

**Turning
to the
Mystics**



The Way of a Pilgrim

Session 3

with James Finley and Kirsan Oates

Jim Finley: Greetings. I'm Jim Finley. Welcome to Turning to the Mystics.

Greetings everyone and welcome to our time together, turning for trustworthy guidance to *The Way of a Pilgrim*, one of the classic texts in the Christian mystical tradition.

We left off in the previous session with the pilgrim in the midst of receiving guidance and the art of ceaseless prayer from the spiritually awakened teacher he had so hoped to find. And we began to see in their initial interactions with each other, he begins to layer in some foundational dimensions of this mystic path. And to single out one again here that's so key is that the ceaseless prayer is something we're not capable of doing. That's the point.

But by accepting our incapacity, our finite abilities to actualize a oneness, it deepens our complete dependency on God, who in our dependency on God infinitely actualizes the infinite union in us that consummates the longing of our longing for God and God's infinite longing for us as the beloved.

And then he gives him a more kind of specific way to practice this, which is what the pilgrim's been waiting for. How do I do this? And he says, the teacher says, "The continuous prayer of Jesus is a constant interrupted calling upon the divine name of Jesus with the lips, in the spirit, in the heart, while forming a mental picture of his constant presence, and imploring His grace, during every occupation, at all times, in all places, even during sleep. The appeal is couched in these terms, 'Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.' One who accustoms himself to this appeal experiences as a result so deep a consolation and so great a need to offer the prayer always that he can no longer live without it, and it will continue to voice itself within him of its own accord. Now do you understand what the prayer without ceasing is. 'Yes indeed, Father.'"

And so here then as we see the point at which the vision aspects of the path, this is this spiritual worldview of the mystical traditions begins to merge with path talk. Like what is the path along which that vision might be actualized in me? And he begins to transition it over and giving him in principle what this activity is.

But then the pilgrim goes on to say, because he's a pilgrim, he knows by experience what matters. "Yes indeed, Father, and in God's name teach me how to gain the habit of it,' I cried, filled with joy." That is to say that very often in our life we see something desirable and there's an initial upfront realization of it in our heart, like to be married or to have a child or to teach or to be an artist or a poet or a healer or to serve the community, whatever it is.

But then the transformation occurs and investing oneself in the process along which we're transformed and fidelity to that process because there's all kinds of unforeseeable stuck points and obstacles, unexpected graces. So he says, "Show me what that path is," like guide me and what this is really going to be like for me to commit to this because it's my life, it's my actual life he says.

And so the teacher then says to him, another important phase in the process, "'Read this book,' he says. 'It is called the *Philokalia*, and it contains the full and detailed science of constant interior prayer, set forth by 25 holy Fathers. The book is marked by a lofty wisdom and is so profitable to use that it is considered the foremost and best manual of the contemplative spiritual life. As the revered Nicephorus said, 'It leads one to salvation without

labor and sweat.”

This is another important phase of this really. The teacher is not ... He's freelancing. He's not making this up. He's actually passing on to the pilgrim the ancient lineage in which he himself was transformed to become the teacher, like he's handing on the lineage and it carries over from awakened heart to awakened heart.

When I was in the monastery, I was so graced to have Thomas Merton as my guide. So he handed on to me this lineage. It goes down to the mystics, down to the centuries, back to the 11th century with Bernard, the fifth century with Benedict the Desert Fathers, and led me through readings and teachings and practice to hand on that lineage to me, this living lineage this way. So he's now in the presence of the teacher who embodies that lineage and is now introducing to him the lineage this way that's in these collections of these writings.

And so what this is the Philokalia, which means love of the beautiful, is a collection of the Orthodox Catholic masters in contemplative prayer. And they offer ongoing detailed guidance in how to move beyond the obstacles, how to be very discerning about self-deception, about getting used to being surprised over and over again by the graces that come to you and so on.

And he says that it leads one to salvation without labor and sweat. And really what we're talking about is a certain kind of labor in which we learn from God how to live without labor. There is a labor that just creates more labor. But there's also a kind of labor that liberates us from the tyranny of labor, like a freedom, like experiential salvation. It carries us along like our breath this way.

