

**Turning  
to the  
Mystics**



# **The Way of a Pilgrim**

Session 5

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 guidance to the author of *The Way of a Pilgrim*, one of the great classical texts in the Christian mystical tradition. In our previous session, we left off with the pilgrim in the midst of passing on to us the guidance the starets offered him in the practice of the Jesus Prayer that embodies what the starets called the inward process in which we find our way to the realm of the heart.

And as a way to begin this session, I'd like to share with you how I have my own prayer and in all these sessions on all the mystics that Kirsten Oates and I that we do together and doing a lot of spiritual direction. I'd like to pass on to you a way that has helped me to understand what the realm of the heart is.

Each mystic has his or her own words for it. But I'd like to understand what it's because what we're doing, really what's happening here is we're being offered a language. It allows us to talk about things that are not easy to talk about, because they're so interior and so delicate and really so beyond what can be conceptually explained. So the more we're able to discern the meaning of the words and discern the ways that it's really a way of putting words to the stirrings of our own heart. It draws us into it. As subtle as those stirrings might be, they're intimate and true and they bear witness that we are on this path, which is the only reason these talks make any sense. So the more sense it makes, the more accessible it is. The more accessible it is, the more helpful it is. So I would like to pause and do that for a bit first to find our way to this.

First of all, the realm of the heart, one way of putting it could be this, is that the realm of the heart is the realm within and beyond ourselves, which is God's very presence or God's inmost being, or God's very heart being given to us as persons created by God in the image and likeness of God. So we might say the realm of the heart then is our God-given godly nature, our inmost being as God's beloved in our eternal nothingness without God. And so it's who we deep-down really are in a trans-substantial communion with God, in a state of oneness this way. So when Jesus said, "I came that you might have life and have it more abundantly," the life of which he spoke was the life that was that once God's in our own, the realm of the heart is that one life. It's there always.

And sometimes though what we find in the Pilgrim, they talk about finding our way to the realm of the heart. And that implies we need to find our way to the realm of the heart, which alone is ultimately real, because we've become exiled from it. Otherwise, we wouldn't try to find our way to it. So in this point then, the realm of the heart is we're trying to find our way to a path in which we're healed from all that hinders us from living experientially in the realm of the heart, in consciousness this way. And so here then we see in the Pilgrim, as in all the mystics, is the story of the fall, the story of the fall and the mythic story of the garden. Adam and Eve were created by God in the image and likeness of God. And so their nature, their human nature, was translucent to the realm of the heart. It glowed with it this way, and we were like God, because we were created by God in the image and likeness of God.

The fall was trying to be like God without God. And in trying to be like God without God is the idolatry of this illusory split-off self this way, which is the dilemma of our exiled state. This is why we don't see God. We look around, God's nowhere to be found. Even though

God's the all-encompassing reality and we're God's manifested presence, we look around and we can't see God with our finite eyes. We can't touch God with our hands. We can't find words that are adequate to God. And also then if this is also true, then we don't see ourselves either. That is we don't see the realm of the heart where we are the beloved one with God, like we're strangers to ourself. And this is our state.

Now, fortunately for us, God is eternally reaching out to touch us and awaken us in consciousness to the realm of the heart. I think at the human level, just the goodness of life itself in all the ways that the transcendentals of being the one, the good, the true and the beautiful, all the ways that were drawn towards oneness to unite, to create community, unity and so on, is we're moving towards the kind of a consciousness of the realm of the heart. Anytime we strive towards the good, the fullness of which is love, we're moving toward the realm of the heart just in human, just in human consciousness. And anytime we move toward the truth, to live by the truth, we're moving toward the realm of the heart and moving toward the beautiful, which is the unity, the one, the good and the truth. It's the beautiful.

So this is really the holiness of ordinary human life. At a deeper level is where our ordinary daily life is illumined by faith. And being illumined by faith is being illumined of God's oneness with us. That really what's revealed to us is that we are God's manifested presence in the world, as Thomas Merton puts it, that our life proceeds from a hidden infinite source, is sustained by that infinite hidden source, has its destiny that hidden source, and it knows the source because the source reveals itself to the heart of the person in faith. And this is the path of discipleship.

