

Turning  
to the  
Mystics



# Mechtild of Magdeburg

Mechtild of Magdeburg: Session 1  
with James Finley

Jim Finley: Greetings, I'm Jim Finley, and welcome to Turning to the Mystics.

Greetings, everyone. Welcome to our time together, turning for guidance to the Christian Mystic Mechtild of Magdeburg. In the introductory session with Kirsten, we shared some background information about her life as a beguine, and also introducing her book, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, that she wrote throughout her life, and dived really in the process of dictating the final two books, the lifelong work. And in this session, I want to be turning to section one of Book One of *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*. And so I'll begin by reading this first section with you and then inviting you to join me as we kind of slowly walk through it to make it as helpful and as accessible as possible, to help us in our own desire to deepen our experience and understanding and response to God's presence in our lives.

So Mechtild writes, "How Love and the Queen Spoke to Each Other. The soul came to Love," that's Love with a capital L, infinite love of God. "The soul came to Love, greeted her with great deference, and said, 'God greet you, Lady Love.'"

"May God reward you, Mistress and Queen," was God's loving response back to her. And so this dialogue now goes back and forth between Mechtild and God as Love, "Lady Love, you are indeed perfect." And God responds, "Mistress and Queen, that is why I am above all things."

"Lady Love, you struggled many a year before you forced the exalted Trinity to pour itself utterly into the humble virginal womb of Mary."

"Mistress and Queen, that was to your honor and benefit."

"Lady Love, you have now come here to me and have taken from me everything I ever gained on earth."

Mistress and Queen, you have made a happy choice."

"Lady Love, you have taken from me my childhood."

"Mistress and Queen, in its place I have given you heavenly freedom."

"Lady Love, you have taken from me all of my youth."

"Mistress and Queen, in its place I have given you many a holy virtue."

"Lady Love, you have taken from me possessions, friends, and relatives."

"Come now, Mistress and Queen, that is a petty complaint."

"Lady Love, you have taken from me the world, worldly honor, and all earthly riches."

"Mistress and Queen, I shall make that up to you in one hour with the Holy Spirit on earth, just as you wish it."

"Lady Love, you have brought me to such a pass that my body is racked by a strange

weakness.”

“Mistress and Queen, in exchange I have given you much sublime knowledge.”

“Lady Love, you have devoured my flesh and my blood.”

“Mistress and Queen, you have thereby been purified and drawn into God.”

“Lady Love, you are a robber; for this as well you shall make reparation.”

“Mistress and Queen, then take me.”

“Lady Love, now you have recompensed me a hundredfold on earth.”

“Mistress and Queen, in addition you may demand God and all of his kingdom.” That’s the section.

And so if our goal is to make her teachings as helpful as possible by making them as accessible as possible without watering down the radicality of what she’s saying, how do we make this accessible? Say, how do we experientially benefit from what she’s saying? How do we apply this to our life? So what I want to do here is I want to go through each couplet, as I want to go through each interaction between Mechtild and God. And I want to share with you what I see in it when having sat with it. And as I share with you what I see in it, I encourage you, if you’re so inclined, to sit very quietly and see what comes to you in it, like what strikes you about it, or what it leads you to wonder about, or what you sense in it as a deeper understanding of God’s love for you. And in this way, personalize it, like step into this love language between Mechtild of Magdeburg, realizing that it’s an invitation for you to find the love language that deepens your loving intimacy with God.

I’m also singling out this section to walk through it in this way because, if you were to color code each of these couplets as a theme or as an aspect of the infinite love of God accessing us, and drawing us out beyond ourself into God that it might transform us into God, this eternal love as our destiny, if you were to color code each couplet as a theme or an aspect of that transformative process. So the very first aspect you might with colored markers magenta, the next one may be dark green, the next one yellow, the next whatever. So they’re all color coded.

