

Turning
to the
Mystics



Mechtild of Magdeburg

Listener Questions (Part 2)

with James Finley and Kirsten Oates

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 Season Eight of Turning to the Mystics, where we've been turning to Mechthild of Magdeburg. I'm here with Jim, and this is part two of our Reflection On Listener Questions. Welcome, Jim.

Jim Finley: Yes. Good to be here.

Kirsten Oates: Beautiful first episode with the questions, and looking forward to-

Jim Finley: Yeah, me too.

Kirsten Oates: ... getting to some more, yeah. So we're going to start with some questions about Mechthild, the person, and I'll just read the first one from Sheila. She says, "I've been so enjoying the podcast about Mechthild of Magdeburg. She's typically not well known outside of Germany, so I appreciate hearing about her in an English-speaking context. Fun fact, I live in Berlin, which is not far from Magdeburg. The information about the Beguines is fascinating. And I've been really sitting with the sentence that, God wants to rest weightless in our souls. I have a question about Mechthild's view of the body. The Wikipedia article in Germany, states that she was a flagellant for about 20 years and had a hateful view of her body, which seems to be in great contrast with the view of Hildegard of Bingen, for example. What have you come across in your research and reading of her texts about this? And how do you think that her views influenced her spirituality? I also wonder how she could have lived for so long if she didn't take care of her physical body."

Jim Finley: Through the Middle Ages, and on into when Mechthild was living, there was this theme in the Christian tradition of doing physical penance to the body. And so too, when I was in the monastery, the Cistercian Order, which was really found in the 11th century, by St. Bernard of Clairvaux. We'll be doing him later in the series. And then that was the reform of the rule of Benedict, which is the fifth century. In that time, when I was at the monastery, this cloistered monastery, just before the Vatican console, they changed a lot of this medieval stuff to that we would take the discipline.

And every Friday, we sat in a common unheated, dormitory with partitions, with a curtain. It was straw mattresses on boards, and you would go in, and close the curtain, strip to the waist. You had a whip under your pillow, a cat of nine tails. And the abbot would give the knock and everyone would whip themselves over the shoulders for the length of the Psalm, De Profundis, "Out of the depths, I cry unto thee, Oh Lord." And the abbot would give the knock, you'd put it under your pillow and go have breakfast. And it was just part of the thing.

So my sense is, it's a cultural thing. But I get the feeling that it didn't find its way into pathological attitudes towards her body. None of that comes across in her, at all. Quite the opposite, actually. So I think she took it in stride, the same way Merton did, but the novices would talk about it, make jokes about it, and these medieval rules and so on. So I think she

was freed from that. Not all the women mystics were. In some of these mystics, you can see tinges of a word that was affecting a negative attitude towards the body.

And it goes into other sources too, like Plotinus and the Greek thing about the body and trying to rise above the body and so on. So it's just part of the historical evolution of things. We're lucky this way. We have our own problems today with things, but I think we do have a much healthier sense of the reality of the importance and gift of the body. And you don't see that in the Catholic traditionalism.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. Were you shocked, Jim, when you got into the monastery and that was described to you? Or were you expecting that?

Jim Finley: No, because it was so medieval, like sleeping on a straw mattress, and boy, they shaved all my hair off. I put on this medieval robe, the monastic robes, and the whole thing was so... Sign language, we didn't talk to each other. So the whole thing was mystical, magic in a way, because I just took it all in stride. I found it quite fascinating.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. And it didn't feel hateful towards your body?

Jim Finley: No, not at all. No, I thought it was interesting. You closed the curtain for privacy, and so there were rumors that some people, instead of whipping themselves, they'd hit the bed with the whip, so no one would know, but you'd hear the sound. There were rumors about who was trying to get away with that. But anyway...

Kirsten Oates: And it didn't hurt too much?

Jim Finley: It hurt. Yeah, you could hit yourself as hard as you wanted. And especially when it was cold in the winter, it would hurt more. It stung. It didn't draw blood, but it would sting. You'd feel it, yeah so-

Kirsten Oates: Feel it, yeah. Okay. Our next question is about psychological versus spiritual teaching. And Carter asks, "You bring up Thomas Merton's wise warning, not to confuse psychological with spiritual truths, when with Mechthild, I'm struck at a psychological level at the notion of God and myself being hopelessly in love with one another. Does the spiritual feeling of this relationship differ greatly from the psychological feeling of being in love and being loved? Are they on the same spectrum of human experience or on completely different planes? I find it much easier to grasp the emotional aspects of love than the deeper spiritual aspects."

Jim Finley: Yeah, it's a subtle question, actually. St. John of the Cross says there are some people who thinks a great deal is going on in their spiritual life, but in reality before God, not much is going on. And others think nothing's happening, and in the eyes of God a great deal is going on. And so there's all these cautions about focusing exclusively on physiological, emotional consolations, and insights and that kind of thing. But properly understood, I think what it is, in the mystical sense is, what anointing does this too. You feel that love is actually flowing from some deep hidden place within and beyond yourself, but it spills over into emotional love. But you feel its origins are not in the emotions, but it spills over into the emotions.

It's also true that you can sense the purity of this divine incarnate and divine love, and nothing spills over. So it is a subtle thing, because of the body and the soul are so

intertwined, they delicately interface each other. It has this interplay between the two, but it's very similar. You would see that these feelings of love for God are God being infinitely in love with you. You could see if you're deeply in love with someone or someone's in love with you, you'd recognize in that love with this person, echoes of who you experienced God to be as love. That's another way that I would put it.