In the next point he says, and notice here how this text under the form of a narrative, it's very carefully layering in foundations of contemplative teachings in this traditional sense.

So then the pilgrim says, “Is it more sublime and holy than in the Bible?’ I ask. ‘No, it's not that. But it contains clear explanations of what the Bible holds in secret and which cannot be easily grasped by our shortsighted understanding. I will give you an illustration. The sun is the greatest, the most resplendent, and the most wonderful of heavenly luminaries, but you cannot contemplate and examine it simply with unprotected eyes. You have to use a piece of artificial glass which in many millions of times smaller and darker than the sun. But through this little piece of glass you examine the magnificent monarch of the stars, delight in it, and endure its fiery rays. Holy Scripture also is a dazzling sun, and this book, the Philokalia, is the little piece of glass which we use to enable us to contemplate the sun in its imperial splendor,’” he says.

I'd like to comment on this. This is not true about scripture when we read it as proof text. That's when we're flipping back and forth revealing things to ... That has its own place, the creed and so on. And traditionally these are beliefs that are the sign of faith. But we're not saved by belief. We're saved by faith. And faith is affirmed in the heart.

“We know not what to ask for,” he's going to quote Romans. “We know not what to pray for. But the spirit within us with an honorable groanings reveals this to us.”

And so what this is then, what I think it is, is when we read this, and I'm thinking now the

monks and the monastery chanting the psalms like over and over and over and over until it soaks in, that when we sit with an attentive heart and listen very deeply to the words of Jesus, it is like poetically we might say everything Jesus says is like falling off a cliff, in the sense that we'll never, never, never get to the bottom of anything Jesus says, interiorly understood because it's the abyss-like infinite depths of God welling up and speaking to us in the world.

And that's why we're so taken by it or touched by it. The origin speaks of this inner or this deeper inner understanding, which is to understand it as God's living word and not as a set of doctrines or teachings, all due respect to those. But this is not reducible to any set of formulations. It is like a light that shimmers and shines unexplainably within us like words beyond what words can say he says.

And to illustrate then how the Philokalia then is this little chip of colored glass that allows us to see this brilliance directly as brilliance, that is as a grace metamorphosis of our heart. He says, "Listen now: I'm going to read you the sort of instruction it gives us on unceasing interior prayer." So here's like a little example of what you can find through the whole book, like one little paragraph this way.

"He opened the book, and he found the instruction by St. Simeon the new theologian, and read: Sit down alone and in silence. Lower your head, shut your eyes, breathe out gently, and imagine yourself looking into your own heart. Carry your mind, that is, your thoughts, from your head to your heart. As you breathe out, say 'Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.' Say it moving your lips gently, or simply say it in your mind. Try to put all other thoughts aside. Be calm, be patient, and repeat the process very frequently."

I like to very carefully walk through this because each phrase is a very condensed set of teachings that throughout the Philokalia is nuanced endlessly in different ways and what this way involves. So I want to walk through it this way.

First he says to sit down. And I think here to sit down means it's our bodily being sitting in the presence of God. That's our intention. Like I'm just sitting here in the presence of. There's statues of the Buddha in a state of deep meditation. And he has one hand turned up like this toward heaven and the other one is on his knee and is touching the earth like he's claiming this place on the earth as the grounded place of his great awakening this way.

And so we're sitting here in the presence of God like deeply present as our whole being and our bodily presence. And sitting there in bodily presence, we also instinctively as we settle into it, we sit very still. We sit very still because we intuitively sense it. We keep fidgeting around. It's hard to settle in the sitting.

And we go even deeper that in sitting still we can learn from our body how to be. That is by sitting still we can learn to be still. It says in the Psalms to God says to us, "Be still and know that I am God." The still point of the turning world is this deep axis of your own body and you're sitting this way.

Next to sit down alone. You're sitting down alone. And you're alone in this sense,

mystically, mystically that God alone is God and you alone, out of all the millions and millions of people who ever lived or are living now and never will live, not a single one of those people is you. That you alone are you, and God alone is God. So Plotinus is alone with the alone, that it isn't that each of us has a relationship with God. Each of us has an utterly unique relationship with God. And we're trying to actualize and realize that uniqueness. But it's a uniqueness that includes all who live and all the dead and everything. It's the uniqueness that we're all alone together as siblings of this infinite love in whom we're one and we subsist as one.

