

Turning  
to the  
Mystics



**T.S. Eliot**

Session 1

with James Finley and Kirsten 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 T.S. Eliot's poem, Four Quartets. In the introductory session that I did with Kirsten, we noted that the autobiographical foundations of T.S. Eliot's poetry is a theme of suffering, and it comes at a societal level in that he lived through the First World War and then also lived through the Second World War.

So he knew this widespread despair and trauma and nightmare and chaos and in a poem he wrote called The Wasteland, it captured that despair and the darkness of the world. But later on, as his life moved on, we see in his poem, Ash Wednesday, and in this poem, Four Quartets, a new theme emerging. And the theme that's emerging is the theme of offering guidance in finding our way to be experientially grounded in God's presence in our life, that transcends the suffering, sustains us in the suffering and an inner peace that doesn't necessarily take away the suffering, but it delivers us from the tyranny of suffering. Because the love of God we're learning to be established in, sustains us in it and transcends it.

It's a poem of this transformative awakening of ourself which makes them among the mystics we explore together in these reflections. So the theme then is really for Eliot, is that the foundations of suffering, let's use the word trauma like woundedness. The foundations are traumatizations great and small that can and sometimes do occur, are not found among the traumatizing things that can and sometimes do happen, as terrible as they might be. Nor are the foundations present in the way they access us and linger on within us as symptoms of traumatization, as challenging of those might be. The root of suffering is the traumatized capacity to abide in the presence of God that alone is ultimately real. And so how can we find guidance to be experientially established in that, which understands this Christ consciousness? And the whole poem is going to gravitate toward the mystery of the cross.

So with that then we'll begin by noting too that the poem Four Quartets actually consists of four poems that are intimately related to each other that continue to explore this theme of deliverance from suffering in the midst of suffering, deliverance from death in the midst of death. And so the first poem, Burnt Norton, begins first, as you saw, is an actual place, and T.S. Eliot's first theme is the way we can begin to be delivered from the tyranny of suffering, is to be delivered from a claustrophobic understanding of time. They were kind of trapped in a one-dimensional experience of time. And so the whole poem invites us to prayerfully reconsider or reflect upon how to find a way to the eternality that transcends and permeates time as deliverance. And so the setting for the poem, Burnt Norton, is an actual place. It's the charred ruins of a manor house where in the past, the in time, a horrendous series of events happened that the person in this manor house fell in love with this woman.

He began to court her, took her to the manor house. She said she'd marry him. She said, the butterfly needs wings, if you build an extension on both sides of your manor house. And he did. She moved in and it turned out to be a horrible, horrendous thing. And she cheated on him. In a kind of a blind rage, he killed her, set the manor house on fire and then killed himself. So that's where the poem starts. So the poem really is like Golgotha. That is, it starts in a place where in time and when we go there, you can go there and visit it. So we're in the charred ruins of this abandoned manor house and we can feel the heaviness of what happened here, all this. And so this takes us to the charred ruins of the places in our life where trauma happened, the places in the world where it's happening now.

And the scene of Burnt Norton becomes a metaphorical place of suffering both in the past and how it lives on within us. And in this context then, he's going to guide us in this journey of awakening, of experiential salvation. So I'm going to read the first stanza of Burnt Norton. And notice also the poem is divided into Roman numerals. And so this is the first stanza of Roman numeral one, how the poem starts. And what I'm going to do is I'm going to walk through the poem and pause and share with you what I see in it. Because like with all these mystics we've been studying, it's very dense. I mean, it's poetically dense. And so I'm going to share with you what's helped me to what I see in it. So as you listen to this, it'll help you to see what you see in it, because really it's an invitation to be guided into these interior sensitivities within ourselves. So with that then we'll begin.

Time present and time past are both perhaps present in time future, and time future contained in time past. If all time is eternally present, all time is unredeemable. So if in the past this horrendous event happened here at Burnt Norton, what happened in the past lives on. When we're there we can feel the weight of the tragedy that's there. And in all the years yet to come, anyone who goes there is aware of it. They'll feel the weight of it too. So if all time is present, it's locked in. Likewise, in our own life, if we've been through things in the past that were traumatizing, even though the event was passed, it'll always be the past, our past that we remember. And when it comes to mind, we feel the pain of it and how it affects us. No matter how long we live, it'll always still be the past up to the very moment we die. And that sense in times unredeemable, if it's locked in. What he's going to try to show us is that it's not locked in. This is what the poem's about really.

