



# Meister Eckhart

Bonus: Meister Eckhart's Life and Influence  
with James Finley and Kirsten Oates  
feat. Rev. Matthew Fox

**Turning  
to the  
Mystics**

Jim Finley: Greetings. I'm Jim Finley.

Kirsten Oates: And I'm Kirsten Oates.

Welcome to Turning to the Mystics.

Welcome, everyone to Turning to the Mystics season seven, where we've been turning to Meister Eckhart. I'm so excited to be here with Jim Finley and Matthew Fox today to talk about Meister Eckhart, his life, and his influence on their teaching. So, welcome, Jim.

Jim Finley: Good to be here.

Kirsten Oates: And a special welcome to you, Matthew. Thank you for joining us.

Matthew Fox: Good to be with you.

Kirsten Oates: I wanted to start with a quote from Matthew's book that's called Meister Eckhart: A Mystic Warrior for Our Times. Matthew writes, "It is a great privilege to be presenting Meister Eckhart. Eckhart is a man for our times, a mystic warrior for our age, and I'm keen to see him better-known and more deeply understood." And you and Jim seem to have that in common, and that's why we're excited to have you on the podcast today. But Matthew, can you share a little bit more about that quote and why you feel that way?

Matthew Fox: Oh, sure. It explains why I'm happy to be with you because I'm glad that Jim and you have been sharing Meister Eckhart all these weeks. I've listened in on some of the broadcasts. Eckhart is one of the great spiritual geniuses of the West, no question about it. Because he was condemned by the Church a week after he died, he was, what should I say, ignored in theology. I, for example, being a Dominican, which he was also, in 14 years of training, never heard his name once. So, when you get condemned, you pay a price for it, but that doesn't mean others did not pick up on him.

Carl Jung says that Eckhart gave him the key to the unconscious. Burnspock, a Marxist philosopher, says that Eckhart was a deep influence on Karl Marx because he was so involved in social justice issues of his day and he developed a philosophy and a mysticism that did not turn us back on society, and that's where the prophetic, the warrior dimension of Eckhart really comes through, you see? And that's why he got condemned because he was supporting the women's movement of his day, the Bigees, which the pope at that time, John XXII, condemned 17 different times, which suggests it wasn't working too well. By the time that pope died, there were over 250,000 Bigees just in Northern Europe alone.

Eckhart supported the peasants, too. In fact, he preached to them in their language, which at that time was the early German dialect. Eckhart actually helped to invent the German language today because he was the first intellectual to preach and therefore write in German as you know it. That's why to this day, the German language is as mystical as it is.

Eckhart has so much to give us today. He was also a feminist. He just was. It's clear. He talks about God as mother. Of course, Julian of Norwich picks up on him and develops that theme even further. But he had this marvelous balance of the intuitive and creative along with the theological. I think he's... I use the phrase mystic warrior or mystic prophet, and

others use the term contemplation and action. They're parallel terms.

Eckhart's influence has been vast. But now that we can bring him, with Jim's help and others, more into the mainstream, I think we all can deepen our vocations as mystics and prophets or contemplative activists.

Jim Finley: Just to echo all of that, how significant he is and also that he played such an important part, then, in the Turning to the Mystic series, really, he's just one of these great mysticism of the masters and he's among those masters on both the depth, mystical dimension and how it incarnates itself in daily life, like what the implications are when we put it into action. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Beautiful. Matthew, you mentioned you were a Dominican, but you weren't introduced to Eckhart during your time in the order. So, how were you introduced to him?

Matthew Fox: Well, actually it was reading Coomaraswamy's book. Coomaraswamy is a Hindu, and he wrote a book in the '30s called *The Transformation of Nature in Art*. There's a whole chapter in there on Eckhart. I picked that up one day and I started to read it, and it scared me because I had just published an article that year on sacred space and sacred time, and there were whole sentences in Eckhart, whom I had not read, that were in my article. I said, "Ooh." It scared me. It really did. I put the book, I didn't finish it... I put it on the shelf for three months, then I tiptoed back to it and I started to read it. Then I had another response, like, "This is thrilling. I have a brother. I'm not alone. I'm not crazy." And he's a Dominican brother, too. Then I really dove into him more.

Then I had an operation because I had a bad back from a car accident. During the operation when I was under ether, whatever it is that put you under these days, Eckhart came to me and it was the most transcendent dream of my life. We walked together on the beach in silence, and I just knew after that dream that we had a rendezvous (laughs). So, it just deepened my interest in him.

