of heart. But as it all opens up, it's all inclusive. What Eckhart says too, not only would we say, does it include then the emotions, but it includes the world that I'm not other than the world, I'm not other than time, I'm not other than the darkness of the night, I'm not other than the unit of mystery and God's the infinity of that mystery. His is a language of the mind closer to Buddhism in that way too very much have it as distinct but here it was much more in the love language, of Teresa and John of the Cross, the nuptial mystics.

But wherever one is dominant, the other is always there. When we're in the loveless language of the mystics, it's the language born of love and it's in feeling, transcending feelings, but we dare not get attached to the feelings. It hinders us. It's a flow into the feeling transcending feelings. Likewise with Eckhart, it's the mind transcending thought and those two rows intersect each other, and how they intersect the primacy is a matter of our own predisposition and our own grace. For some of us it is more of a mind language. It's more of a love language, just knowing that when one is there, the other's always present and they're always together.

Kirsten Oates: Another question, this one's from Rita. "What has also been comforting has been knowing that Meister Eckhart lived in the world and still managed to be a contemplative mystic. The idea of being open to the presence of God in my life throughout the day is very appealing, but it is so difficult to do this. So often I get distracted by my doing and fail to be fully aware of God's presence. The thread not only gets broken, it flies away in the wind. In one of the sessions, Jim spoke about spontaneous moments of awareness, which to me are just a gift which have nothing to do with me, but rather with God's grace. I wondered if you could offer any guidance in how to actually build moments of awareness into one's daily life, especially when it gets busy. I suppose practicing mindfulness is another way of saying the same thing. I always start with the best intentions, but somehow they dissipate during the day and maybe that's okay, but it would be nice to have some hooks to remind myself what I'm about."

Jim Finley: Let's say first of all, you can see the benefits of fidelity to a daily practice, like a rendezvous because in the practice we're sitting in optimal conditions for this state and in the optimal

conditions we look at our watch, we see we have to go to work. At some level it's not as optimal because going through traffic to get to work, it can be difficult. Some helpful things that have helped me. One is as for the grace, not to break the thread as we go through the day, then through the day there's all kinds of little moments to pause. For example, you begin in the middle of something and just sit there for a moment and like three breaths, remind yourself, whereas you're sitting there, put your hand on your stomach or over your heart or write down a saying of Meister Eckhart, one of the mystics.

Write it out by hand, fold it up and keep it in your pocket and read it. Or when you're going to your next appointment down a hallway, walk a little slower than you need to. There's always to build in with the finger of one hand, touch the palm of the other hand and let the point of contact be the contact with God. Another dimension of this is to know... Say with a simple task like peeling potatoes. It isn't as if peeling potatoes is exostectomy from God. I have to be thinking about God so I don't get caught up at thinking about the potato that I'm peeling. Rather how am I to discover God's the infinity of the potato that I'm peeling. Peeling potatoes has a value that cannot be calculated because it's a gift of life. Likewise, I can be at a meeting around people and lots going on like this, but I could ask myself, there's a value here to this.

We're here to perform a service for society or to provide a product for society. There's something here that we need to believe in. We need to know that each of us matters to each other and not get caught up in reactivity like this, but how can I take a more spacious stance of appreciating the innate holiness of the inner interactions of a meeting or processing a task that's necessary to help people or to move things forward. In this way then the task of the day started merging into the optimal state. When Eckhart was caught up in the politics of being accused of heresy and had to make these long trips on foot through Germany, because he had to visit the different houses of superior.

He was caught up in the world, but I think he was caught up in the world that he realized that attachment was actually that the world is God's body and God's the infinity of the configurations of my life like a mandala, so I can see the providential unfoldings of the concreteness, something as simple as watering the houseplants or doing... The Buddhists say don't grow a second head. If there's your ordinary head, then you're enlightened head. You're to have enlightened ordinary head. I think that's how Jesus lived in the world. He walked the streets of this world with utter clarity present to people. It's an ongoing task. It's an ongoing task, but God gives us the grace even to desire. It is already the grace of it and it grows and deepens over time, I think.