Kirsten Oates: Next question, Jim is from Sandra and she says, "I don't think I would have ever attempted to connect with Mechthild's book without Jim's guidance. Jim, is there any comment you might add regarding the psychological aspect of Mechthild's contribution?"

Jim Finley: First of all, I think there are some deeply mystically awakened people who don't have the language for it. They just bear it in the simplicity of themselves and the truth of themselves. But sometimes I think with these mystic teachers, they've also been gifted with the ability to put words that convey this oneness, and that's where you see their own giftedness coming through. So for example, Thomas Merton was very gifted with words, and so Mechthild was very gifted. She's very literary and very boldly creative, and I think that's her psychology coming through. But I think it's like God using the giftedness of her psychology to convey God this way. But she's very stunning actually, from a literary point of view. She's quite something.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah, it was wonderful getting to read her work with you. Yeah, beautiful. So a couple of questions on how to live this, in the world. And I'll start with the first one. This one comes from Carissa. "I'm a teacher and I'm confronted with the problems, and pain, and also the stressful structures of our society. Often I feel that the lessons I'm learning here are hard to apply, being forced into the frames of time constraints and academic assessments. I won't jab on about the school system and all the things I wish were different. My question is this, when living in a world of demands, how does one reserve that space of vulnerability and sensitivity without being crushed by the unconscious rush of the world around?"

I was multitasking the other day, biking and simultaneously enjoying your podcast. I decided that right where I was, I would stop, sit down on the ground and listen to the last 10 minutes of your podcast, in meditative calm. That felt real, present, and not withdrawn, but very much in the midst of things. For me though, these moments are too few and too far between. I feel that stopping and listening should be our constant mode of life. Is there hope that humankind can come to a place of honest, humble listening? I'm afraid sometimes that this is only for the few."

Jim Finley: Yes. Here's some things that helped me with this. First of all, I think to sit that way on the ground, it felt real. So it shows you how helpful it is to have a rendezvous of sitting like that every day, maybe twice a day. And also each time you end that sitting, ask for the grace not to break the thread of that underlying sensitivity. So when you go into the day, it's true, there's all kinds of constraints, societal constraints, institutional constraints, and so on. And it's not always easy to deal with that. But here's what I found. I used to teach high school for a number of years, high school seniors, religion. So you're dealing with the politics of the school administration.

But what there was always, was with the students. And I found then if I could be present to the students in a way that was continuous, when I was quietly sitting, it allowed an encounter to happen. And it helped to keep the buzz of political disturbances more at the edges, so it didn't intrude. It didn't give it more weight than it was due, actually. Easier said than done, but it is a worthwhile thing. But I think most of us are contemplatively drawn who are in the midst of the world, we have to deal with this in our own way. For all of us, we have to find the artistry of this.

Another example I use, in Los Angeles, there's rush hour traffic, and so it's very easy to get frustrated by rush hour traffic. And the other way I thought of it then, when I would be driving, I used to go a place that was farther away, in rush hour is, I used to think of my car as a traveling hermitage. And so if someone cut in front of me, instead of getting frustrated, I would think to myself, who knows what they're stressed with today? I'd back off, like we're all in this together. We're all traveling on the highway, and when we all pull off on our own exits, it's like death. We're all on earth, we're all going to exit someday. And by that mindset, it changed my sense of rush hour traffic. And so, anyway, those are some things that helped me with it.

Kirsten Oates: That's really helpful, yeah. I hear you saying that if you can, even if it's just 10 minutes like Carissa found, but something about pausing, being still, that's a really helpful grounding place.

Jim Finley: Yeah. Really another thing that I would do too when I was doing therapy, back to back with trauma people, was a 10 minute break between each session. And I would always stop. Sometimes I would walk real slow in a circle around the room, and realize in a minute I was going to invite the person into the room with me. But really I'm inviting them into my presence, in hope I can help them be more present to themselves. And that would anteriorly, recalibrate myself again to be ready to do that. So I think there's these little meditative strategies during the day itself that can help habituate these kind of sensitivities.

Kirsten Oates: So Jim, we have a question from Greg. He says, "I'm a retired Chicago police officer. The suffering and violence I've seen over 32 years has motivated me to contact you. I've heard Jim say that God rescues us from nothing, but sustains us in all things. What does it mean that God is sustaining us in our most tragic moments, but unable to provide any immediate tangible assistance? It rings hollow, and akin to a pie in the sky perspective. No violent crime victims I've dealt with, and there have been hundreds, have been fortunate enough to dissociate or have a mystical experience to help them through their immediate terror, and subsequent pain. It seems to beg the question, "What good is God, this side of the Pearly Gates?"

The consolation provided to fortunate folks like me, who derive personal comfort from daily meditation, is mitigated by an awareness of the everyday horror and violence experienced by so many others. The context in which they live and the pain they carry often preclude the spiritual luxuries available to a lucky few. As a Catholic deacon, I've been a hospice chaplain for 21 years, and the most difficult question I get is, "Where is God in all this?" After trying to explain that God is with you, I frequently get a version of the above question, "What good is God now?"