So it's like a meditation on how we experience our temporal self and our passage through time from birth to death and also the passage of time of the world in history. Because if it's all locked in that way, what might have been is an abstraction remaining a perpetual possibility only in a world of speculation. In other words, yes, this did happen here at this manor house, but you know what? What if it wouldn't have happened? We can consider what happened. But what could have happened remains a coulda. Coulda, shoulda, woulda. So even though we can consider what could have happened, maybe he could have avoided doing that or could have avoided. Point is that's all an idle speculation in the mind, in your life, in my life. What might have been and what has been, point to one in which is always present. And that's what's always present.

What's always present is what was. What's always present is what could have been and wasn't. And that could have been that wasn't and what was, live on in our present is we look at our life and this is what life is like. So he's inviting us to slow down, almost like in psychotherapy, to pay very close attention to the nature of our consciousness. And by the way, when we settle in like this, we're settling into it in a moment of time, namely this moment of time in which we're listening to Eliot guide us into this deeper awareness of time.

Footfalls echo in the memory down the passage which we did not take towards the door we never opened into the rose garden. My words echo thus in your mind. So footfalls echo in the memory. That is there's these footfalls, but where do the footfalls go? Toward the passage we didn't take, the door we didn't open. In the light of the poem, what's the door we never opened? Mysticism. We never considered, we never opened the door of eternity. It's true that our bodies, everything born in time dies in time. But we never consider that although our body born in time dies in time, in the deathless beauty of ourselves as God beloved,

we're eternal. We never paused to take into account the eternality of ourself. That which never passes away, that keeps unfolding and everything endlessly passing away. So this is where the poem is taking us now.

My words echo thus in your mind and they echo there, we pause to ponder this. This is like a deep thought. I mean, we just don't look at this in passing, next in sight, please. We're kind of sitting with something. But to what purpose? Disturbing dust on a bowl of rose leaves, I do not know. In other words, why do this at all? Why?

Because in the ego self that lives in one dimensional time, it's of no purpose, but in the poetic language that opens up the layers of the soul, it's beyond purpose. Opens out upon the divinity of ourself like the eternality of time. Because it's also true that although we are in a place of suffering, of something in the past that happened and we feel it now in the present, that's also true. There's other things there when we start to open the door of spiritual awakening. Stanza continues.

Other echoes inhabit the garden. See, it's true that suffering's there, echoes of the suffering, but there's other echoes inhabit the garden. Shall we follow? Shall we follow the other echo? And we know we are because he's going to take us there.

Shall we follow the other? We know we are, because he's going to take us there. "Quick," said the bird. "Find them. Find them. Round the corner through the first gate into our first world." Shall we follow the deception of the thrush? I'd like to reflect on this. What is the first world in the big picture? The opening words of Genesis, "In the beginning, God said, let there be light." That's the first world. Let there be light, God speaking light and time, and you and me and the whole world is perpetual and boundaryless. That's the first door. So, we're going to go back to the beginning, because for God to begin the beginning, God had to be there before the beginning to begin the beginning, and that's the door. That's where we're headed.

Through the first gate into the first world, shall we follow the deception of the thrush? I don't know what this... A lot of times, it's so personal what to make of what he's saying. I think it's this way, "Is the thrush, the bird, leading us into these deeper places, but the ego and claustrophobic time is skeptical." Like St. Augustine says, "We have to believe in order to understand, because it's not deception. Is deception not to listen to the thrush? It's a deception not to let ourselves go deeper into our first world. There they were dignified, invisible, moving without pressure over the dead leaves and the autumn heat, and there they were. Who's they? It's the dead.