Knowing that if you were to then read *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, as you read each paragraph, as you notice that in the paragraph that you’re reading that she’s exploring or refining one of those themes, you would highlight or color that paragraph in that color. And as you went through the whole of *The Flowing Light of the Godhead* that way and then fanned through it, you’d see those colors flowing through the whole thing. So what she’s doing here in a very succinct way right at the beginning is laying out the foundations for the transformative path of divine union in our life. And notice, too, then that you finished *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, you would go back and start it again and go through the same thing again, and you would repeat that nine times and then you’d be off to a good start. So this is like a long, slow, gentle rain where, little by little, the subtleties of love can soak into and become woven into your own intimate realizations of God’s loving presence in your life.

And so with that said then, I'll begin by sharing what I see in the text as an invitation for you to see what you might see in the text, like reading it from your heart.

"God greets you, Lady Love."

"May God reward you, Mistress and Queen."

I'd like to start there. See, first of all, see, "God greets you, Lady Love," she's referring to divine love, wishing that God would greet Lady Love, God's love. What does that mean? Here's my understanding of what she's doing here with this. There's God. God is Trinity, God is eternal, God is infinite, God is creator, God the sovereignty of God. And there's a sovereignty of God is love, because God is love. When she says "Lady Love," she's referring to that aspect of the infinite love of God that comes to us, accesses us, and it very tenderly awakens us to its presence in our life and its desire to be ever more deeply one with us as the beloved. Remember in Juliana of Norwich, she spoke about God and the relationship with the soul, and God as a feeling of familiarity, as a kind of a quiet, intimate, trusting, close exchange between God's love and your soul. That is, God's love in the interiority of yourself.

Also, Lady Love, we know that gender does not apply to God. God is neither masculine nor feminine. These finite categories do not apply directly to the transcendent mystery of God; it's ineffable, hidden. But God is the creator of the masculine. God's the creator of the feminine. "Male and female he created them," it says in Genesis; and therefore, God is somehow the infinity of the masculine, the infinity of the feminine. But because of the overriding dominance of patriarchal society, we're so used to God as He. It's in the Scriptures, too, referring to God as He, Our Father, who art in heaven, not our mother, who art in heaven, and so on.

So what she's doing here is, we see that Julian did this also to a degree, is that this is kind of the feminine dimension of God. In other words, it's very, very close to the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit, but with these stirrings of love, with these unutterable groanings of love. The Spirit within us groans that we might realize that we're God's beloved and that we might, realizing it, reciprocate by giving ourself in love to God, who's infinitely being given to us. So it's in this language of the feminine then that she's speaking to us and as the way God is being addressed.

Next, she says, "Lady Love," she says this divine love intimately, accessing itself to her, "you are indeed perfect."

"Mistress and Queen, that is why I am above all things."

Here's my sense of this. First of all, know that for her this was invisible. No one saw this. No one saw this. And although some of it was in a kind of an ecstatic state of love union, we might say to ourself, "Gee, that's nowhere... I don't think I'm anywhere near that." But if you remember what we've been saying here, that just as in the Dao De Jing, that the Dao is like water, that like the flowing divinity of life itself is like water, it seeks the lowest places to give life to all that lives.

And so this infinite love of God pours itself out and infinitely gives the infinity

of itself in our least awareness and least response to it. See, that we're living in incremental realizations of this infinite love and so the limitations are our limitations. We're very limited, but it meets us in our limitations and infinitely gives itself to us in our limitations. That the small little child is so limited in so many ways, and we don't mock the child or laugh at the child or make light of the child, but in their very limitations, the small child is all the more endearing to us. And so in our limitations, this infinite love gives itself to us as the beloved in the midst of our limitations like this. And the very fact then, we're touched by the beauty of what she's saying. It's not that we've experienced it to the degree that she has. It isn't as if we could comprehend it. It's not comprehensible, it's not figure-out-able, but it's intimately realized in our heart, in this loving exchange of love like this.

And so, "Lady Love," then, "you are indeed perfect."

"Mistress and Queen, that is why I am above all things."