Jim Finley: I think a good number of us in our professions, were spared from ongoing repeated exposure to horrendous situations. We are. I remember I spent two years in internships, in two different hospitals, on locked psychiatric wards. And people slice, multiple suicide attempts, and very serious mental illness. And a lot of them were chronically in that loop, where you've just said. And when I was working in private practice, they were more high functioning, but also post-traumatic stress disorder flash, just different, like the struggling world. And so, he's dealing with really just horrendous, hardened, brutal situations like this. And to me, it's just acknowledging first, you have to know that you're drawing on inner reserves to be able to function in it, that you're capable to accept the challenge, because someone has to do it. Someone's on the front lines of that.

And then you say, "Well, where is God in this?" And I would say, "Well, it's you as a police officer. It's the law." And in spite of how overwhelming the ugliness is, and it's ugly, if it wasn't for the law, it'd be a thousand times uglier. And so the law actually is a representative of something that makes a difference, because without that presence, much, much worse, and that's where it is. And so it takes courage, or a certain resiliency to face that over and over and over again. When you get home, at the end of the day, you carry that in your mind. But I would say that it's you, there.

Another example is, where's God in all of this from a Christian's terms, is the crucifixion. You've heard the Son of God came down from the cross. He didn't come down, he couldn't, because he was nailed to it. "My God, my God, forgive them. They know not what they do." And then he couldn't find God anymore. "Why have you forsaken me?" So he became our despair, and God is hidden in our despair, which is the mystery of the cross. It's a mystery of the brokenness. So where is God in all of this? I think it's in not losing heart, in believing that in the most hardened, broken person, there's a core in them, buried under all that internalized pain, that belongs to God. And a lot of people are not realistically in a place to find it. A lot of people will die without ever being able to find it. A lot of people actually.

And also on the deathbeds, where's God in all of this? Well, it would depend. Some would say that, but my daughter who's a hospice nurse would say that sometimes, to be doing hospice work is very mystical, really, because the person comes to an unexpected sense and also the people gathered around the bed with you, it's given to you what to say. And you realize you're in the presence of something extremely mysterious. And it's true, some people say, where's God in all of this? But some don't. I'm sure he would attest to that if we talked about it. Some don't. So I would offer those thoughts.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. Thank you, Jim. That's a really hard topic to address, and that was beautiful, and helpful. Thank you. So much more of that in the world at the moment too, just for everyone, just turning on the news, yeah.

Jim Finley: Exactly. And I would add another piece to this too, about Israel, and the wars, and peace is, if you can feel when you're taking in more suffering than you can bear, like you're getting overwhelmed. And then for the sake of the world, and yourself, turn it off. Don't listen. Don't listen, because we're to love our neighbor as ourselves, not instead of ourselves. And if we're getting overwhelmed, we're just one more person that needs to be helped.

So we turn it off, get re-grounded, in a grounded place, present to a love that transcends

the suffering, but allows us to be courageously and tenderly present to it. And we're always trying to navigate or negotiate that sensitivity, as it's given to us to do so. So some people with a trauma history, for example, they have to be extremely careful not to watch it. They have flashbacks and so they can't watch it. They shouldn't watch it. Other people know it's important that I watch this. These are my brothers and sisters. This is broken humanity, and God's present in it. God so loved the world, He sent His only begotten son.

Kirsten Oates: A couple of questions on the path and practicing. So a question from Kim. "You often speak of the longing as the path, and I'm curious if you could say more about this path of longing. What do you mean when you say the longing is the path? Are there some insights you can offer to those who long on an unknown path, seemingly following something somewhere? Are there any concrete or practical considerations for this journey of longing, helpful to a novice on the way?"

Jim Finley: Yeah, I would say first, it's a discernment question too. You'd want to listen and be sure that the longing rings true, that is that there is a longing. But you intuitively sense there's a gift in the longing, because the longing can be related to other things, or an anxiety, or depression, or loss. So you want to be sure that it has that quality to it, that you sense the longing that keeps tugging at you. There's a certain gift in the longing. Then it's to know, and this is what all the mystics are saying, to know that that longing that you feel, is an echo of God's infinite longing for you, that God freely chooses to long for us as the beloved. And so our longing, is the reciprocity of longing this way.

The next thing to discover, I think, it isn't just that there are moments of graced oneness in which the longing is consummated in oneness, that those moments happen. But also you can begin to sense in a more subtle way, that God's the infinity of the longing itself. So it's almost like being liberated from the tyranny of longing and the path of longing, because somehow God's present and actualized in the longing itself.

One final example comes to my mind. It comes in the teachings of the Buddha, really on the middle way, but applies to the Christian too. And it says that all mystics, you get a sense that as we're on the path that leads to union. You get a feeling that along the path that leads to union, you discover the union you're searching for is welling up beneath your feet, on the path that leads to it. And there's a heightened ambivalence between the union, and the longing for the union, become indistinguishable from each other. That's a meaningful insight, to me.

Kirsten Oates: Jim, our next question is from a listener who's back listening to *The Cloud of Unknowing*. But I think a question on centering prayer practice is helpful for everyone, because I know a lot of people use that as their practice. So the question is, "The issue I'm running into when I try to practice centering prayer, is that when I try to open to God in the practice, I feel a lot of fear. Growing up, I was pretty afraid of God who was more like a harsh judge and police officer, always looking to catch me doing, or thinking something wrong and sinful. However, I still feel this calling to explore this relationship more deeply. I feel I know that there's more to God than my upbringing would have me believe. But because it's from childhood, some of the assumptions have very deep roots. I have an easier time opening to this relationship in nature, or when I'm out walking, or riding my bike. Do you have any recommendations on how I might explore my relationship with God in centering prayer?"