Not just the man and woman who died there are there, because they're deathless too. Nobody dies, but it's all the dead. All the dead are there. He keeps alluding to things. He's trying to help us be experientially sensitive to what faith proclaims. When I was in the monastery, an old lay brother died, and Thomas Merton spoke that day to the novices about death. He said, "It's very important to keep in mind that when we die, we don't go anywhere when we die, back to some far off place because scripture says, "In God, we live and move and have our being." We're living out our lives in the vast interiority of God. We're like manifestations of God, living in the interiority of God seeking God, seeking God because we've lost the awareness of the divinity of our

situation, which is suffering.

Not only are we living our life in God, and we're present in God, but all those who have passed through the veil of death have crossed over into God, and they're here, which is the communion of saints. Sometimes when a loved one dies, there's this horrendous pain of the absence of the beloved, like it's an unbearable thing. But as time passes, we begin to feel the deathless presence of the beloved. So, this is the communion of saints. Right now as I'm speaking this, and right now as you're listening to this, you and I are together in the interiority of God, and all the dead are here with us. All the angels are here. All the saints are here. Everything is here, and we don't see it.

See, we might put it another way. What we're getting at here is we don't see the dead for the same reason we don't see God, because in the one-dimensional temporal time of the ego, it lives at the surface of things. So, what the poem is doing is slowly opening things up to poetically sit with these deeper layers that we know by faith are there, and to help us be more present to it and more attentive to it. In the autumn heat through the vibrant air, and the bird called in response to the unheard music hidden in the shrubbery, it's the music that our finite ears can't hear, just like it's the presence of the angels and the dead and God that our finite eyes can't see.

Saint John of the cross talks about silent music. I can remember in the monastery chanting the Psalms. This sense of that chanting is an echo of that silent music of God through all of creation. Notice this poem has a certain cadence to it. It itself is like a music. As we listen to it, and let it have its way with us, it's opening up this deepening sensitivity to ourselves and the ultimate nature of our situation as we're here together. I want to skip down now three lines and continue, because he's going to return now to the dead. You can see why. You don't want to just give them nodding a set and move on. The dead are here for God sakes.

There they were as our guests accepted and accepting. There they were. In this moment of time, we might say, therefore, there they are in this moment we're saying this and listening to this here together, and we accept them. We accept the deathless presence of the dead, and they accept us. They also accept us because they know we'll be joining them soon enough. We're all in this together. We're of eternity here, the passing away of time. So, there they were as our guest accepted and accepting. So, we moved, and they in a formal pattern along the empty alley into the box circle. So now, there's a procession of the dead. Where we're headed to is in the garden of Burnt Norton.

It's this poetic scene where this is occurring. So, here we are with all the dead going into the garden of Burnt Norton. At this point, it's already looking very differently than when we first arrived. It's just simply a tragic place where a tragic thing happened, because already it has a celestial quality to it. To look down into the drained pool, dry the pool, dry concrete brown edge, so there's a pool. There's dead leaves at the bottom, brown-edged around the edge of this pool, and we come to the pool with the dead and this procession to the pool. Here's a waking dream. The pool was filled with water out of sunlight. So now, the sunlight is the water, and it's filled

with water out of sunlight, and the lotus rose quietly, quietly.

This is the first allusion to the mystical traditions, but he doesn't tell us where it's coming from. There's two references here to the lotus that Eliot was very aware of. One is you know in Kundalini yoga with the chakras at the spiritual centers, and the Kundalini ascends up the spine. In a state of enlightenment is a thousand petaled lotus at the top of the head. This is the light of the divinized self. I think closer here to the lotus, this way, is in the story of the Buddha, it says that when the Buddha sat all night under the Bodhi tree with great resolve not to get up until he discovered the liberation from suffering, that's why he sat there. In the morning when he turned and saw the day star, one way of putting it, he saw the divinity of the phenomenal world.

He saw the eternal boundaryless immediacy of life itself, and he was free from suffering, because suffering is not to see that, samsara, to be caught in this closed world. Then the story says that when he was enlightened, he stayed there for several days, and he was inclined not to leave. He was inclined not to leave. He said, "Because the people of the world don't want to hear this, we're attached to what binds us." It may be claustrophobic, but there's a perception of control in it. If everything is unexplainably boundaryless in all directions, there'll be resistance.