We will see this later in the book too in the chapter where this starts to open in his heart, we start to see all people with love because everyone he sees, he sees through the eyes of Christ, he opens his eyes to how lovable everybody is walking around this way as created by God in the image of God. "Sit down alone and in silence." And it's in silence. We go to silence because we are learning how to listen. Hero is real, see?

I once went on a Christian Zen retreat with Hans who now is a Jesuit priest from the Netherlands. And he was giving one of these Christian Dharma talks. We were doing a lot of sitting. And he said, "There's three kinds of silence." He said, "There's imposed silence." And I thought there's two types. "There's the imposed silence out of respect for others in the situation like at a funeral or a time of prayer or in an art museum. You impose upon yourself a silence. But also there's the imposed silence where someone tells you, 'Don't you dare tell the truth or you'll regret it.' There's that kind of silence." He said, "Then there's a chosen silence in which we interiorly choose to be silent because it's in learning to be silent that we're able to listen." If we're not silent, we can't listen. And in learning to listen, we can learn to hear this way. And so there's this chosen silence and then he says, "There's eternal silence this way."

So what meditation is really is learning to become so silent, this ties into a mystical understanding of creation, that in God's let it be God's speaking all things into being. "Let there be light. Let there be stones and trees and stars." And isn't as if God then speaks everything into being and goes off to leave the universe to run on its own.

Brother, creation is absolute and perpetual. That is right now we're being created by God in a self-donating act where God is giving God's very presence to us and our nothingness without God, so that our body embodies the presence of God and our nothingness without God. And God is speaking all things into being right now. So if God would cease the speaking, we'd all disappear.

So now we're trying to become so silent that we can hear God speaking us into being. How can I become so silent that I can hear God speaking the sun into being, moving across the sky with the trees in the field and all this? So this is a deep vast silence of listening to this living word of God, this manifesting itself as the reality of all things, to be in silence.

"Lower your head," and here we might see this as a liturgy of the body, as a kind of humility to lower your head. And then to shut your eyes. I'd like to reflect on this.

What if we could all close our eyes right now and be interiorly awakened so that

when we opened our eyes, we'd see through our own awakened eyes what Jesus saw and all that he saw. What would we see? We'd see God, because Jesus saw God and all that he saw.

And what's really wonderful about it, when we prayerfully sit with it, it didn't matter what he saw, whether he saw a prostitute or his own mother, whether he saw the joy at a wedding or those gathered at the burial of a loved one, whether he saw his disciples or his executioner or a bird or a tree, Jesus saw God in all that he saw. And Jesus said, "You have eyes to see and you do not see. There's your God-given capacity to see the God-given godly nature of yourself, others and all things, and you don't see it. This is a source of all your sorrow. This is a source of all your confusion."

And so the prayer then is, "Lord, that I might see, that Lord, that I might see with my own awakened eyes and really deeper down my own awakened heart. Your presence being poured out and given to the reality of me others in all things, that we are the generosity of your presence to this. Help me to see meaning to realize this this way." So this is the prayer.

And imagine yourself looking into your own heart. And here you're looking into your own heart, not just as the center of emotions, but you're looking into your own heart as the very place where the ongoing self-donating presence of God and you and your nothingness without God are pouring out of God and touching each other in your heart. Like the point vares, this oneness which is so this point vares in microcosm of the whole universe is in your heart.

And so you're looking down into the abyss of the interiority of your own heart that opens out into the interiority of God this way. And he's instructing you to see this, to refine your assumptions about what sitting is, to refine your assumptions about what seeing is, to refine your assumptions about He's asking you, inviting you to a more spacious kind of a primordial understanding of the immediacy of this presence this way.

You're looking into your own heart. Carry your mind, that is your thoughts, from your head to your heart. So a lot of our thinking, they say in Buddhism, they have this saying, there's a saying that the head to know, this is an Hinduism also, the head to know, the heart to love. And the Buddhists say the hara to understand. The hara is H-A-R-A, which is the ground of the belly. That is the heart, that we think with our head, we feel with our heart, but it's in the ground of our body that we understand this way.