Jim Finley: This is my sense of it. It might be helpful, that a person had unfortunate experiences in your early evangelical, the versions of it, the unhealthy part that affects him and they become internalized, so they're part of his inner landscape. So a triggering event is anything in the present that reminds you of the trauma. And the somatic levels of ourself re-experience the trauma. So to turn towards it, if one was hurt by damaging versions of Christianity, to turn towards a Christian text instead of the safety of the Dharma or the Buddhist text, how to turn to the Christian text. What's happening is it triggers those feelings, because you're being triggered by the tradition that caused so much pain. So this should be something to consider, really. I think it's a place where a lot of people have been hurt by the church, and clergy abuse, and different things.

First of all, think this through and get clear about what's happening. So those unhealthy versions were actually regrettable distortions of the gospel, which is really that God is love and God is mercy. That's the essence. That's Jesus, really. That's the good news. And remind yourself of that. And the cloud of unknowing, the centering prayer, is a mystically awakened Christian, a Christlike person who's writing to help us find our way. And then be prepared to know that when you're sitting in the prayer, be sensitive to the fact that the stirring of these painful feelings will come up. So as soon as they arise, stop at the level where they're still manageable, that is you're aware of it, and remind yourself where they're coming from. They're not coming from Christ, they're not coming from Jesus. They're coming from internalized pain. So that the adult you, with God's grace, can turn toward that hurting part, or ask Jesus, or ask God to help you, to be healed and touch that hurting place inside of yourself and then back off.

And you might for a while just stay away from it a little bit, like do breath awareness, do some Zazen. Then return again, and turn to Jesus. You might have an icon of Jesus, whatever would help you, light a candle, like devotional sincerity this way. As soon as you feel it rising up again, ask Jesus, ask God to help you to heal that hurt that was inflicted. So what it can become really is a therapeutic transformative process of being liberated, where the intensities of fear have been so felt, at a level that you can tolerate, internalize, accept it, and let go of, that over a period of time, it could be a deeply transformative thing, where you could return to the beauty and truth of the Christian tradition. It's like finding God from your birth tradition. It's like this language of God in your mother tongue of childhood, but reclaimed in the truth of the love and be healed from it. It would be part of your path. And also I found myself that the Dharma and this mystical Christianity, they mutually illuminate each other. They can be very helpful that way.

Kirsten Oates: Wonderful. Yes, I didn't mention the context of that question from Matthew that he has turned towards then, Buddhism, and is just trying to reenter Christianity through centering prayer. So that context is helpful to listeners that he already has the Zen practice in place. Yeah. So Matthew, if you do try that, let us know. Love to hear how that goes. And Jim, this next question comes from another Buddhist practitioner, from Roberta. And it says, "My idea of God came out of Catholicism, went into Evangelicalism, then a Christian cult, had an arranged marriage, divorced, raised two girls on my own. One day I found myself in the library with Robert Atkin's Taking The Path Of Zen, in front of me. I heard Zen poets tell me everything changes, everything is connected, pay attention. I dived into Buddhism practice, mainly solo, studied the teachings, still doing that. Profoundly grateful for the practice of awareness of thoughts, the change synapses in my brain and the practice of giving

myself and others loving kindness. Yet I feel I'm in between, in limbo, not Christian, not Buddhist.

Yes, a contemplative, but can't relate to the intensity of the mystics experience with Jesus, except Merton. Still something drawing me to whom or what? Can't relate to Christianity or Buddhist religiosity. Hard to commit to any community. I stand in my hallway and pray, to whom? I can relate more to loving awareness. God is the universe, then personal Jesus. How to go on? Yet I'm so grateful for my life. What do we do with our concepts of God? Does it really matter? Or not knowing is most intimate?"

Jim Finley: Yeah. By the way, Robert Atkin's book, I love that book.

Kirsten Oates: Oh yeah.

Jim Finley: And also maybe this person's read this already, but also someone I really liked a lot, a Buddhist teacher, Masao Abe, in his book *Dogan*, his religion and philosophy. I found it to be so profound, really in deep in the *Dogan*. But being betwixt and between these two traditions like this, there's some things to consider. To be betwixt and between two traditions could be a calling, and a grace, because it's like the solitude of your own awakening heart, that doesn't find a landing place in any place, which really deepens your dependence on, and you can choose your Dharma word, the Dharma or God. But it's not a God that's reducible to the traditions of God. Nor is it a Dharma reducible to the tradition of the Dharma and therefore it has its own solitary clarity about it and a certain kind of inner freedom, that I would think.

The other approach would be, in each tradition, to take one of the sayings of a Christian teaching, for example, Mechthild, "God wants to rest weightlessly in our soul." Take a sentence that's beautiful, and sit with it, as the beauty of the lineage of that tradition. Don't take the whole thing on. Just take the fact that your own heart is touched by that. That's beautiful, that's worth underlining and sitting with for a while. Then likewise, turn to something in the Dharma that just strikes you for its clarity and just stop there. And so little by little, in incremental little pieces, you can slowly find your footing in this way.