He went down to the edge of the water, and he looked in the water, and he saw a lotus blossom. The lotus was starting to come up from the mud at the bottom up a little higher, up a little higher, and he saw lotus that was just about to break the surface. He said, "There are those who are ready to hear this," and he set off on his mission of liberation, and began to turn the wheel of the dharma, the Nirvanic peace. It was a Jesuit priest, Thomas Hand. It was a Zen Sensei. We did a lot of sittings as Zen. He used to have this chant over and over again, and he'd ring the bell. Slowly, slowly blooms the rose within, and so the lotus rising.

By the way, insofar as we're moved by the beauty of these words, we are that lotus that's breaking the surface. Insofar as we're touched by this, we're grateful for hearing these words of liberation. So, then we looked down into the surface of the water, made a sunlight, and then this lovely image, and there they were behind us reflected in the pool. So, we're looking into the pool, and over our shoulder, we see all the dead looking into the water with us over our shoulder, like we're all looking into the pool together, and then a cloud passes. The image that I get is when the cloud passes, they're gone. But here's the point, it's just we don't see them, but we know they're there.

That in moments of awakening, we get the intuition that in these quickening moments, it isn't that something more was given, but a curtain parted, and we fleetingly taste the divinity of the depths that every moment is including this moment. "Go, said the bird, for the leaves are full of children." That's a lovely image. So, not only are just the dead, but now the trees are full of children hidden excitedly containing laughter. All the trees are full of children who are laughing. "Go. Go. Go," said the bird. Humankind cannot bear very much reality. It's so true, but here's the point. It's almost-

But here's the point. It's almost as if in ego consciousness, we can't bear what we can't comprehend. We can't bear what we can't manage. But if the only thing that's real is what we can comprehend, it's myopic and claustrophobic. And so we can tell something's missing,

but we're afraid to step beyond the boundary in which there's no control. So we can't bear very much reality but deep down what festers is, we can't bear the privations of reality which are infinite and divine and are given to us as our life in each passing moment. Time past and time future, what might've been and what has been point to one end which is always present, which is the end of this first section.

I'm now going in the second section. I want to skip the first stanza. I want to skip the second stanza and go to the very last stanza of part two. And the first lines are, "Time past and time future allow but a little consciousness." I'm going to start there. This is important. See, the first part up until now, in these mystical teachings, there are vision aspects and path aspects. The vision aspects bear witness to the divinity of the immediacy of what is. Being awakened to the divinity of what is and then the light that shines out from that vision illumines the path that we might be habitually established in it. And this is the path.

"Time past and time future allow but a little consciousness. To be conscious is not to be in time, but only in time can the moment in the rose garden, the moment in the arbor where the rain beat, the moment in the drafty church at smokefall. Be remembered, involved with past and future. Only through time is time conquered." Sometimes these awakenings that happened were quickened. Some of them are very intense. And the aftermath which were never quite the same. Almost always, these awakenings are very subtle. And in these moments where the awakening happens, he calls it we're in consciousness. Another word we might use, we're in a meditative state. Or another word we might say, we're resting in a contemplative attentiveness spontaneously. That's what he's really talking about.

And he says that in this state, we're not in time. We're in the eternity of ourselves. The divinity of God being infinitely poured out and given to us as standing up and sitting down as life. And then he gives two examples. And it's so helpful because notice, these aren't ecstasies or visions. These are so disarmingly simple, we might not think anything of it. One is you're out walking and you're surprised it starts to rain. And so you rush ahead and get under the shelter of a overarching Great Barber. And as you stand there, you can hear the large drops of water hitting on the leaves of the Great Barber.

The other example is that you're sitting alone in a darkening church, at smokefall. And I think of smoke fall, it's the smoke of the village of people lighting fires in their homes and you're all alone in this drafty church and this washes over you. Consciousness. You're not in time. But it's only in such moments of time as time conquered. But we don't linger there long enough to let it have its way with us. And this is what the poem is doing. It's holding us there because listening to the poem is actually listening to words that are coming from the poet's own attentiveness. And we can only follow an echoing and following that awakens that attentiveness in us.