Kirsten Oates: And in a certain way noticing that you've lost that sense of presence is a gift because it helps you regain it.

Jim Finley: It does. In another insight of that because we lose it a lot is I realized, yes, I lost it again, but although I lost it again, God never loses God's infinite wonders of me and losing it, so that even in losing it, I'm being sustained unexplainably. Then you can have a certain underlying awareness sustained in the losing, and I think that's this integrative process instead of marking either/or one has some absolute power, it gets in the way of the other. And here there's a kind of a unifying divine unfolding of ever greater integrative oneness with everything.



Kirsten Oates: I got an idea from a great teacher that I am going to try when I notice I've been distracted and lost presence, I'm going to say the word ground.

Jim Finley: That's right. Very good. That's very good teaching. See, because when you think about it for a... See, that's what I mean. I like it where Thomas Merton says, there's that in us that is not subject to the brutalities of our own will because it's that in us it belongs completely to God. In a way when we stop and think, "Oh, I broke it again." It's still the ego thinking that it has to stay in a certain place and it's really the ego achieving, but as trying to realize it's not capable of achieving it or losing it and it's trying to get into that richer place, so the ground is all pervasively everywhere and the immediacy in what to try to then live out of it and let the light of the ground shine onto the situation that we're in and share it with others.

Kirsten Oates: Okay, next question, and I didn't get a name with this one, but it ends with peace be with us all. The question is, "How does someone follow your instructions when they're alone in seeking and trying to do it through a podcast? Especially when you start practicing, it's often not the comforting feelings that arise, it's the scary feelings with anxiety, concentrating on breathing, bringing up fearful thoughts. How do I get through that when that's mostly what I feel from the silence of God, especially somebody starting out without your skills and your sense of community and all your years of practice." The question also says, "I'm feeling very lost as to how to pray, how to be with God, how to find a home base that doesn't feel scary and alone."

Jim Finley: I would say first that practices of detachment, practices of openness, like awareness of the breadth, whatever it is, that what we're always doing is watching over ourself. We're always honoring the gift of our life. Anyone who has a history of unprocessed trauma, anyone who has the experience of being flooded by painful emotions, it's hard to find your way out. This can be with some people, be extremely helpful. The starting place is to find a place that's meaningful for you to start, to put the scary feelings into a context. One would necessarily start this way. One, for example, could listen to a podcast like a phrase and turn the recording off and sit with the beauty of those words or write them out longhand and then sit with a candle burning like a prayer, write a reflection of the beauty and truth of that thought because then it's the thought concretizing you in the holy or in the good.

Then grounded in the good, it can be a place from which you can turn to the undealt with scary things inside, and choose one that's the safest at first, like a sadness. What would it mean to bring God's presence into that sadness, to internalize it, to accept it, to walk with it, to grieve it, and to know that there's something in you infinitely bigger than the sadness that you're grounded in it. And then you go back to reading another text and you get grounded again in the text, *Lectio Divina*. You get grounded in the text, you reflect upon it and that way you're being honest before God, which is holiness this way. And as you keep going, what tends to happen is that this wordless state tend to happen more and more by itself. Instead of a painful memory rising up in the wordless state, a sense of the quality of amazement or gratitude rises up mingled with the sadness.

It's a spiritual direction question. It's a very personal thing, but I always say nothing happens without safety. You always back up first before you can find your sure footing, because that's where God's waiting for you there. If you did nothing else, but *Lectio Divina* your whole life and with all your heart, that's the path of holiness. That is the path. And then out of that



path, little by little touch the hurting places, until little by little you can move toward. It'll often happens spontaneously little by little. There's a kind of a quietness. How I put it on silent meditation retreats is in the unguarded silence of sitting meditation, suffering arises.

The idea would be another approach is from when does it arise? You would write it down sitting aside if it could not get in the way and later go back and process that. If I dealt with that or not or how could I deal with it, how God could help me to deal with it. It becomes more and more inclusive, including the internalized abandonments and hurts, which is salvific. It's a saving process. Turning to the mystics will continue in a moment.