So we're trying to move from a kind of thought that has to do with thinking the next thing we're going to think, and instead finding a way to be released from conceptual thinking to drop down into our heart and down into the innermost center of our heart that opens out up on the center of God being given to us heartbeat by heartbeat, breath by breath this way.

And I would say this too, I want to say this too, is that see, this isn't real. One, it isn't real if you're not called to it. We talked about this. You have to be true to yourself. But even if you're not specifically called to sit this way, you can draw out insights that are applied to every way to find God. Whether you're teaching or walking or whatever you're doing, it applies as different. God leads us in different ways.

But if you are called to do this, to sit this way, what you'll find is this. It doesn't work if you say I'll try for 10 minutes and see what happens. Nothing happened, I'll turn on the TV.

Nothing happened. You have to be drawn to sit with it with all your heart.

And let's say you decide to sit with it with all your heart for half an hour. You have to sit with it with all your heart for half an hour every day because it's a very, very subtle habit that emerges slowly and interior fidelity to it over time. That eventually starts to permeate every hour of your life. And what you'll start to notice, you're to observe what starts to happen to you when you sit this way with all your heart. And you'll notice what's happening is a kind of a descent. And what you're moving into a qualitatively deeper awareness of and oneness with ever deeper dimensions of yourself that are opening out upon the abyss-like depths of God, welling up and giving the infinity of God away as the immediacy and gift of your own beating heart, your own breath, your own life.

And this descend, this is a very subtle thing this way, but you can feel it. You kind of let it. You just have to be very patient with it. It's very gentle, like a quiet descent this way into this quietness.

"Carry your mind from your thoughts, from your head to your heart. As you breathe out, say 'Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.' Say it moving your lips gently, or simply say it in your mind." I'd like to reflect on this.

So what you do is you sit this way. This is at the heart of the cloud of unknowing too on this part. And when you exhale, you say, "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me." But what's so important in this is that when you exhale is the Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me, you're exhaling yourself in a self-donating act. You're exhaling yourself. And you're exhaling yourself into this love, which as you inhale is silently inhaling the infinity of itself into you as the beloved. This is an explicit here, but later in *Philokalia* in the book, it starts to broaden this out this way to see and the reciprocity of love destiny is fulfilled. And so the Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me.

And there's another piece of this is going to be so important. Have mercy on me as sinner this way. And what does it mean to have mercy on me as sinner? To have mercy on me in the waywardness of my ways, that I know by my own actions I'm not really true to or embody to who in your presence I deep down really am, I'm a call to be. I know that in my weakness. Have mercy on me. And at the very heart of this prayer, which is the heart of Jesus, is that because God is love, when love touches suffering, the suffering turns the love into mercy. Have mercy on me. That Jesus is like a field with no stones in it. It's like boundless oceanic mercy this way, this love.

Thomas Merton refers to this by saying, "It is added in us that is not threatened by our own brokenness and our law." In other words, put it this way, it's a love that in no way whatsoever can we increase it because it's infinite. God's infinitely in love with us. And as infinitely in love and giving the very love to God as a reality of ourself and are nothing to us without God. But just like we can't increase it, we can't threaten it either. See, we're an infinitely love broken person. And in the acceptance of the brokenness, the infinity of the love that shines through the brokenness gets brighter and brighter.

There's the moral imperative of doing our best not to continue on with things that are hurtful to ourself and others. You have your list. I have mine. That's important. But

grounded in an inner peace is not dependent on the ability to overcome the hurtful thing. Like St. Paul had a thorn in the flesh, asked God to remove it. Let's just leave it there. It's the teacher. It's the place. If this is all up to you, this isn't looking good. But it's not up to you. It's up to me giving myself to you as infinitely lovable in your brokenness and incompleteness. This is experiential salvation. See it this way.

Try to put all other thoughts aside. I think this is important. When you sit this way, it isn't as if all other thoughts politely step back so you can do this. They don't. And what happens is they're circling around the edges and they keep making inroads into your practice. And so you're sitting there, "Lord Jesus, have mercy on me. Lord Jesus, have mercy on me. Oh, I forgot to call Aunt Mildred. Oh, crap. Lord have mercy. Lord Jesus. Oh Jesus, I wonder what's for lunch? Oh, maybe I'll have ... Oh no. Oh, Lord Jesus have mercy on me."