So it's a moment of time that conquers time. Such are these moments, if they have duration, where you just rest in it. You have to look at your wristwatch to see how much time passed because you weren't in time. You dropped down into eternity. We are graced with these moments, I think we all are, from time to time. But what happens sometimes, we're so subtly moved by it, it matters in a way we can't explain deepening presence of this. And we also sense in such moments, there are moments of homecoming. We get the feeling that in the momentum of the day, the complexities of the day's demands, we get this feeling that



we're skimming across the surface of the depths of our own life.

And we begin to realize in the light of such moments as we listen to them, that we're suffering from depth deprivation, which is our homeland. All the more regrettable because God's unexplainable oneness with us is hidden in the depths over which we're skimming. And so what can happen then, and this is the grace of the path, is what starts to happen as we listen to these moments this way, we realize a longing to abide there. They're like moments we fleetingly glimpse that without which our life will be forever incomplete. And the interesting key about it all is that although we waver and fluctuate in our attractiveness from it never wavers in its eternal oneness with us. It's always right there with us by touching us, touching us, touching us.

And so then the question becomes, I'm awakened by a longing to abide, but how do I do that because the moments are fleeting? That's the point. They wash over me, they take me unawares. They're fleeting. So what am I to do? We saw this in all the mystics. It's really true that we can't make the moments of homecoming happen. That is to be experientially grounded in the love of God that alone is ultimately real. That's true. But we can choose to assume the stance that offers the least resistance to be overtaken by what we cannot attain. We cannot attain it. We cannot reach it, but it attains us and our deep acceptance of our inability to attain it. And that's meditation practice.

And it has to be a practice because it's a rendezvous. Put it another way. What the poem is reminding us of is that which is essential never imposes itself, which is God. That which is unessential is constantly imposing itself. That is that which is endlessly passing away and the self that's identified with it is itself passing away. But there is that in all this passing away that which never passes away in the interior beauty of God's beloved, the deathless nature of ourself and we never pass away. And so what we can do then is fidelity to a practice. And the point is this, this poem is that practice. It's a prayer, really, when you think about it.

And it's a prayer in this sense at two different levels. It's a prayer both that we saw in previous sessions when we were doing Guido and a Ladder to Heaven and a Lectio Divina, discursive meditation and prayer. So Lectio Divina is sustained attentiveness to listening to words which resonate within us as God speaking personally to us, like we're touched by it. And so we read the poem out loud or we listen to it out loud and it could be anything that has this vibrancy to it and ultimately, to read the scriptures this way. So we know that in the word, in the Lectio is attentiveness and the poem holds us there in this attentiveness.

So in effect what God says to us then in the attentiveness, "Now I spoke to you, now you talk to me. What do you think?" In other words, you have to sign off on it. I have to do this, it's personal. What do you make of this? What about this strikes you or what about it perplexes you or what's this remind you of? What is it that's so sadly elusive? And yet at some level, it's reminding us that what's elusive isn't elusive at all, we just keep straying from it. And it's one with us in our elusiveness. That's why it overtakes us in the Great Barber and in the church and lying awake at night, listening to our own breathing or the smelling of flower. It overtakes us again and again and again and again.

And so we can learn then to faithfully have a daily rendezvous of subtlety this way in the presence of God. And in the subtlety, we listen to God speak to us the Lectio. Might journal



out the meditacio, write it out. “What is this to me?” And then the prayer is the heart. “Help me with this.” Because we tell God, “I can’t draw closer to you without you drawing me to yourself or without you helping me to awaken that you’re endlessly drawing me to yourself. Help me with this. Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.” That’s the practice, the path.

Next, I want to go to the beginning. I want to end at the beginning with the Roman numeral III, which is the next section. This is so good, but here’s the thing he says, so we’re sitting in prayer. He says, “Here is a place of disaffection. Time before and time after in a dim light, neither daylight, investing form with lucid stillness.” That is it’s not a light that illumines form of the certain stillness we can see, it’s still out of focus. “Turning shadow into transient beauty.” And the shadow doesn’t turn into beauty. It isn’t that. “With slow rotation suggesting permanence.” Doesn’t do that either. That’s a beautiful thought. There is a slow rotation of the revolving of the turning world and time. But if we don’t see, it turns into eternity. “Nor darkness to purify the soul.” There is darkness. But I don’t think I’m getting purified. I’m still me sitting here. I only have 20 minutes to meditate. I have to go to work. I don’t see the point.