Kirsten Oates: Jim, I do find just the practice of sharing your reflections on the mystics, just that practice and even just writing down what stands out for you and not even reflecting on it. There's something that begins to shift inside. It's very much like prayer in a way, finding where God speaks to you through the podcast.

Jim Finley: I was in the monastery and Thomas Burton would be teaching and, say, he would give a half hour talk. There was something about the half hour that had continuity to it because there was a certain bandwidth of sensitivity or God. It's almost like a 30-minute meditation, not reducible to any specific point, but there's a certain flow of his words. Dan Walsh too with metaphysics. I also find that when we open up the seven-story mountain or the mystics, and instead of specific points, just read it, almost like listening to music. It's a kind of a sustained state similar to the monk's chanting the Psalms, verse by verse by verse by verse. We learned to get in that state. The presence is riven through all the words. Yeah, that's a good point. That's good.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah, I would encourage no one to push themselves. If they're just enjoying listening to the podcast and not feeling they have to push themselves into the silence if they're not ready.

Jim Finley: Thomas Vernon had this image. He says, "Imagine there's a big door. On the other side of the door is divine union and you can't push the door open. And so you run back and with all your might you run up and smash up against it to break through. About the fourth or fifth time you try that, just as you're jumping up to smash into the door, God opens the door from the other side and you fall on the floor before God." He says sometimes it's like that. You can't get the door open, then all of a sudden right in the middle, God opens it from the other side and there you are.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah, beautiful. In a way that's how it always happens.

Jim Finley: Sometimes it happens that way.

Kirsten Oates: Our next question comes from Anne-Marie and she asks, "Is it possible to discuss journaling in a little bit more detail, like tips may be on how to go about it to really get to an understanding of oneself?" Please.

Jim Finley: Years ago, it's not popular anymore, but Ira Progoff had a whole spirituality of journaling and a method of journaling as a way to pray and it helped a lot of people. I'm echoing that, that this helped me to journaling.

Kirsten Oates: I know Richard Rohr was very much impacted by that method.

Jim Finley: Yeah, it's very good. It would go like this, your journal and let's say when you're journaling, write out something that happened that day or something you're going through. Then the next level is in the journaling, after you wrote out what you're going through, you would then write out, maybe go in layers. What is this thing that I'm going to feel like? Is it joyful or painful? Am I scared? Where am I at with it? Certainly, what do I think this thing that I'm going to is inviting me to discover about myself and my life? What does it inviting me to open myself up to and accept that I've not accepted? What is it inviting me to grow stronger in setting effective boundaries between myself and a person or a group that isn't treating me the way I need and deserve to be treated? What does it reveal to me, by the way, my own self-talk. I'm not safe with myself. I catch myself in the act of being punitive or shaming toward the very part of myself that needs to be loved the most. Where am I at in having this whole thing over to God?

Because God understands this infinitely more than I do and asking God to help me to shed light on the mystery of myself in God's presence. And how could I let that light shine in and what would that look like? And if I did let the light shine in, how would that affect the way I'm experiencing this or understanding it or approaching this like a learning curve. It'd be questions like that. And if you write out the questions that are helpful to you and keep them off to the side of the page, every journal entry you would fill in each of those blocks. The journaling could be a form of deepening experiential self-knowledge in God's presence. Know thy self. And when you think about it too, a lot of psychotherapy is there was someone who helps us do that. They really ask us a very intimate question.

We are sharing something and the person asked, help me to understand why... The very question, you have to stop and listen to yourself in their presence to say it. And as you listen to yourself, you're more present to yourself in their presence and they keep parenting you that way in experiential self-knowledge, until little by little, then the therapist says the way we're together here like this, you don't need me to do this. You can do this at home. When you're alone, you can be more present to yourself, like this. One thing that always strikes me a lot, it's strange how willing we are to stay strangely vague and distant from ourself. Turn the TV up a little louder for someone we barely know. I think the reason is that in order to know ourself, it means looking at things that we feel uncomfortable in looking at.