Here's a key text in scripture on this and this will lead us directly into the Pilgrim. This is Paul's letter to the Romans, chapter eight, verses 38 and 39. "I am persuaded that neither death nor life nor angels nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor heights, nor depths or any other creature shall be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

And here's the point. This is where *The Way of a Pilgrim* opens because the Pilgrim was already living a life of faith. As he traveled the roads with the dry bread in his knapsack in his breast pocket over his heart, he carried the Bible. As a matter of fact, the story opens, he's at church and it's during the liturgy and he's listening to the scriptures. So he is already living this life of discipleship. So we might say the great awakening that was about to occur to the Pilgrim, he didn't see it coming. We never do. Had it never occurred, he would've lived his whole life walking through the countrysides of Russia and died. He'd be with heaven right now like the holy life, like with us. We live our life of devotional sincerity following Christ and the love of God revealed to us in Christ Jesus, our Lord. And we die this way and cross over and we cross over into God this way.

And here's the point of the story, and this is the point of all the mystics really. It is in the midst of this devotional sincerity, efficacious unto holiness that we're graced with a quickening in our heart this way. And the quickening is a depth of presence, of God's presence. It's so disarming because it's so intimate and unexplainable. It comes in different ways. And for the Pilgrim it came that he was baffled by it this way. And so there are all these different moments in our lives, and married love, and being a parent, and living alone, long-

term fidelity and a long illness. And it is the essence of the poet. It's the essence of the artist. It's the essence of the musician. It's the essence of commitment to solitude and silence this way, is that we're living this life and we're quickened by this touch of this unexplainable oneness in which God is so unexplainably and eternally one with us forever. And we're quickened by it this way.

And I think all of us have these moments. Great and small, we all have them. But the next step for the Pilgrim, and this is the gift of the path, is the desire to abide in the depth so fleetingly glimpsed, where can I find somebody to help me with what's happening to me? Because I'm beyond myself unexplainably. But I do believe there must be people out there, somebody seasoned in whose presence they can guide and help me to find it. And this is the path this way. And what's interesting for us in this way is the Pilgrim then finds the starets. And in finding the starets in the presence of the starets, he realizes his heart has not deceived him, that he can tell that what he hopes searching for in himself, he's in the presence of someone whom has been realized this way.

And the starets recognizes the sincerity of his quickening and his longing this way. And that's how the lineage is passed on. And by the way, when the Pilgrim then is sharing with us what the starets pass on to him, the Pilgrim is now the teacher of us teaching us. And this is how it's handed on. So in a way then for me when I prepare these talks, it's this way, for you have been listening to them and listening to the talks that we're in the presence of this teaching. We're the presence of this deathless teaching that stirs in our heart with a longing and we're touched and moved by it, which is the gift of it. And the very fact we're touched by the beauty of it bears witness that we're already on the path that the Pilgrim is inviting us to find this way in our own awakened heart.

And so it's in this way then that the story goes on to say, what is the nature of this teaching? If I am quickened by a desire, what is the nature of the teaching along which I've habitually established an experiential reality of that desire of the realm of the heart this way so that I can be in my consciousness, what I am in truth, in the presence of God, the realm of the heart in my consciousness this way. And this is where we walk through this together. And so what we saw here is in a very subtle way really is by saying the prayer repeatedly what we're doing by way of the prayer is we're learning how not to think. We're learning how not to get caught up in the preoccupation of endlessly. On the edges we can feel it. But if we hold fast to the prayer, the prayer is like an anchor that leads us to be beyond the frontiers of the wandering mind in thought.

Next, when the pilgrim is told you're having a hard time because your zeal for this is immature, it's too sophomoric. It's a gift to be so zealous, but unless the way you're proceeding follows and is true to what you're trying to follow it's a mismatch. So he's then led out beyond his own intentions and his own abilities, and this is where he then moves. He says, instead of from your mind to let your tongue say the words, and what he's doing is he's moving them into his body. It's somatic. So in a way the mind is listening to the body say the words and the words are the words that embody the realm of the heart, that the words bear witness to this way.