I only have 20 minutes to meditate. I have to go to work. I don’t see the point. Emptying the sensual with deprivation. See, there is the sensual, but it doesn’t really empty the sensual of deprivation. That is, it doesn’t help me to see that sensual gratification, although it’s a gift from God, is shallow water. This is the essence of addiction. It doesn’t remove me from the gratification of the sensuality that keeps me in this place of gratification. Cleansing affection, like cleansing my heart, effectus of the heart. Cleansing affection from the temporal, that is it cleanses my affection from time. Time’s not enough for me. It’s not plenitude nor vacancy. Only a flicker over the strained time-ridden faces. And these are now the people in the world. You look out at the people, in all their faces, you’re going to describe now this collective unawareness of the sadness of people over the strained time-ridden faces. See, their time-ridden, distracted from distraction by distraction.

It’s like you go to the bakery. “Pull a number. I’ll be distracted by you later. I’m being distracted by this now.” And why are we afraid to not be distracted? We’re afraid, if we’re not distracted, there’s nothing there. There’s a cartoon strip I used to read all the time called *The Far Side*, and it shows a little boy in bed at night looking up at the ceiling scared. And he’s scared because he’s afraid there’s a monster under his bed. And underneath the bed are two monsters lying there side by side about nine feet long. And one monster’s saying to the other, “There it is again, Charlie”, that eerie feeling somebody’s up there. He doesn’t want to look under the bed because if there is one, it’ll be an irreversible situation. And so we just don’t look. So we keep walking along because we’re afraid to let go.

Oh, it’s unexplainably not enough for us. Filled with fancies and empty of meaning, tumid apathy with no concentration. Men and bits of paper whirled by the cold wind that blows before and after time, wind in and out of unwholesome lungs, time before and after, and so on. And this is the collective dis-easement of this. And we’re among them. So the whole poem, it isn’t as if you sit and get started and you step into plenitude. What you step into is you sit into empty-handedness. But if you don’t panic, if you don’t panic, you discover there’s an integrity of your waiting heart. And even though the finite you and the ego, it might look like nothing’s happening, you realize that a presence deeper than what you can

feel is flowing out and giving itself to you and understanding that you cannot comprehend is giving itself to you.

You have to settle and be acclimated to it. It's a gift to want this, to be faithful to it. Each time you end your rendezvous, you ask God for the grace not to break the thread to these sensitivities as you go through your day. And as you go through your day, the thread will break many times. But here's what's different. You're aware that it's breaking. But what's different is you know and believe and trust that although it breaks many times from your end, it never breaks from God's end. And so when you come back for the next morning, you set open the scriptures, light your candle, whatever it is. You say, "Where were we yesterday? Oh, yes." And that's the contemplative way of life. So I'm going to end here because I think really this is what the poem's about. Really, I get this feeling of what we're being led into. So we'll end with a meditation.

And then the meditation will invite us to, we'll bow. The Zen master Shunryū Suzuki says that when we bow, we give ourselves up. If ever you get to a place in life where the only thing you can do is bow, you should do it. And that's where we are now, this contemplative, men and women. And then I will say from the Psalms, "Be still, and know I am God." Repeat after me. And I'll take off one word each time until I just say the word "Be," and I'll ring the bell three times. And then here in the session, we'll sit in silence for one minute.

At the end of the one minute, I'll ring the bell once, we'll bow, we'll slowly say The Lord's Prayer together and name Mary, Mother of Contemplatives, and two Christian mystics to bear witness were sitting there, one with all the lineages throughout the whole world and all the traditions, these paths. But in your own life, as you sit there, sit as it's given for you to sit there. So I invite you to sit straight, hold your hands, and bow. Be still, and know I am God. Be still, and know I am. Be still, and know. Be still. Be.

Bow. Mary, Mother of Contemplatives, pray for us. St. John of the Cross, pray for us. Julian of Norwich, pray for us. Let's 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. Amen. Blessings til 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@caac.org](mailto:podcasts@caac.org), or send us a voicemail. All of this information can be found in the show notes. We'll see you again soon.