But if we don't look at them and walk through them and find a safe way to walk through them, and like Rollo May says, if the neurosis of Freud's age was repressed sexuality, it's hardly the neurosis of our age. He says, I think the neurosis of our age is anxiety as the fear of accepting and realizing all that we're called to be, because if we accept it, we might have to stand up and be it. We're both afraid of the gift and what it might ask of us and we're afraid and then we keep in this narrow bandwidth of discontent because something's missing, which is ourself. You can see Eckhart's strategy of detachment could be very helpful that way, to be detached from the need to distance and detach from the need to force our way through. There's no need to force anything.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah, and it's interesting that idea of anxiety being so prevalent and I just take comfort in a lot of what you shared, Jim, about how it's not up to us. Our ego can't do it. In a way, even doing the reflection questions, we're looking to drop into prayerfully, into God's presence to help us even do the reflection.

Jim Finley: That's exactly right. See, because there are things we can do and should, and we're responsible for self-efficacy, we can do things, but then when it gets to these very deep, intimate things, we've come up against the limits of what we're able to do, but it's precisely at that limit, we can hand it over to God who achieves in us what we're incapable of doing, and that becomes the grace and counterpoint, which is itself is another aspect of detachment. Trying to run the store all by yourself.

Kirsten Oates: Well, thanks for sharing those journaling questions. That's really helpful. Very practical. Jim, this next question is from Carolyn and she describes herself, "I'm a counselor psychotherapist in the UK and work with adults who've been sexually abused in childhood. I believe I take God in me to every session and love my clients where they're at. Yet the church teaches they'll go to hell if they don't accept Christ as Lord and Savior. I struggle with this polarized view. The people I work with are unbelievable, beautiful human beings and I'm humbled in their presence. They truly overcome horrific things and they're still standing. My role is to journey with them as they explore and heal and create the next chapter in their life. My Christian friends are very much either accept Jesus Christ or you'll be in hell." That's part of her experience, and then she did ask a question, she's curious about asking the mystics to pray for us. How does that work. In Deuteronomy, we're instructed to not contact the dead.

Jim Finley: First of all about the church, if you don't believe in Christ you should go to hell. It's my advice, that's not what the church teaches. Find another church.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah.

Jim Finley: There's a fundamentalistic fire and brimstone version and it's extremely unhealthy and contrary to the spirit of Jesus, to this love and this mercy. Go somewhere else. It's really pathological and traumatizing, especially someone in therapy to help them find a more nurturing place where they get the spirit of the gospel, which is the spirit of mercy and of love, and so-and-so. Yeah, exactly. I would say that,

Kirsten Oates: Yeah, thank goodness you found this podcast. I'm so grateful for that.

Jim Finley: That's why a lot of people like Richard Rohr, it's like a breath of fresh air here because it's freedom from all of that. It's a breath of fresh air because when you listen to it rings so true to what Jesus is and what we're called to and...

Kirsten Oates: Especially that piece where you say Jesus was all about mercy and love and accepting everyone.

Jim Finley: Exactly. They're asking the mystics to pray for us. How does this work? Deuteronomy about the dead. I think in the Catholic tradition and the Christian tradition, there's this whole tradition of the communion of saints. Then communion of saints is not just that God's one with us and our oneness with each other here on earth, which God is. But when we die and pastor the veil of death into God, it's this idea in God we live and have our being. We're living our life in the vast interiority of God. The dead don't go anywhere. See, they cross over into a boundaryless union with the boundaryless love of God and in God, they're still aware of us. They're still aware of us. One Catholic theologian put it is the Catholic tradition is a tradition of mediations of unmediated presence.