And I have another image I'm thinking of. I don't think I've even mentioned this before now. Years ago, there was a documentary on the BBC called, *The Long Search*. And a person spent a month living in Israel with the kibbutz, with the Jewish family, going to temple and so on. Then was in Japan with the Buddhist family, then the south of France with the Catholic family, and then in Saudi Arabia with the Muslim family and so on. And at the very end, he shared his reflections on living with all these religious people, all over the world. And he had this feeling that if they could all get together in one place, at one time, there'd be an argument so loud you couldn't hear yourself think.

He said, "But if I would gather together in one room, the handful of people that had the most profound effect on me when I was in their presence, there'd be silence, and a deep respect for each other. And I think the silence would be more resounding, than the yelling outside the room, outside the thing." And I think that's the advantage of the mystics. It's within the lineage. You transcend the lineage because it's God. And people who have found that which transcends their lineage, which is infinite, within the lineage, when they meet each other

at the center of the circle, they recognize each other this way. And so I would offer those thoughts that might be helpful.

Kirsten Oates: Yes, very helpful. I often feel like poor God and Jesus, whoever they hired to do their PR campaign, did a terrible job.

Jim Finley: Yeah, really.

Kirsten Oates: The Buddhist got a better PR manager.

Jim Finley: Yeah. The way I put it sometimes, it's enough to make God go sit on a stone somewhere and weep. I taught all of this, and these people are doing this with it.

Kirsten Oates: But I guess these earlier mystics hadn't been tainted as much by some of the ways God is inter-presented. Yeah.

Jim Finley: Yes, that's right. That's right. But I think they were very aware in spiritual direction of people who were, and also in doing trauma work, or prison ministry, or hurt, sometimes it's precisely because the hurt got so deep that the light shines so bright. See, that's another way to look at it too. Sometimes, that is often so true, I found in trauma work with people. Yeah, it's really true.

Turning to the Mystics will continue in a moment.

Kirsten Oates: So Jim, just next, some really positive comments on the coaching session that you did with me, where you were my spiritual director and I reflected on that beautiful end passage of Mechthild's book, that people really found that helpful and they're asking if we might do some more things like that.

Jim Finley: Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: So yeah, we probably will, Jim. I guess.

Jim Finley: I think we will, too. You know why? Because it's like what we're doing right now with the students. It's out of the dialogue, the insights shine through. And so when they listen to us model that, the insights shine out of the dialogue and touches them. And so that's how it's passed on, I guess. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: It's also good to see someone a little bit more amateur, reflecting on the text.

Jim Finley: Yeah. You're great.

Kirsten Oates: Okay.

Jim Finley: And by the way, you say amateur. You know that lovely book, Shunryu Suzuki's A Beginner's Mind and how to keep a beginner's mind to stay a well-seasoned amateur. Because out of being an amateur, look at the insight you had. You had this clarification, which was quite good. And the same holds true with them and their sincerity, the truth of God shines through in the sincerity of their seeking. It shines through in their questions that we're answering.

Kirsten Oates: Exactly. Yes. Yeah. Well, I hope it really encouraged people to do some of the Lectio practice themselves. Yeah, I hope it felt encouraging. Yeah. Okay, so we've got some questions about your teaching, specifically Jim, in relation to Mechthild, and just some of your more general teaching. So the first one comes from Jack and he asks, "Near the end of session one, you suggested that because of its richness, a listener could have someone read the text of Mechthild's book on his or her deathbed. You have thoroughly read writings of so many amazing mystics. Which text or text would you want to read at the moment when God inhales you back into the divine presence of eternal love?"

Jim Finley: Well, I would say, if I was trying to be cute, I'd like to have someone read my books to me when I'm dying, because I'm my favorite author and I would listen till my eyes closed. Well, that's amazing, but I won't go there. Here's what I would say, if I would do anything. One, the last discourse of Jesus in the Gospel of John about love. I'd like that to be read. Also, I think what I would do is certain passages in each of the mystics. So for example, Teresa of Ávila, on the fourth mansion starting this, or St. John of the Cross on The Three Signs, chapter 13 of book two, that you're being called to this union. So I think I would've certain passages and Eckhart sermons. I'm certain the students have these too of Mechthild. Everyone has for some reason there's a crystalline quality to it. And I think I would like that. But not too much of it, the silence that I... But those would probably be some things, if I would request anything, those would be on what I would do...

Kirsten Oates: On your way to join them more fully.

Jim Finley: Exactly. Cross over, and meet them in person.

Kirsten Oates: John of the Cross could continue reading the passage, where we leave off here.

Jim Finley: Yeah, really, wouldn't that be something. Really crossing over, "I crossed over, listening to your book." That'd be great.

Kirsten Oates: That'd be great, yeah. I was thinking too, for you Thomas Merton, because when you read his book that first time in the library, and how it sparked this deep, spiritual journey.

Jim Finley: The one I met him in person. Yeah, that's true, that was really something. By the way, I've had this thought where sometimes I'll say to people on the talks, this, a big crossing over into heaven and being with the saints, I think it's poetically. I think it's true. I think it's true. But we can also flip it around the other way. Say reading the Bible, notice on a retreat talk, sitting on a silent retreat, God can come in as an unexpected guest, autographing Bibles, "God, Best Wishes." I'd say to God, "I read your book, so I'm so glad." But it cuts both ways. God anteriorly signs off on your life, in your heart. And there's something about these stirrings on this earth, these poetic intimations that are already tremors of paradise. I mean, I think they're celestial. I think they're the first tremors of glory.