Then I was writing a book on compassion, and I was becoming very frustrated that so few spiritual theologians in the Christian tradition had written about compassion. They're writing about contemplation all the time, but not compassion. I was looking and looking, and finally I found in Eckhart this major treatise. It's not just a sermon, although he wrote sermons on compassion, delivered them. But a major treatise on Luke 6: "Be you compassionate, just as your Father is compassionate." It was just what I was looking for, real meat on those bones.

Those were some of my conversion experiences early with Eckhart. The more I read them, especially around the theme of compassion and then went broader, the more I realized I was in the presence of a major heart and mind teller. So, we hung out from then on. I've been teaching him ever since. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Can you talk a little bit more about what it was like to experience his presence in the dream? And as your life has unfolded, have you continued to feel his presence in that way?

Matthew Fox: Well, as I say, it was the most transcendent dream of my life. It's interesting that it was in silence. He was wearing a full Dominican habit. He had no face, which is very interesting. To me, that means he's every man, he's every person, every woman, he's all of ours. But we

were walking along the beach of the ocean. I think that's significant, too. For one thing, he wrote a... It is my favorite sermon of his. Whenever I read it for years, I would cry: his sermon on compassion where he, among other things, he quotes John about how God is in us and we are in God, so it's panentheism, but that we are in compassion and compassion is in us. He ends it with this amazing passage where he says, "We don't know what the human soul is. The human soul is as ineffable as God. We can't talk about the human soul anymore than we can really talk about God." And he says, "Well, we can know a little bit about the soul, when it goes out to work and all that," but ultimately we can't know.

But then he says, he ends the sermon with this one sentence. He says, "The soul is where God works compassion. Amen." And my instinct's to say everyone in the church fainted and he fainted, too, and fell off the pulpit, that he didn't know what he had just said, that we don't have a soul until we have compassion. That's a mouthful. That's a mouthful, especially after he leads up to it by talking about our being in compassion and talks about the deep waters of compassion. Those are fetal images. Of course, the word compassion, both Hebrew and Arabic comes from the word for womb. So, the idea that in the womb, we are in compassion and then we leave our mother's womb and then the Earth and the universe becomes another womb for us if we respond, if we grow up, that the whole world, really, the whole universe, creation itself is our resting place. He has a whole sermon on repose and resting and how all beings seek repose and so forth. That's us, too, that we need repose in our life. That's contemplation, isn't it? That's repose. Return to the waters.

Kirsten Oates: Oh, that's beautiful.

Jim Finley: I had that experience, too, after Merton died, a dream with Merton. Same way, kind of a numinous dream. Merton gave a talk once on God, does God seek us in our sleep? So, somehow the numinous quality of the dream is so intimate, you know what I mean? Kind of sets us on a course.

I recall for me, Merton would mention Eckhart and the other mystics in his talks. Just then, there was just one translation there at the time on Eckhart, Blackney. What's his... Blackney. I have to say, when I first read, unlike John of the Cross and so on, I couldn't quite get what he was saying. It just seemed elusive to me. John of the Cross and the cloud and the others kind of, Theresa. It was after I left the monastery, and then I read your breakthrough, the translations with the introduction, and then C.F. Kelly, *The Divine Knowledge of Meister Eckhart* and then Reiner Sherman. Then, he came to be very substantive for me over the years, giving retreats on Eckhart and reading him over and over and over again. He's so intimate and profound, just amazing, amazing person for all of us.

Matthew Fox: And so practical, I mean, like his sermon on Martha and Mary where he just flips the whole tradition and says Mary was the mature one because she could do two things at once. She could do the dishes in one room and listen to Christ in the next room. Mary had to be centered, focused entirely on Christ because she was immature. He said, "Someday, Mary will grow up to be as mature as Martha and be able to do two things at once."

Jim Finley: Also, it dawned on me later after I left, that the reason he eluded me at first, he's so disarmingly immediate to the intimacy of our own experience about detachment, and he's really talking about a foundational stance of our subjectivity in the world, that he sheds a light on that. He's elusive if you're thinking for some kind of pious light. And instead, he's shining a light on how we get up in the morning and go to bed at night, like an experiential self-knowledge in the presence of God. So, it was very helpful to me to see that.