Next, he's invited to sit still, like a yoga practice to sit very still, lower his head towards his chest to see his heart beating and he's finding his way down into the realm of the heart, meaning into this interior place of this oneness. And he's going to drop down to an experiential oneness with that place and it produces a state of absorption this way, a kind of a quiet state of this subtle awareness. And then when he starts telling him start to say it 3000 times a day, what he is really doing is dying to his own will. And what he says is don't intentionally say it even one more or one less than 3000. And he says intentionally because you will say it more or less. So every time you realize it happens, you return. But that's the path because that's mercy. You're just a human being in water way over your head, and through the acceptance of yourself what you're searching for is unexpectedly close this way, shines out.

By the way, when we ask Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, we're asking for the mercy that's already there. So really what we're asking for is the awareness that it is already there, because we're asking for what's present. What we're really asking for is the awareness of what's already infinitely present this way. So one last comment on this, kind of getting our bearings in this. This idea of constancy, just keep saying the prayer. Father John Maynes, a Benedictine, went back and read the Desert Fathers in the Desert Mothers and that's how they use the prayer of a constancy. And John Maynes and also Father Lawrence Freeman picked up the path, is you use the prayer as a plow. The plow is through the tendency to wander off into thought, but you use it as a plow in a very calm way.

And what it reminds me of is this, when I was in the monastery, we would chant the Psalms. And so when the monks are chanting the Psalms, they don't stop every eight seconds to rest in their inspiration. They just keep chanting. See? But they chant it and communal calmness. In the cadence and rhythms of the constancy, the lights start shining through in ways that light can explain. And that's that approach this way. But also notice in the cloud of unknowing that we looked at it in earlier sessions, he doesn't speak of it this way. He says, what you do first is you sit very still, you take your word and you use it as needed. So when you're in the ..... and every time you wander off, you use the word as needed. And here's an important point. We have to always be sure that we're practicing in concert with what rings true with who we are. Like what's helpful, because that's the integrity. We're being led by God in the givens of who we are. And that can shift and change.

And this is what spiritual direction's all about. Contemplative spiritual direction is all about you listening very deeply to your fidelity out of your own unique experience of the universality of this way. And when we read this text as Lexio, this is spiritual direction. We're being guided by taking it to heart this way. And this is where we left off in the previous talk this way.

So with that then I'd like to pick up with this. That the Pilgrim, he tells him to say it 3000 times a day, which is the way of really dying to his own will this way and don't intentionally. We touched on that this way. Now he's continuing to share what happened to him. And the reason he's doing this is that we can then listen for ways that we can tell he's talking about certain things that have stirred in our heart, maybe in ways that are very different. But no matter how different or how subtle or delicate,

we can start to see the resonance of the oneness of this universal path on how we're following it and how it speaks to us this way.

So by telling us what happened to him, he's inviting us to listen to what happens to us this way: "I gladly accepted the guidance. I went home and began to carry out faithfully and exactly what my staret's had bidden. For two days I found it rather difficult, but after that it became so easy and likeable that as soon as I stopped, I felt a sort of need to go on saying the prayer of Jesus as I did it freely and willingly and not forcing myself as before."

This is a subtle point this way. That what's happening, whereas before he's starting out in ego consciousness awakened by faith seeking the realm of the heart. And by means that the prayer, the experiential realm of the heart is luring him in and transforming his consciousness into itself. So before where the prayer was an effort, now actually the prayer kind of incarnates the rhythms of his consciousness in the realm of the heart. It is the consciousness of God's oneness with him unexplainably forever and he's slipping into this. So it's a certain kind of effort in which we learn to be free of the need of effort, because we're in the grace flow of the Tao or the flow of God's grace in us.