The presence of God is unmediated. You don't need to have it mediated through anybody. It's direct for all of us, but it's mediations of a unmediated presence that is through the mediation of the saints. To pray for the saints, ora pro nobis, the litany of the saints. It's the knowing that the saints care about us. You see this in Buddhism too on the ancestors, that the ancestors, Indigenous peoples also are big on this, the presence of the ancestors are with us. That's why I put at the end of the sitting, Meister Eckhart make that pray for us. They're praying for us and they're with us in the presence of God. In deep meditative states that line between birth and death becomes more and more transparent, get's more and more one. It's very consoling.

Kirsten Oates: It's so consoling.

Jim Finley: It's very consoling, I think.

Kirsten Oates: How amazing to think that as we're learning and studying and longing to understand Eckhart's praying for us or with us or encouraging us. Yeah.

Jim Finley: It's a very consoling thought. That's why I also say poetically, we can't see the dead for the same reason we can't see God. But in deep meditative states of detachment, you can see the dead. By the dead, meaning you can realize there are unexplainable oneness with us in God. Also, I think, Eckhart would say to all these mystics, is it possible that death to everything less than God comes deeper and deeper into the ground? That in a certain state when the moment of our physical death occurs, nothing happens, because we've already crossed... I mean, something does happen, but it means that something will happen because we've already died entirely to anything less than the infinite presence of God being poured out as a reality of everything. We can be so at peace with it to come to that state.

Kirsten Oates: Well, Jim, while we're on the topic of Jesus, there's some questions about theology and evil that came in. One of the questions was where does Jesus fit into all of this? It seems that in Eckhart's scheme of things, Jesus is almost unnecessary. That's a question from Mark.

Jim Finley: Yeah, it's observant. It's true in this way. Eckhart rarely mentions the historical Jesus and salvation, the cross and so on. In that sense, it's hard to see that Christ Jesus plays a relevant role, because there's so much centered in God consciousness and so on. But in another sense, it's so christocentric. In this sense this runs through all of his teachings in between, that in the intradivine life of God, this poetic language, God that's origin, God is Father, says, is eternally expressing himself as the word Eckhart says, from all eternity, God the Father, like a woman in labor, is giving birth to God as the word and God eternally giving birth to God as the word contemplates in Christ, us, and God then in Christ, just as God the Father gives the infinity of God away as the word. God, the Father gives the infinity of God away as the ground of our own mind to the same degree that he does in Christ the Word.

Eckhart says no differently, because glossenheit, the generosity of the infinite is infinite. In that sense, it's profoundly christocentric. Then he says, when this birth happens in us than we and God are united, then we give birth to God back into God's fatherly heart. We then have the power to reciprocate the birth by giving birth and God returns to herself, returns to herself like this. It's very saturated with Christ in that sense. It doesn't mean that he saw the beauty of Jesus in his traditional forms. He appreciated that. He was a priest. He was

celebrated Basque sermons in the Eucharist and the Holy week and all of that. He saw it in this way that he sees it.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. That in a way, Jesus's ground is our ground.

Jim Finley: Exactly.

Kirsten Oates: Here is God's ground.

Jim Finley: And no differently. See, that's a radical statement.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah.

Jim Finley: That's the infinite... Because if God held anything back to stay God, but God gives all the God... Then Eckhart goes further and says, "God must do it." God is the necessity of giving the infinity of God away. It's the ground of our own mind that we are the generosity of God and Christ is that...

Kirsten Oates: Okay, Jim, moving on to a question about evil. If God is our very life and ground, if he should stop loving us, we and all there is would simply disappear. This is a wonderful, beautiful reality by which we all live. Therefore, my question is, when there is so much evil and evil deeds being done, some more outrageously evil than others, why does God not withdraw his presence from those people?

Jim Finley: In South Africa apartheid, Bishop Desmond Tutu, he said, "We should always be against the evil act, but never against the one who performs the evil act." Because who we are before God is not reducible to the evil acts in which we betray who we are before God. It would be this, we could put it poetically to dramatically make the point that God loves the devil as much as God loves the Virgin Mary, because the devil is an angel. The devil is a person created by God in the image and likeness of God who tried to be like God without God is a fallen angel. And so Dan Walsh used to say at the monastery, if one person's in hell, then God's in hell. My child is burning. My child is burning. No matter how evil the evil is, sometimes it's a horrific evil.