Kirsten Oates: This question comes from Rob. "Jim frequently refers to a quickening in the podcasts. I find this term intriguing, but also, I'm not sure I understand it. Can you speak some about what that means?"

Jim Finley: Yes. Mystics used different words for this. Some use the word, the touch. Merton uses the word, a glimpse. In Teresa of Avila another word they use is, a taste. But by the quickening,

I mean this, for example, I'm here at the ocean and say I'm sitting out on the porch, and looking out at the ocean. And as I sit and look out at the ocean, there can be an interior re-awakening of the abyss-like depth that strikes me. So it's a quickening. It's almost like when you're in an art museum, or something where there's like luminosity that shines. And sometimes it can be quite intense, but usually it's very, very subtle. But that's what I mean by quickening. It is like the unexpected nearness of what you're looking for, stirring in the depths of your own body. I think it's like that.

Kirsten Oates: So it's a deeply embodied experience. Yeah.

Jim Finley: It is. It's very intimate. And also it's very hard to explain to anybody. It's not explainable. But I think what can tell the spiritual directions about, or really when we read the mystics too, this way. But you can tell when you struggle to find the words to share it, like we're doing right now. In the presence of someone, you can tell that they know what you're talking about, because they've experienced it too. And so you're together sharing what neither one of you can explain, but each of you can share, because it stirs inside of you, and you pass it on.

Kirsten Oates: I think for me, in that coaching session, Jim, when you asked me was there a prayer that was coming up, and I actually just said the words from her text of, "And everything that God has done with us will suit us just fine." And I started to cry. I just had tears come to my eyes. Would that be another example of a quickening?

Jim Finley: Yeah. As a matter of fact too, in the Christian tradition, they talk about the gift of tears. You're moved, and sometimes you actually cry, you actually tear up. But sometimes there's an inner weeping of a joy without foundations. See what I mean? It's washing over you and it has no foundations, nor is it in any way, the result of effort. It's like a granting, intimately realized this way, is the quickening. And then I think what happens over time is, the quickening becomes more and more an underlying habitual sensitivity that's always there. The consciousness of it rises, and falls, but even when you're not aware of it at all deep in your heart, there's an habituated sense that it abides in you, this way.

Kirsten Oates: A question from Maryanne. "Throughout all the podcasts, Jim uses the word infinity. Well, I have a rather general definition in my head of what infinity means. I'm wondering if you could now fine tune it, by expounding upon his meaning of infinity in these contexts, particularly when Jim says God is the infinity of, can he further describe the meaning of infinity there?"

Jim Finley: I going to give an image of it first, that comes to me. We shared this on one of the sessions. I think Gregory of Nyssa, one of the Greek fathers of the church, he had an insight, which he called glory unto glory. And I'll paraphrase it. Imagine when you cross over into God, into paradise, and imagine there's an ever increasing intensification of the divinity of God, infinite being poured out as your very existence and your nothingness without God and the bliss of it. And he says, after you've been there for a trillion years, and you start to get the hang of it like you know all the angels on a first name basis, and you show newcomers around, get them fine, that God pulls the lever and eternity begins all over again. Amen. And that's infinity. It's endlessness because there's no end.

The Buddhists talk about before beginningless beginnings, before endless ends, as infinity.

And so the idea here would be... We don't know what infinity means. Infinity just means not finite. We don't know what it is. That's why we can say really in the apathetic tradition of the transcendence of God, there's no idea of God's adequate to God at all. God's transcendent, hidden, ineffable. So Jim Marion says, when we talk of God, all we can do is search for the least inadequate words. And infinity is one of the least inadequate words, and it just means not limited. But you can taste infinity in the boundaryless quality of the stirrings of your heart. It doesn't have a bound at the feeling of that which ends. That makes sense, in a way. There can be intimacy or deep silence or solitude, and it doesn't have a bound at the feeling of that whichever ends. And I think that's incarnate infinity intimately realized. It's incarnate boundarylessness this way. So those would be some ways for me that what I mean by it.

Kirsten Oates: And you often give examples like the infinity of a tree. Or when you really, really love someone and you can't say anything to describe them. There's something infinite about them that's indescribable.

Jim Finley: That's exactly right. That when you first start out their qualities, but the deeper the love gets, the less inclined you would be to try to find words to express it, that would do justice to who the beloved to be. And then when they return the favor, that's a sacrament of how God sees us, and of how we see God. And I think those are shimmering indications of the mystical experience. And I think in moments that way, we're a momentary mystic. And when it abides habitually and underneath is a mystical dimension to our discipleship or to our life, and we learn to treasure these sensitivities.

Kirsten Oates: It feels infinitely clear now.

Jim Finley: Exactly. I love the mystic of John, the mystic John Kuza. We'll talk about him later. And he said, it must be ineffably expressed and incomprehensibly understood. It's ineffably expressed because you're bearing witness to it, but you're not explaining it, because it's not explainable. It's like the voice of the poet, the voice of the lover, the voice of the friend, the voice of the child. So it must be ineffably expressed to be true to it. But likewise, incomprehensibly understood. I know it. I know it. I know that I know it. But there's no concept. It's not conceptual realizable, but it's realizable, unexplainably, in your own heart. And these mystics, I think, speak to us at that level and they awaken that in us, which I think is why we're so drawn to them. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Yes.