You see? For me, again, I'll share what I see in this, the connotations it has for me. Encourage you to pause to see what she's saying in my reflections, the connotations it has for you. You might draw closer to God through her as our teacher. She says, "That is why I am above all things." Well, what are things in this sense of this infinite love that is so gently accessing us and awakening us to itself? This infinite love is above all things, then how are we to understand things in this sense?

I think the broadest way to understand it is that thing refers to any aspect of our experience of ourself in finite consciousness, and our passage through time is a thing. Any condition is a thing. And so, for example, this infinite love of God is infinitely above our health, our physical health, or lack thereof. It's infinitely above the fulfillment of our intimacy needs or the lack of the fulfillment of intimacy needs. The infinite love of God's above that. It's above our ability to have feeling that we found our way on a path through life, a feeling that we're headed in the right direction, that we found a certain space, or lack thereof, maybe a state of confusion and not being able to find our way. All things refers to our shelter, to our clothes, to our food, to the adequacy of these, or the lack of these things is things. And so this infinite love of God then is beyond all of these things. The concreteness of the details of ourself through the day, this infinite love is beyond all of that.

But here's the other side of it for her. This is a thing for her. This is important I think. It's true that if I take the beloved or the child, the one in whose presence my intimacy needs are being met, right, it's to know that in and of themselves, compared to God they're nothing, because God's creating the beloved, God's creating the child. God is creating and is flowing out as a reality of the beloved, the reality of the child. God's a creator of the love that the beloved shows to me, that the child shows to me. But without God, all by itself, all by itself, it's nothing. Likewise, if I am blessed with the creative process through art or through words with poetry, or I'm blessed with the work that I do serving others as a teacher or a service to the community, that God is flowing out and giving itself to me in and as the concreteness of those blessings, but all by themselves, without God, they're nothing. Because they're being created by God and given by God moment by moment, by moment, by moment, in themselves,

they're nothing.

And also, if we cling to those things as things we try to have or to keep, as if they're ours, is kind of the idolatry of the concreteness of conditions as being enough for us, and then these things become opaque to the generosity of God that's present in these things. So that there's this very subtle relationship of how this love would have us relate to the blessings and concreteness of things that bless us in our life, but also how the love of God is present in the absence of these things. And it's just like in the moment of our death, which is approaching even as I speak, that God is above but is completely permeating through and through and through the mystery of our approaching death.

So she's trying to help us see this all pervasive plenitude of this love, this kind of ribbon, in endlessly varied ways through the concreteness of our life, a love that's above all things, but being above all things is giving itself to us in and as these things concretely, asking us to be grateful for God's presence there and to be responsive to it. And realizing how important it is not to be attached, but being able to hold onto these things, because they're ephemeral, they're fleeting, the impermanency of life because of death, just like the self that tries to have these things is ephemeral, that we're dying, we're passing away. So how do we find the eternal love of God that never passes away, this permeating and giving itself to us in the intimate unfoldings of everything that's passing away? This is the love language that Mechtilde invites us to sit with and to listen to.

"Lady Love, you struggled many a year before you forced the exalted Trinity to pour itself out utterly into the humble virginal womb of Mary."

"Mistress and Queen, that was for your honor and benefit."

To me, I think here she's beginning to invite us to consider the whole mystery of salvation history of the good news of life in Christ. And what is this arc of the salvation history and the mystery of it? It's that this love of God is pouring itself out and giving us... We're created by God in the image and likeness of God. God is infinite love. We're created by infinite love in the image and likeness of love. Love is our origin. Love is our sustaining ground. Love is our substance. This is the God-given godly nature of ourself and our nothingness without God. And we're given a nature, see, to realize that, which is religious experience.

But the whole mystery of our life, too, and the fall, is that our capacity to live in an abiding underlying state of God's generosity, of this love being poured out and given to us as life itself, is that we're exiled from the ability to abide in it. Once in a while we get flashes of it. It flashes forth in endlessly varied ways. Our faith is the underlying habitual heart knowledge of this, a primitive inner assurance, an obscure certainty in our heart, but it's hidden from us, we're exiled from it. And we might say, too, that we live in a traumatized state. Our capacity to abide in this, love's oneness with us, is traumatized, hence the traumatizing things we do to ourselves and to each other in our ignorance and in our confusion.