"I reported to my staret's," about how well it was going in effect. "I reported to my staret's. And so he made me to say the prayer 6,000 times a day saying, 'Be calm. Just try as faithfully as possible to carry out the set number of prayers. God will vouchsafe you with his grace.'" And I want to talk about this. He's upping the ante. I live in the Marina Del Rey here. I live at the beach and every year there's groups of people practicing for the marathon. So there's groups of a hundred or more people running past and you keep incrementally increasing your tolerance to that. So that's what's happening here. There's a kind of a pace tolerance for going beyond the closed horizon of your own abilities this way. By the way, if he would've come to the staret's in trying to do it 6,000 times a day and it would've gotten very confusing, he would've told him to go back to 3000.

He would've told him to go back to maybe 4,000, or he would've maybe for years stayed 3000, been transformed in 3000. So you're always listening to the stirrings of the spirit as you're kind of moving and not trying to mechanically follow some kind of thing if you do all this right, because you're missing the whole point this way. The staret's is always listening to him and attentive to where his heart is at this way, and to be calm, be as faithful as possible.

"In my lonely hut, I said the prayer of Jesus 6,000 times a day for a whole week I felt no anxiety, taking no notice of any other thoughts, however much they assailed me. I had but one object to carry out my staret's bidding exactly. And what happened? I got so used to my prayer that when I stopped for a single moment, I felt so to speak as if something were missing, as though I had lost something. The very moment I started the prayer again and went on easily and joyously, if I met another person, I had no wish to talk to him. All I wanted was to be alone and to say my prayer, so used to it that I had become in a week."

I'd like to reflect on this for a minute. We might imagine, I would use the imagery of a committed artist or a poet or a healing or music, whatever. And what it is a state of sustained absorption and fidelity to a calling this way. And in fidelity to a calling, they really interiorly pass beyond linear time. They're not even aware of time. They're like beyond themselves and they're doing it out of obediential fidelity to the truth of themselves this way. And

so that's what's happening here, is a kind of an obediential fidelity to the truth of your own awakening heart, to completely give yourself over to this love that from all eternity is eternally giving itself over to you and you're drawn to follow it at your own pace and in your own way.

When he meets somebody, he has no desire to exchange anything with them. He wants to be alone. And here's the thing about it, I want to comment on this. In a way what happens it separates us from other people and it does because you can tell how unaware they are of what it is that is becoming the biggest thing in life itself this way. And your ability for small talk, your ability to stop and engage in chatter for a while, but you're doing it because of the constancy of this lure of your heart. You're drawn away from the day-by-day realities. You don't get so caught up in them because you're so interiorly caught up in this infinitely greater, infinitely more subtle, all-encompassing realm that you're being led into.

Later on in this chapter, it's going to turn around and radicalize the sensitivity to others. It's going to be important. And actually like Christ, he did not consider his equality with God a condition to be clung to, that .... himself taking the form of a servant. And we're going to see how it comes full circle and actually radicalizes his presence, not just to himself but to everyone that he meets with love and with mercy this way. So he's in this transitional deepening phase.

And by the way, in real life, this is so personal, this has gone for years. I mean it's your life. You just live your daily life. And by the way, notice he still is living his daily life. He gets up every morning, goes to bed every night, he eats some more bread, walks up the road, he still just himself. And also notice that what's happening to him, no one can see it. It's invisible and he can't see it either. And the fact that other people wouldn't even understand it if he told them, he wouldn't blame them because he doesn't understand it either. So he is being caught up in the transformative power, the intimacy of the unexplainable luring him onward as a kind of a quiet calling or grace or a gift in his life. And the pilgrim is sharing it with us in the ways we realize the very fact moved by it, it's a gift that's luring us to follow in our own unique way.

"My staretz had not seen me for 10 days, on the 11th day he came to see me himself and I told him how things were going." I want to talk about this for a minute. In Buddhism, they say that when they're in the presence of the awakened teacher, we're manifesting and expressing our immense gratitude to the teacher. And the teacher accepts it as a temporary arrangement because the teacher knows that everything that you see in the teacher is completely true of you too, but you're not yet ready to hear it. The closest you can get is to admire someone in whose presence you're awakened to it. And because teachers don't argue, they accept it temporarily, and they have this tradition in the end of slapping the master. You don't literally slap the master out of respect. You make the gesture because now the master's delightfully unemployed because there's no master, because God's the master shining out from the brokenness of your heart this way.