Jim Finley: I would add one more thing about this too. I would say to Saint Augustine, "You made our hearts for thee O Lord. And our hearts are restless until they rest in thee." It's a setup. It's an arrangement by God, that nothing less than an infinite oneness with the infinity of God will ever put to rest, the restless longings of our heart. That's the setup. But there's a certain way in which there's a quiet resting in the restlessness. It's transforming us into itself, unexplainably in the passage of time and so on.

Kirsten Oates: That's why it's wonderful to have a teacher like you who tells us, "If you just don't panic, you stay with it."

Jim Finley: And the very fact you're touched by it, means you're already on the path that you're seeking, or you wouldn't be touched by it.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. So a question and comment from Maryanne. “I wonder if Jim has had a grand plan for the order in which he has chosen to present each mystic. For instance, after discussing Thomas Merton, then moving to Teresa of Avila. Is there a reason for the order? The reason I ask is because after the last session on Mechthild, which was so deep and so profoundly moving, I don’t think I would have ever received and understood Mechthild’s words if I had not learned so much from all the others who came before her.”

Jim Finley: I would say this, there’s an order in some sense, but then it’s not after that. We started with Merton and I put him first, because he was my teacher. I also put him first, because he’s one of us, he’s contemporary. And therefore, with these mystics, it isn’t just the subtlety of the mystical language, but it’s a subtle of a different epoch of time and history. So there’s a double internalization process going on. But with Merton, he’s one. So in 500 years from now, people will be struggling to understand Merton, because it will be an historical epoch. And the times moved on.

But after that, I just took the mystics that have touched me over the years. John of the Cross was the first one, then In The Cloud, and so there was no arrangement. And I would say this though too, I know what you mean about being touched by Mechthild this way. But I would suggest this, that part of it is due to the accumulative effect of listening to all the mystics. Because I could have started with Mechthild and ended with Merton. And you would have said, “Merton was so profound.” So I think there’s something about the cumulative effect of just leaning into this, for months and years. It just becomes richer, and richer, and richer, as the fruit of that kind of fidelity to life. That’s been my experience.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. I feel the same way. And it’s such an encouragement to continue listening and learning. And what a gift your teaching is, to help us try out all these mystics and get these different ways of hearing and feeling the sense of God’s presence.

Jim Finley: Another thing that helps people. I would say this in therapy too, with people. Isn’t it true that... How does it come to pass? You become the person who’s capable of being concerned and touched by these things, at the level or sensitivity that you are able. Is it not so, that a year or five years ago, 10 years, it wasn’t like this for you? So already you’re on a path not of your own making. It may be a res, you’re in the midst of an unfolding of something that goes on and on. I think that’s helpful to see it that way.

Kirsten Oates: The next question is from Phyllis. “In their lifetime, did the mystics know they were mystics? If not, what was it that prompted them to write? And are we obliged to share personal experiences of God? If not, why are such experiences gifted to us? It feels like Divine pursues me and I don’t know how to respond.”

Jim Finley: That’s lovely. That’s very nice. It depends. I think there are some people who are anteriorly awakened in levels of subtlety. It hasn’t consciously dawned on them yet, of the awakening, because it is unveiled. It’s not veiled in beliefs, veiled in feelings, veiled in... It’s unveiled. But it’s unveiled in a veiled way. It’s innermost, it’s subtle, and sometimes it can be there for quite some time, but we don’t slow down enough to calibrate ourselves to the subtlety to begin to pick up on it. So I do think that’s true with mystics.

I think the mystic teachers are people, they know. They just know. In other words, they

realize there's a self-evident, luminous clarity that's been given to them. And they also feel this is why they teach, that it wasn't then they were called to share it. They were called to share it as a book. That's why they wrote. They saw it as a ministry. Because they know what it's like, how bewildering it is at first, to know that this kind of language even pertains to you. It's very confusing to be a beginner, to know this is possible. And so how to be a wise beginner and so on. And the purgative way, illuminative way and unitive way. And so they're trying to help us, because they know what this is like. And so here we are years later and we're at it. Here we are passing it on now. So I think they knew.

Kirsten Oates: Especially the teachers. I remember you saying how Meister Eckhart said that, he would be up teaching his sermons whether there was anyone in the church or not. He was so compelled to share.

Jim Finley: Yeah, exactly. Yeah. It was a higher order imperative of the awakened heart. They could not not do it this way. It's just given to them to do so.

Kirsten Oates: And similar with Mechthild feeling like-

Jim Finley: Feeling the same way. And then I also think there's other people deeply mystically awakened, who live in the anonymity of it. And they're called not to say a word, because in the surrender to it, it touches the whole world in ways we don't understand. That's the thing really. The Cloud Of Unknowing is, don't think your ministry is located to where you live, because it's boundaryless in all directions. And in the hiddenness of your fidelity to this, it radiates out and touches the world. And some people are called... A lot of people, I think, are called to live it in that way.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. That's encouraging that when we sit and practice that, it has these ramifications. A question from Lynn. She says, "I struggled with Meister Eckhart. And from what you say this time, I think, maybe different mystics draw in different personalities." Because she's loved Mechthild, the starting off. She's loving how Mechthild's feeling at the beginning and how she'd struggled with Eckhart. Is that true, Jim? You feel different personalities?