So you do your best. But here's the point. This will be later on a thesis that every time the slippage occurs, it's a graced opportunity to circle back around to God being in love with you and your inability to do this. And that's it.

"Be still and know that I am God." The stillness is not a stillness that we perfect in our ability to sit still. The stillness is an inner stillness in which God is unexplainably transforming us into the love of God and our nothingness without God and we're still by it. And there's a kind of a quiet amazement or a quiet awe of the graces unfolding within us in the midst of all unresolved things in our heart this way.

Be calm, be patient and repeat the process very frequently. Be calm. Be calm. Like relax. Relax, seriously. You're going to be dead soon anyway. This isn't some kind of. You're not trying to achieve something. Do you think you're going to get anywhere? You're not. There's nowhere to go. Where are you going to go? Be calm, relax. Why don't you just rest in me? Resting in you unexplainably forever. Be calm. The peace of God that surpasses understanding.

So it's not the peace that's dependent on our ability to overcome or attain anything. But rather it's the peace of God that is in no way dependent on our ability to overcome, attain anything because it's unexplainably already completely given to us unexplainably forever, is the generosity of God. The good thief on the cross when Jesus was dying and the thief says, "Remember me when you come into your kingdom."

Jesus didn't say, "Well, it all depends. We've got to check this out. You don't get away and all the ... It all depends. Let's run this down. This day you'll be with me in paradise." The prodigal son returning home. The father runs out. He rehearses a little speech about how his father would accept him back. Father doesn't even want to hear, puts the ring on his finger, that we've already started that you come home. God's like that. See?

So relax, be calm, and really let yourself be transformed that it's really true that God's mercy of merciful love for you is eternal, infinite and boundaryless in all directions. And not just know it poetically. Let it soak down into you as it just becomes the texture of your very presence this way, this mercy, that you embody this mercy, which is then going to allow you to embody it in how you treat other people. It's going to have social implications for how you see people and understand them and listen to them and so on. Be calm. Be patient. Be

very, very patient because this is on God's time really.

So in a way God is saying to the pilgrim, "Remember back when all this started, you were in church on the 23rd Sunday after Pentecost, and you were blindsided by some unexplainable desire to pray always? And you wondered here and there along the roads. Guess what? Every step you took was on the heartbeat of my time with this." It unfolds in my time, not your time this way.

Someone once said in creation that the moment in which God said let there be light, and the moment we're in right now, for God it's one moment. That's eternity. So this is the eternality, the fleetness of time that comes welling up. In an open-ended free willing way everything's right on schedule, and we learn to move with the providential flow of things. So be calm, be patient, and repeat the process very frequently so you have something now to stabilize in this way.

"The old man explained all this to me and illustrated its meaning. We went on reading from the Philokalia passages of St. Gregory of Sinai, St. Callistus, and St. Ignatius, and what we read from the book the starets explained in his own words. I listened closely and with great delight, fixed it in my memory, and tried as far as possible to remember every detail. In this way we spent the whole night together and went to matins without having slept at all." It's one of these grace moments of timeless oneness this way of the lineage being handed on.

Plato in one of his letters says, "As to my essential teachings, I've never written it down and I never will. It's handed down in a face-to-face encounter between the teacher and the student, and a self-sustaining fire catches holding the student this way." And that's what's happening here, is this face-to-face encounter.

But there's another way to look at this too, like all due respects to the goodness to Plato. You know when I was with Thomas Merton, I was with him this way because I knew him. When I read his writings, I can hear his voice when I read him this way. And I think it's because he wrote with the same purity of this sharing this way.

And notice also, we're receiving it now to write. So there's a kind of an ongoing lineage handed on through time in the written word that embodies this living word of the teacher, which is really the word of God speaking to the heart of the transformed teacher. And really it's the heart of the transformed pilgrim being transformed in the presence of the teacher handing it on to us, like passing on the contagious energy of this awakening this way.