Kirsten Oates: And just on that practical note, we have talked a lot in the podcast about the fact that Eckhart wasn't a cloistered monk, that he lived out in the world, he traveled through the world, and how that makes him a different kind of teacher for us. Jim, would you like to just share a little bit about that, and then Matthew could respond?

Jim Finley: Yeah, this is my sense of it, having been in the cloister where I was introduced to it. In the Catholic Church, most of these religious orders, including the Dominicans, the Jesuits, the Franciscans, it's a vowed life. It takes some form of service to the world, the consecrated life of service to the world. But we also have in the Church contemplative or cloistered orders. Teresa of Ávila was cloistered. Thérèse the Little Flower was cloistered. Guido II, the ladder to heaven, was cloistered. John of the Cross, a Carmelite priest, they had ministry. But when he got ordained, he was intending to join the Carthusians to become a hermit. Thomas Merton wanted to become a Carthusian, and the Abbott stopped it, wrote to Rome and stopped it. So, what you have is this hidden contemplative life, and every aspect of the life is intended to nurture and foster this deepening communion with God or the deepening awareness of God's oneness with us, like an eschatological sign in the world, like God alone. Through that hidden life of prayer, it touches the whole world.

That life, for six years, had a very profound effect on me. Really, meant so much to me and the talks I had with Merton about it. The Berrigan brothers used to come. They were reformers. They would argue they didn't quite agree with Merton. We had talks about that. It was a lovely mutual reflective dialogue they had.

But then when I left the monastery, I was out here and I still wanted to live the contemplative way of life, and I realized it isn't necessary to live in a monastery to live a deeply contemplative life of God's infinite communion with us and share it with others. Eckhart was very influential in that because he found it in the world. He was in the midst of the world radiating this presence. So, when I lead my retreats, when I give the retreats, like with Matthew, people who come to the retreats are living in the world. He's a lovely mentor for how to bring this contemplative divinity of daily life into the details of our day like that. That's how it affected me.

Matthew Fox: I'd like to share just one quote he has about work. I put it in my book on the reinvention of work. I include a lot of mystics, East and West. But his statement is stunning. He says, "The outward work can never be small if your inward work is great; and your outward work can never be great or good if your inward work is small or of little worth. Your inward work always includes in itself all size, all breadth, and all length." I have goosebumps right now. That's a stunning example of his bringing the contemplative and the action together, you see. Of course, this is Dominican.

That's the Dominican philosophy here. It was a break. I mean, both Francis and Dominic, they were contemporaries in the early 13th century. They broke consciously, deliberately with the monastic tradition because, at that time, the monastic tradition was in bed with the feudal system and the feudal system was dying.

So, a lot of monastic work was not happening... well, because there was a whole new generation and a larger population because Europe had warmed up because of shifts in the ocean, and then the serfs were being freed because there wasn't work in the feudal system for the young people. So, all these young people fled to towns which overnight became cities, or fled to cities which overnight became big. Then the universities were invented at the end of the 12th century, too. So, you didn't have to go to a monastery any longer for education. You'd go to the city and the city was new, and it was very young and they had communes. They had communal living. It was a very, very exciting renaissance that was happening.

That's when Dominic and Francis came along and said, "Hey, you can be a contemplative and not stay in the security of the monastery. We can do it while we're working with people, but living in community." They borrow, of course, some of the prayer methods from monastic traditions such as the chanting of the Psalms and so forth. But they also put a big emphasis on attending the new universities, and especially Dominic did that.

The way Aquinas put it was that it's important to share the gifts of your contemplation with others. That was a little different from the big emphasis on being a full-time contemplative in the monastery. Not that the monasteries didn't serve. They certainly did. They kept agriculture alive and scholarship alive and so much more.

But there was this new thing happening in the 12th and 13th century, and it was the idea and it was considered very radical. I mean, many of the monks just responded with shock that Francis and Dominic and their followers proposed that you can be a contemplative and be in the world.

But it's interesting that Jim has lived both, both lives so he can give us an opinion on the possibility of both. Of course, as Jim knows, the contemplative life is not without its shadow side, either, or that there are people who... We're all human beings, whether we're in a monastery, out of a monastery, or half in and half out. We all have our needs and we can all make mistakes.