Jim Finley: Yes. I liked the Bernard McGinn visiting thing that he did with us, that each mystic is... They're all on the symphonic oneness of mystical awareness, but they're each in their own unique way, that it was given to them. And so Mechthild here, she's an ecstatic mystic. You don't get any of that in Eckhart at all. And so that's really true. But there's also something else about Eckhart. He's really especially challenging, especially if you try to figure him out.

I can remember first when I was in the monastery, John of the Cross. But when I read Eckhart, I can remember struggling with it. It wasn't until years later, I picked it up with a commentary. It really just had a very profound effect on me. So I do think that what Bernard McGinn was suggesting, but if you don't try to figure Eckhart out, because he's trying to wake us up, and just read one paragraph at a time and sit with it. Don't forget, he was giving this as sermons in church, to people just sitting there like this. And so there's a musical resonance that touches you and you can tell he's alluding to something that matters. And so the more we can read him in that way, I think it helps to get to him. But it just shows you how we need to find the mystic that speaks to us, and walk with it and be grateful for it. And little by little, your repertoire expands. And I think it's like that.

Kirsten Oates: And different times in life, you might be drawn to a different mystic.

Jim Finley: Exactly. Very much so.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. A funny question from Andrea. She said, “A random question, but I can’t let it go. I would love to know why the monastery had pigs, if the diet was vegetarian?”

Jim Finley: Oh, yeah. They had pigs because it was a huge farm. It’s a thousands of acres, a lot of woods and fields and so on. So they ran a farm. And so for the farm, they had a big dairy herd. And they used the dairy herd for the cheese, because they sold cheese, along with fruit cake, and that’s how they made a... Because Benedictine Monasteries are meant to be self-sufficient. So Trappists jam, Trappists fruit cake, Trappists everything. And the hogs were sold for market. It was a hog operation. And they also had some beef cattle, I think, but it was a farm. It had a huge farm. They had the farm brothers, the lay brothers who worked on the farm. And I worked in the pig barn. I worked in the calf barn and sometime at the dairy barn. I liked it because in the city, I never got to work with animals before. But anyway, so that’s why the pig farm.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah, amazing time in your life.

Jim Finley: It was awesome.

Kirsten Oates: So we’re coming to the end of our questions. I had one last one I just wanted to read to end. But we obviously don’t have time to get to every single question on the podcast, but we read every single one. And remembering your description of quickenings, and I know reading these questions for me, is just a very amazing experience. And so gratitude to everyone who wrote in and then co-created what I’m sure is a very helpful couple of sessions for people who listen. I was just going to end with this note that came in from Eileen. And she said, “Dear Jim, last year, I was reading over and over the life and books on St. Therese of Lisieux. I had read her biography many decades ago, and also the biographies of major mystics. I was drawn to them, but lacked the guidance I needed to continue learning from them. Now in my 87th year, I find myself completely immersed in the mystics under your guidance.

I feel that sanctuaries led me to you via Father Richard Rohr. I’m so deeply grateful to you for opening me to the intimacy of God’s love. My life has changed completely. You say that because you are 80 years of age, that there isn’t much time left. I want you selfishly to live for 20 more years, so that I and so many others who listen to the podcast will grow so much more closely to the heart of our dear God. We’ll begin to love him as you do. Everything is possible with God. Thank you, Jim, with all my heart and soul.”

Jim Finley: Oh, sweet. That’s very loving. I’ll share something about Therese of Lisieux. We’re going to talk about her too as one of the mystic. I think she died at 26 years old, I think. She was a cloistered Carmelite nun. She wrote a book called *The Little Way, The Little Flower*. And Mechthild had a deep devotion. She’s a doctor of the church, and this little way, this way of love. And so when I was a monk at the monastery, I had a devotion to her and I had a relic. I had a lock of her hair, in a little gold locket, and I kept it pinned over my heart, under my scapular on *The Little Way*. I had this devotional sense of her. She really affected me that way too.

Kirsten Oates: Wow, beautiful.

Jim Finley: So anyway, that was a lovely way to end this off.

Kirsten Oates: A lovely way. And I just want to say I'm sure along with everyone listening, Amen, Eileen. We all hope you're here for another 20 years.

Jim Finley: Yeah. Well, we'll see what God has in mind. You know what I mean? I understand. I appreciate the sentiment though. I do, I do.

Kirsten Oates: How amazing too that someone in their 87th year is coming to these wonderful realizations and changing her life. It just gives all of us hope that as many-

Jim Finley: You never know. Seriously in the 11th hour, just realized seriously. It's beautiful. Anyway, it was a great season and mystics so lovely and so good. And I think we pick up again in January, I think.

Kirsten Oates: It was more fun than work.

Jim Finley: So anyway-

Kirsten Oates: Yes, thank you.

Jim Finley: ... it was lovely. It was beautiful. And thank you Kirsten for the dialogue. It really facilitates in Corey.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. Thank you, Corey.

Jim Finley: It's a team effort.

Kirsten Oates: It's a team effort. May God bind us all.

Jim Finley: Yes.

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'll see you again soon.