So what we see in Christ, see, in the birth of Christ, hail Mary, full of grace of Lord is with thee. What we see in Christ is that God's response to us in our dilemma, and all the ways we act out that dilemma towards ourself and others, God's response is to become identified with us as precious in the midst of our dilemma. Yes, there is a dilemma. There is a dilemma and

sometimes we can get all caught up in that thinking we are what's wrong with us, thinking our inability to live as we feel we're called to live has the authority to name who we are. But the good news is that God's infinite love for us is infinitely more real than the fragmentation and the brokenness.

So we're trying to learn from this love to be liberated from the idolatry of the inability of trying to live up to an ideal of love, to realize that this love is already coming to us and giving itself unexplainably, and our inability to live up to that love. That in the deep acceptance of our poverty is the portal through which this infinite tenderness comes pouring in, seeking us out, and giving itself to us. "Father, forgive them. They know not what they do," Jesus says on the Cross, which is the gift of tears, which is the gift of gratitude, and realizing that when love touches suffering, the suffering turns love into mercy.

"Lady Love, you have come to me now and taken from me everything I ever gained on earth."

"Mistress and Queen, you have made a happy exchange."

Here again she's repeating this mystery that everything that we've gained on this earth, that this love has taken it all from us. In what sense? That it has taken from us the illusion that it's enough for us, that you made our hearts for thee, oh Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in thee. And that everything suffers from not enoughness and being finite, it's infinitely less than the infinity of your infinite love for me in my wayward ways.

The sum total of all that I've gained on this earth, that all that I might have on this earth is not enough to put to rest the restless longings of my heart, that you made my heart in such a way that nothing less, Lord, than an infinite union with infinity of You will ever be enough for me as your beloved like this, see? And that gives you then freedom to realize that. It's freedom from hanging in the balance of the outcome of a situation. It's freedom from having our inner peace being determined by the outcome of our efforts, determined by all that we've accumulated or all that we've lost. This is freedom.

"Lady Love, you have taken from me my youth."

"Mistress and Queen, and its place I have given you a holy virtue."

By youth I mean this, through my experience of myself as a very small child and through my adolescence, through my young adulthood, through all those things I've internalized in the days of my youth of actualizing my potential of all of that. You've taken from me the substance of that compared to how you actualize in my heart my potential to be unexplainably one with you forever like this. That your love for me, it doesn't fall within the realm of what can I attain, because it's already completely given and it doesn't fall in the realm of what I can lose. God lets His love shine on the good and on the bad. Which, it's just given like this, that I am the generosity of God in my nothingness without God.

"Lady Love, you have taken from me my possessions, friends, and my relatives," all my family connections as being adequate to understand who I am in your presence in whom I realize that you are identifying yourself with me as my deepest self in my nothingness without you.



“Lady Love, you have taken my possessions, friends, and relatives.”

“Come now, Mistress and Queen, that is a petty complaint.”

Yes, yes, it is true that in this love you’ve been smitten by this love that unveils the not enoughness of all these things, but it’s so petty to complain about it in the light of the effulgence or the fullness of this love of, God says to us, of God’s love for us taking us to itself unexplainably forever.

“Lady Love, you have taken from me the world, worldly honor, and all earthly riches.”

“Mistress and Queen, I shall make that up to you in one hour with the Holy Spirit on earth, just as you wish it.”

See, what I see in that is this, that from time to time we’re touched, we’re kind of surprised by a certain sweetness or a certain overwhelming holiness to the immediacy of the situation in which we find ourselves. Years back, when I was much younger, when my children were very small, and wife and I would be with relatives, say, gathering at Thanksgiving, like these multi-generational gatherings, with grandchildren and grandparents, and everyone’s talking and just pausing to look around about God’s presence. And as the gift of these multi-generational gatherings like this, where it might wash over us in silence, and might wash over us in the silence of an art museum. It might wash over us in the midst of extending or giving ourselves to the community, sensing how in giving ourselves to the community the infinite love of God in and as the community for all of its brokenness is giving itself back to us.