Think of Hitler, for example, is a prime example. But Hitler's God's child. Hitler's God's child and is invincible God's child. We're powerless to bring ourself into existence. We're powerless to keep ourself in existence as evidenced by death. And we're powerless to be anything other than infinitely loved by God in a wayward ways. We can't threaten it. We can't diminish it. But we can tragically separate ourself from it and act that out in different ways that has destructive... That's all true. And it needs to be dealt with is boundaries and justice and so on. But at the heart of it all really is holding onto this core indestructible vow. Then the other way I put it is in the gospels when Jesus is dying on the cross and one thief says, "Remember me when you come into your kingdom." And Jesus said, "This day you'll be with me in paradise."

Jesus didn't say, "Well, all depends. We got to run down the list to see how you're doing." There's no list. Thomas Burton once said, "We're all walking around with a little list in our heart." Once I stopped doing this and this and this, God will really... But to realize for God, there's no list. We're the one carrying, because we can't bear to be unconditionally loved. See,

there's no control in it. God never will. That's the promise. That's the covenant. God will never withdraw through all of eternity. God's eternal oneness with us as manifestations of God's presence in our nothingness without God.

Kirsten Oates: That's part of the challenge of the mystery, isn't it? That mystery is witnessing evil in the world and just having to come to terms with that.

Jim Finley: Yeah, to confront the evil for justice, to confront it to set boundaries, to do what we can. Likewise, I used listen to talks on prisons and really the essence of a punishment, the root word is to reform. The purpose of the prison is really to reform the person who did the deed, but we tend to see it as punishment. See, we tend to see it as punishment and people come out of the prison worse than when they went in because there's no commitment to the prisoner as a human being. They still have to pay the price, be separated from society like this. It's a very spiritual thing about our attitudes toward the law and towards people and understand the relationships between the legal system and racial prejudice and the relationship to that to poverty and understanding how all this works and be present to it. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah, not to turn away from it.

Jim Finley: Yeah, but look at Eckhart. Eckhart was very aware of the inquisition and the burning of heretics and the antisemitic throughout the world. He was so aware of it. He was very aware of the brokenness of the church in a broken world. But he bore witness as a follower of Christ in the church bearing witness to this love. The more liberated we are from all of this, the more authentically we can be present to it, like he was present to it without rank or...

Kirsten Oates: Okay, Jen, this will be our last question and then you're going to outline some resources that might be helpful for people who want to pursue Eckhart. This is a question from Barbara who is clearly interested in pursuing Eckhart and has a deeper level question. Her question is in session two, Jim refers to a quote from the Book of Wisdom that Eckhart uses in a sermon, "In the middle of the night where all things were in quiet silence, there was spoken to me a hidden word. It came like a thief by stealth." That's from Wisdom 18:14. In the context of the Wisdom narrative, the hidden word here appears to be a word that fills the universe with death. The Book of Wisdom continues, "Lept your all powerful word like a stern warrior into the heart of the doomed land, carrying your unambiguous command like a sharp sword. It stood and filled the universe with death." Did Eckhart develop this further in his sermon, this word of death?

Jim Finley: Several things. One, we'd have to take that extended text from Wisdom and flesh a hall out into the wisdom tradition itself on how to understand that sternness. Also, the sternness that we see in the Prophets really for the sake of mercy and liberation. There's that. The other piece of it is that it does say that Eckhart was very careful to select out a passage that serves his purposes so he can stay online with this thing. This would be an example in one of the collected sermons. In the middle of the night... This is a Christmas sermon. It's an advent sermon, Bethlehem. In the middle of the night where all things are in a quiet silence there was spoken to me, a hidden word, and it came like a thief by stealth. He says, what happens really in the quietness of the night, this word descended into the darkness of our heart.