So the very fact the master comes to see him is very important. It isn't as if he still doesn't know this teacher may be way beyond where he is yet. But don't forget this is just chapter one. He's got a long way to go. He's just getting started. It isn't that. But somehow, even though he's just getting started, he and the master are already in a kind of a graced equality

with each other in the realm of the heart this way. So he comes to see him and he tells him how it's going, how well it's going.

“He listened and said, ‘Now that you’ve gotten used to the prayer, see that you preserve the habit and strengthen of it. Waste no time therefore, but make up your mind with God’s self from today onwards to say the Prayer of Jesus 12,000 times a day. Remain in your solitude. Get up early, go to bed late, come back and ask for advice with me with every two weeks.’” See you, bye.

And here’s the point we’re going to end here for today at this point. How it rounds itself out is that it’s in the state of this equality. See, now that you’ve gotten used to the prayer and because you’re used to it, you’re now ready for what I’m going to ask you to do. Because notice Merton says we cannot love and live on our own terms. He said we should get down on our knees right now and thank God we can’t live the way we want to. And here it isn’t because of circumstances. We can’t live the way we want to because the love that’s stirring within us is calling us to live on love’s terms, not on our terms. And so because the master then sees that the pilgrim is at the tipping point, he asks it very delicately. That’s why I think the spiritual director in this realm, two things, these mystically awakened directors. They’re there to let you know as gently as possible that you’re beyond human help.

That is to say, this is how the starets started out by saying. He said people try to explain it, they try to use reason. None of that’s helpful anymore. Another way to look at it is a master takes you up to the edge of a high cliff and has you back up a little more, a little more, a little more. And when you’re teetering right on the edge with one finger, they finish you off. And so he’s going to finish him off. See, he’s right at the brink. He’s right at the precipice. But the moment’s ripe. See, this is the timing of an intervention. See, if you tell it too soon, it doesn’t make any sense, but if you miss the moment, you’re not really in concert with the divinization of the person in their heart this way. And so he’s going to up the ante to 12,000 times a day. And so he’s at the precipice.

And I would say this too, a last thought. Traditionally in all these mystics, there’s the purgative way where we’re being let out into the infinite, but we’re still attached to things that compromise our heart. And we have to kind of, with God’s grace, learn to move beyond them and so on. All of that. Then there’s the illuminative way. And the illuminative way is this transitional point between it. And the thing about the illuminative way, this illuminative way. The illuminative way is once you get to this midpoint, all the mystics, is you can’t go back because there’s nothing to go back to. And you can’t move forward because you don’t know how.

And so the master helps you to stay there with clarity and offers insight into radicality and love. How do you kind of. And I think that’s what’s happening here, which then leads into the unitive way, see, which is that we and God mutually disappears dualistically other than each other. And this is what’s happened to the Pilgrim and it’s what’s happens to us insofar as we’re led this way.

And I also had one more thought this way, is that the Jesus prayer is a lovely prayer. Every so often during the day, you can say it. It’s a great way to fall asleep at night. And so you can use the prayer in devotional sincerity this way, efficacious unto holiness this way. It’s just



what you're also looking for is so subtle that unexpectedly it starts becoming unexplainably more. And what all these mystics are about is how to understand what's happening to you and then how to cooperate with it, because we're subject to self-deception. And this is the trustworthy guidance that we're seeking here in these teachings.

So with that, then we'll end with the sitting. I'd like you to sit straight and bow.

You bow. 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 now and forever. Amen. Mary, Mother of Contemplatives, pray for us. The anonymous author of *The Cloud Of Unknowing*, pray for us. The anonymous author of *The Way of a Pilgrim*, 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. All of this information can be found in the show notes. We'll see you again soon.