Sometimes you wonder who’s helping whom. There are certain moments where we realize we’re interlaced with this generosity in the midst of it. In a single hour, in a single moment that we can be graced by this realization that’s nothing’s missing. We saw a lot of this, too, in Meister Eckhart on the birth of the word and the soul born out detachment.

“Lady Love, you have brought me to such a pass that my body is racked by a strange weakness.”

“Mistress and Queen, in exchange I have given you sublime knowledge.”

When we think of our body this way, what comes to me is, in the guidelines for meditation practice, like sitting still, sitting straight, eyes closed or lowered towards the ground, your hands in a meaningful, that is, folded in prayer or crossed over your heart or whatever, your hands align with your palms upward, resting your hands on your thighs while you sit, your hands are at rest. Why? Why are they at rest? Because this is Sabbath. Your bodily energies are not capable of producing or fabricating or forming or making. It isn’t like that at all. It’s a work that God is unexplainably achieving in you and infusing in you intimate realizations of yourself as God’s beloved, see? And realizing that then, you might in turn realize that God is your beloved utterly beyond the machinations of the body or something fabricated or produced. And yet in another way, in another way, the sublime knowledge is that my body embodies the infinite love generosity of God.

The gift of standing up and sitting down, Thomas Merton says this divine love, it “beats in our very blood, whether we want it to or not”. That the body embodies, it is a sacramental



embodiment of this love in this, the holiness of the body. Lady Love, and that in exchange is sublime knowledge, that in the powerlessness of my body to make it happen or to fabricate it, by resting in it, I come to see that my body embodies this and there's a sublime knowledge and gnosis, a deep bodied understanding, in my body of this oneness in love.

"Lady Love, you have devoured my flesh and my blood."

"Mistress and Queen, you are thereby purified and drawn into God."

And by devouring my flesh and my blood, I think to me the connotation is that you made my very body to be wholly inadequate means of fulfilling the desire for you that you've placed in my heart. You devoured my body, revealing my body's poverty to return and reciprocate this love. But in my very being... And also, I guess I'm saying this because I'm 80 years old, that it's time, the body's being unraveled by time. But being unraveled by time in increasing fragility of the body, the deathless mystery of myself shines bright with an unseen light that the eyes can't see, because it's a deathless mystery of love.

An image that I used and put in my book, *The Contemplative Heart* book, is imagine this in the middle of the night, and imagine that you're dying. You're alone, you know that you're dying, and you turn and you look at the flowers on the window sill silhouetted in the moonlight. They seem to know all about it. That is, there is a place, an utterly silent place, that has no name, in which fear has no foundation, in which sorrow has no footing anywhere, like the intimate upwelling of the unexplainable love and a kind of a quietness. So that as you disappear on the earthly plane and time and death, you're returning to the infinite love of God from whom you emerged in your birth when you first emerged on this earth.

So that our passage through time from birth to death is very short actually, and essentially in the light of this and the light of the gospel, basically to learn how to love. And to learn how to love is learning that God's infinitely in love with us and our brokenness. And taking that in and living by it and sharing it with others, the homecoming, so that when we're born, God exhales us onto the earthly plane. We go through our days, then when we die, God inhales and returns back to the depths of God.

"Lady Love, you are a robber; for this as well you shall make reparation."

Like, look what you've done like a thief in the night. I didn't see this coming. I didn't know it would be like this, see? Because the survival instinct is too strong, so you had to make a move on me and to quietly undermine my ability to keep a footing in my ability to live on my terms. It's like love has done it to me. See, that's why I say the mystic is not the one who says, "Listen to what I've experienced, this to what I've experienced," no, but rather, "Look what love has done to me," because there's nothing left but love.