And then he says, we sense it, but we don't know what to make of it. He said, we're meant to yearn and sigh for it, he says. It's a lovely saying. It touches me with the yearning, but I know not what to make of it. We have to yearn and sigh and to be detached from anything that would hinder finding our way to that. And it comes like a thief at night because it steals from me my ability to pretend that anything less than God will be enough for me. It's stolen from me, my agenda for tending. He very carefully crafts how he uses the words to keep moving along this mystical understanding of things. Then also, like I said, if we take the broader text scripture and look at it too, we could see how it resonates with scripture thing.

Another way that I put it with scripture is out of all the text of scripture, everything, what if we could find the one teaching, then in the light of which everything else falls into place and is understood about what all scriptures about? What's the deepest teaching? I'll say in the Christian tradition, out of all the teachings of Jesus, but also the Prophets, the Torah, and we're saying that the deepest teaching is that God is love, who in an ongoing donating self, donating act of love create you in the image and likeness of love for love's sake alone. And in your nature endowed to realize that your nature has been exiled from it, and exiled from it, it acts out, its exile on all of this. God's response to that in historical Christ is to become identified with us as precious in the midst of our wayward waves. God meets us in love with us in our brokenness. And I think that's the spirit of that card, which is the spirit of the spirit of the gospel, really.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah, because some denominations take parts of scripture and apply it literally violently to people, not in a mystical tradition, in a more literal tradition. Eckhart certainly wasn't doing that.

Jim Finley: I will just say I should add in... We going to talk about sources in a minute. This is why I say that the Protestant Reformation was formed as much by the Enlightenment period as it was by a badly needed reform of the Roman church, really. The thing about the Enlightenment period is the primacy of reason, which resulted in turning to the Bible as proof texts, like facts. You can flip back and forth and prove. Really that fact basis, whereas really I've been listening to talks lately too by a few people so good in the theopoetics mind that is a theologically poetic mind that sees it as unfolding parables of mysteries of love, which expresses liturgy, which expresses chanting, which express as sitting, which expresses as...

That's another layer of this too, how these mystics move us to the theopoetics thing, which is transfactual. It's not explainable, but it is realizable. It doesn't mean at another level there isn't theology, ecclesiology, christology, epistemology. There is, but those beliefs is a sign of faith like the creed. But we're not saved by belief, we're saved by faith, which is a quiet burning in our heart. See, an obscure certainty, that God is unexplainably one with us, and how can we deepen that faith? And then the mystics are all about that deepening and live by it.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. Beautiful, back to that comment about why doesn't God withdraw the presence? You think of churches like that one that an earlier listener goes to that just teach bad theology. You wonder why God wouldn't just withdraw that bad PR. Yeah. Terrible teaching. Well, Jim, sadly, we're coming to the very end of the question and response time. There's so many great questions and it's been wonderful sitting with you and hearing your responses. Thank you for your time today, and thank you to everyone who sent in a question. Although we



didn't get to all of them in the session today, we did read all of them, and they do influence your teaching. Don't they, Jim?

Jim Finley: Oh, they very much so guides me in the way to say things and to emphasize where the help is needed. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah, a real gift. Thanks to our community and thank you, Jim. We had a lot of questions about resources, and so we're going to do a little special bonus episode, Jim, where you're going to go through resources that have helped you understand Eckhart, and you'll share them with everyone.

Jim Finley: I want to give the list of resources in print so they can have access to them. Then we'll have a little short bonus session, and I'd like to talk about reading commentaries.

Kirsten Oates: Oh, great.

Jim Finley: Like, where you turn to Thomas Merton as your guide. Thomas turned to Meister Eckhart. You turn to Meister Eckhart as your guide, like how to read the commentaries, mirroring the sermons. I would like to do the way that it's helped me to do it. They're so inclined. It'll maybe help them too.

Kirsten Oates: Wonderful. Well, I really look forward to that, and I know a lot of listeners will be grateful to get something so detailed and helpful. See you for that bonus session next. 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.