We read from the book the starets explained to me in his own words. I'd like to reflect on that. That the starets is not, this is not hearsay or he's not memorizing it, and parroting it and pass it on, that it's a sense in which the person has become so transformed in this divinization, theosis. We'll see in our next session this divinization through love, that it now lives in the teacher and embodies itself in the teacher's own utterly unique way to say it. But the teacher isn't free to say anything he or she wants. It's that everything they say is an obediential fidelity to this lineage of graced awakening that has embodied itself in their life this way.

And likewise, notice also something, that the pilgrim is sitting there, at least this sense of this narrative. The pilgrim is sharing this, but he's sharing it in his words. But his words are

the words that are true to the lineage. That's why we're touched by his words. And so we're touched that the teacher, that the illumination of the teacher rolls over and finds its way into us, such as we start articulating with that very same voice. But we're saying it in the cadences of our own voice. This is given to us. And I think that's the handing onto the lineage, the tradition. And then each one grows in their own way.

And I think there's something else about this too. We look at two, is sometimes you can be with someone you love very much and they're really hurting and you say something that helps and you don't know how you knew how to say that, but you do know that if you're faithful to a quiet time, there's something about fidelity to the quiet time that created the openness of which it was given to you to say it. See, that it was a gift. You didn't think it up ahead of time. You went with the flow of what your heart, your awakened heart was moved to share. And so the more stabilized we are in this, the more refined we get and the sensitivity of the helpful word this way is this.

The staretz, we're going to end with this point. "The staretz sent me away with his blessing and told me that while learning the prayer I must always come back to him and tell him everything, making a very frank confession and report; for the inward process could not go on properly and successfully without the guidance of a teacher." We'll end with this reflection this way.

See, I think the way I understand this in a way, one way to look at this is that the ego self is illumined by faith. And then being illumined by faith, the ego illumined by faith is inspired and moved by God to respond to it. But because of the ego's subject to self is to confusion, disorientation. So the ego can see in principle what it needs to do, that the ego is somehow illumined by divine light that exposes the illusion that it has the final say in who we are. That's the thing.

And the ego transcends itself and fulfills itself by giving up that illusion. But it's unconsciously. There's so many threads where it's still attached to it. We're subject to self-deception. And therefore, a teacher is a skilled person who reads between the lines and listens to help you discern the places where you think it's going very well. And they point out something. If you look a little closer, it's one more thing to hand over to the mercy of God. And sometimes as the teacher listens to you, what you think is a stuck place is actually the deepening of what you're looking for. So the teacher's always mirroring back and listening very closely like this.

I have this image in my mind where I saw a film of Itzhak Perlman, The Violinist. He was teaching a violinist, a young student at Julliard. And they were practicing chamber music together. He played a piece, he asked the student to play it and the student was gifted, well, he played it. So then the gifted musician says, "Right here, this phrase right here, play it more like this." He plays it. Because the student is gifted he could play it more like that. But what the musician is really listening for, Rocha calls the call note is that the beauty of the music isn't coming from the musician. He's surrendering to let it flow through him. And it's undefinable divinity of music.

And so the mystically awakened teacher is always listening for that. See, they're always listening for you're much closer than you ever imagined. But also there's something we need

to look at closer. As you're constantly internalizing it in incremental ways, these lessons that stabilize you along this path. And so we'll end there. We'll end on that note.

And by the way, when we get at the end where I say the author of the pilgrim pray for us, the reason I'm mentioning the cloud of unknowing is that in the Roman tradition, it's another person who offers us a practice this way. So I think they're paired up in that way where the Roman rite and the Orthodox rite touch each other this way.

So we'll end here and we'll do a sit down and silent prayer. And be true to yourself, however you're inclined to be in the presence of God in silence, knowing, interconnected in one with all of us who are sitting together in silence all over this way. If you're so inclined during this time of silence, say the Jesus prayer inside this way. So with that, then I invite you to sit straight and fold your hands 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 sins, as we forgive those who sinned against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and forever. Amen.

Mary, mother of contemplatives, pray for us. The author of *The Way of a Pilgrim*, pray for us. The author of *The God of Unknowing*, 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 podcasts@cac.org or send us a voicemail. All of this information can be found in the show notes. We'll see you again soon.