Jim Finley: Yeah. My sense of it is the cloistered life and life out here, in one sense, is very different. You can also see how this Spirit works in the Church, where a new epoch emerges and universalizing the call to holiness and so on. It's also true, I think, the hidden life is more of a rare charism, but if you're really living it, just like in the world... Thomas Merton once said, "We should all get down on our knees right now and thank God we can't live the way we want to." He said, "You can't love and live on your own terms." If you live the monastic life in a deepest sense, it unravels you. Just completely lays you bare in... But the trouble is, there's thousands of ways to hide in a monastery. And it goes on all the time, and Merton saw that.

Merton once said, "Life is 98% Mickey Mouse, and it doesn't help to relocate because you discover Mickey Mouse waiting for you at the airport to show you to your new apartment."

He said, “The key is to find the kernel of pure truth in every situation.” And he found it as a monk. I think we’re called to find it where we’re planted and be this contemplative in the midst of our situation.

Eckhart is so lovely about universalizing the divinization to the ground and then concretizing it in our situation. He was in his situation; I’m in my situation. And so, it’s just endless variations of this transformative process of call to God. It’s beautiful.

Matthew Fox: And he was practical. I mean, he was a prior for eight years at Erfhurt. He was a assistant provincial and had to travel to Bohemia several times. It’s a pretty long way, and he didn’t go by airplane. He had to deal with personnel, with others, and running a monastery or friary and, of course, teaching and running some of the academic stuff and so forth. So, he wasn’t just in a cloistered circumstance. It was a both and thing that he was doing and that is the ideal in the Dominican [inaudible 00:20:34]

Jim Finley: You know the nuns at Strausberg. They recorded or wrote down a lot of... We have the talks. A lot of it we owe to them in terms of how they very faithfully wrote it down, and the Bigeens, too. You know some of those nuns must have been touched by that. I’d give anything to listen into the spiritual direction sessions where they would come one-on-one with Eckhart, to have Eckhart for your spiritual director. In a way, he exudes it in his sermons because it goes right to your heart.

Matthew Fox: And he had a wonderful sense of humor. I mean, he’d quote people saying, “I don’t understand a word you’re preaching.” And he’d say, “And neither do I.”

Jim Finley: Yeah. Sometimes he would say, “You don’t understand it,” he said, “but don’t worry about it. It’s okay.” Like a light touch to deep things.

Matthew Fox: A light touch, yes. In one of his most powerful sermons about the difference between the Godhead and God, he ends it by saying, “Don’t worry about it. None of you understood it, don’t worry. But I had to give this sermon, even if I preached to a poor box. No one was in church, I would’ve given this sermon to preach to the poor box.” So, I think that says a lot about, I’d say, the passion in him, but the artist in him, that he had to birth this, and whatever happens, happens.

Jim Finley: Reiner Sherman says, “The fact Eckhart’s clothing is full of holes suggests to us the fire that consumed him, that conflict gives way to paradox and at last invites silence.” And to me, what that means is each of us is to live out of the fire in our own heart. Each of us have that radicality of kind of a obediential fidelity to follow the light that’s given to us to follow. Eckhart’s so good that way, kind of modeling that for us because he did it, and not without a price.

Matthew Fox: I was going to say he paid a price. Yes.

Jim Finley: He did. He did.

Kirsten Oates: You’ve both shared how he was such a support to women in his time, to the Bigeens and to the nuns in Strausberg. And it’s amazing that then they were the ones, after the Church condemned him, to hold onto his work, and probably the reason we have it today, so much

of it today. The long game.

Matthew Fox: And of course, he speaks to a lot of women today.

I'll tell you one story. I had a student and she was a therapist. There was a class in Eckhart we were doing with my little book *Meditations with Eckhart*. And then one day in class, she spoke up and she said, "I have to tell you this story," she said. "I was sexually abused by my father." And she said, "For years I went to therapists, and ultimately I became one." But she said the deep healing did not happen until reading Eckhart. There is a difference between psychological healing and the healing that the mystics can bring, and it's not either/or. But there's a dimension that Eckhart brought her and I think that mystics spring us and that our culture needs so badly that is more cosmic, if you will, and that includes our souls, just like he was saying in that quote about work, that our psyche and the cosmos go together. When we are abused, there's a rupture that happens in our soul, so to speak.

Someone like Eckhart, I think, brings the whole back again when we've been split into parts. I think that's what this woman was saying. She's kept in touch with me over the years because this has been such an important part of her work, but also of her healing that continues.

Kirsten Oates: That's amazing. Well, just building on that, Matthew and Jim, can you talk to us a little bit about how these teachings invite people on their own spiritual path? How might these teachings impact us, guide us, carry us forward?