And I think this is Mechtild. See, this is love language. This is love language. And as we listen to her language, as the very fact we're touched by the beauty of it and its highly evocative nature, we realize that she's mentoring us, where she's offering us guidance, and this fully pertains to us. And if we just keep leaning into it and yielding to it and let it have its way with us, it'll become ever deeper on up to and including the moment of our death and beyond.

So, “Lady Love, you are a robber; for this as will you shall make reparation.”

“Mistress and Queen,” Love says, “then take me.”

Rumi was a mystic poet. In one of his poems he says, “There’s this field. I’ll be on the edge of right and wrong. I’ll meet you there.” Love says, “There’s a field out beyond the edge of anything definable, anything explainable, anything you can gain, anything you can lose, and I’ll meet you.” And so God said, “What all this has been about really is to lead you out beyond the closed horizons of anything you’re capable of finding or losing. And now that I have you out here like this, then take me,” see? Take me and consummate the union that your own journey has brought you to in this moment of you and God mutually disappearing and unexplainably giving yourselves to each other forever.

“Mistress and Queen, in addition you may demand of God and all of his kingdom.”

That is, “Lady Love, now you have recompensed me a hundredfold on earth.”

“Mistress and Queen, in addition you may demand God and all his kingdom.”

Having come to this surrender, we can ask God anything, see? We can demand of God anything. And notice, this love of God, we can demand God of anything, the Trinity, the infinity of God, the eternality of God. Why? Why? Because now that your heart has been transformed by love into the love of God, you will not really ask for anything but love. You’ll only ask anything, Lord, that Your will be done in me like this in each moment of my life.

So this is Mechtild. And the thing is, I think, see, if we step back as if we’re reading it for content, we’re waiting for something to be explained. It’s so opaque because it’s so intuitively dense with a love language that has no conceptual content. But if we sit with each thing she says in a receptive openness of love, we can begin to get reverberations of this loving union that is stirring within us.

And listening to when she and God talk back and forth in this deepening love language, we realize we’re being invited into over-listen to their exchange, because we’re being drawn into it, because our own heart is responding to it. It’s responding to it in the stirrings of a desire with a recognition that, in some strange way, all this love language pertains to us. It’s a dowry of our being. It’s a dowry of our being. And if we just stay with her and patiently stay with this, then this kind of empty-handed poverty, like leaning into it, trying to live day by day, sharing it with others, we could sit and read her book like this. And when you’re all finished with it, go back and start all over again and read it start to finish, line by line, and read it nine times.

She died writing the book. You could die reading it. On your deathbed, you could have someone reading it to you like this. It has this endless quality, this power. God gives some people this gift of putting words to unsayable things, but the heart knows it’s true when it hears them. See, this beloved, I think it’s Christ’s mind and a consolation without a cause, all of this like this.

So this is Mechtild then. And so in the next session I want to continue on in this way, but I want to start weaving into it the interplay of life, love, and death, the sweet death, like

different layers of dying, which are really layers of being born over and over and over again through love. And then in the third and final talk, I want to continue on in this way, but especially looking at the end of her life, where she couldn't feed herself or dress herself, she became blind, and she lost all sense of God. She lost all sense of God. It comes back full circle. And she was at peace and dying in this complete poverty as this. And so she's a great teacher. She's really just filled with heart lessons like this. And so here we are with the challenge and the grace of having her guide us in her own search for God, this love path. And so let's end with a sit. I invite you to sit straight and bow.

And bow.

We'll 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. For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory forever and ever. Amen. Mary, mother of contemplatives, pray for us. Meister Eckhart, pray for us. Mechtild of Magdeburg, pray for us. Blessings till next time.

Kirsten Oates: Thank you for listening to this episode of Turning to the Mystics, a podcast created by the Center for Action and Contemplation. We're planning to do episodes that answer your questions, so if you have a question, please email us at [podcasts@cac.org](mailto:podcasts@cac.org) or send us a voicemail at [cac.org/voicemails](http://cac.org/voicemails). All of this information can be found in the show notes. We'll see you again soon.