Jim Finley: I want to tie it where this becomes spiritual direction or pastor, this very personal level. We read Eckhart at that level. I think one way that it touches people is we get so caught up in the demands of the day. We're being carried along by the momentum of the day's demands. We have this feeling that we're skimming over the surface of the depths of our own life, like we're suffering from depth deprivation. We also sense that God's unexplainable oneness with us is hidden in the depths over which we're skimming. So, the whole idea, can I slow down enough to catch up with myself or slow down enough to be present to myself, and that requires a certain intimate quality of detachment, see. I have to look at the idolatries or the thing. How can I set aside a rendezvous, a daily rendezvous with God and then habituate it through the day to knot absolute ties, the passing contingencies of impressions and so on, and sink the taproot of my heart into a deeper place.

It seems to me that everything Eckhart says is an invitation to that because you can't skimread Meister Eckhart. It's the one-liners that gets you. He says it, and you have to stop. The pedagogy, he requires you to stop in kind of a patient... And then you discover it's luminous, and the very way he's inviting you to follow him is accessing you, and you're dropping down to this deeper place with him like that. And that's for me also, as a psychotherapist, is where spirituality touches healing, like the depth dimension of the healing encounter, like Matthew was saying about this woman. I see that all the time with people.

Matthew Fox: Well, that's beautifully put. I'm certainly on board with it. What I derived from Eckhart was what I call the four paths of [inaudible 00:26:54] spirituality. Because traditionally we've been taught procreation, illumination, union, name the spiritual journey. But those ideas are

essentially Greek. They come from Plotinus and Proclus and then Denis the Areopagite picked up on them.

But in reading Eckhart I found, and the first time I ever wrote about Eckhart was an article on the four paths in Eckhart. It's the first time I ever wrote about the four paths. What I find there is a different naming of the journey. One is *via positiva*, which is the path of awe, wonder, and joy and delight. Ecstasy of that kind can open us up to this wanting. We have wanting experiences in nature and in love and in friendship, and in many circumstances, that's the *via positiva*.

The *via negativa* is two things. It's silence; it's that emptying and detachment and that dimension of contemplation. But it is also, of course, suffering and loss and grief, coming apart. Pema Chödrön says when things fall apart, and that happens. Chaos might be another word for it. Rupture might be another word for it. Then comes the *via creativa*, that creativity flows when you've been empty.

Eckhart has this great sharing. He says, "I once had a dream. Though a man, I dreamt I was pregnant, pregnant with nothingness. And out of this nothingness, God was born." That's a tremendous naming of the passage from the *via negativa*, the emptying, whether it comes through suffering, which it often does, or whether it comes through silence. It's both emptying. It's both letting go and letting be. It's detachment, to use Jim's word.

Eckhart invented two words, *apishchindenheit*, which I translate as let go, and *galossenheim*, which I translate as let be. But however you translate it, detachment, let go, let be, those are the lessons of the *via negativa*, whether it's about meditation or whether it's about suffering. Through suffering I should say.

But the *creativa* is so big for Eckhart. He once gave a Christmas sermon and said, "What good is it to me if Mary gave birth to the son of God 1,400 years ago and I don't give birth to the son of God in my person, in my time, and in my culture?" You see, we're all here to be mothers of God. So, he didn't put Mary on a pedestal, which so often happens, but rather she's kind of the one who shows us the way we're all here to birth the Christ. As he said, "God is always needing to be born."

And then the fourth path is the *via transformativa*, and that gives us direction to our creativity because, obviously, our human creativity, which is the image of God in practice, is very powerful, but it can be demonic as well as divine because with our creativity, we make more hydrogen bombs or we destroy forests in a day that God and nature 10,000 years to create and all these other things we do with our creativity. So, creativity needs steering, and that's the fourth path. That's where compassion comes in and that's where justice comes in. And Eckhart actually says this. He says, "Compassion means justice." It's a quote. He unites the prophetic tradition of Israel with the other traditions of the world about compassion. But also, he says, and this is an amazing statement from a mystic like him, he says, "The person who understands what I say about justice understands everything I have to say." That is just stunning.

That really feeds right into liberation theology and other efforts in the late 20th century and onwards to push justice to the front of the line, whether we're talking economic justice,

gender justice, racial justice, and social justice. And so that's what I've been teaching a lot over the years with real profound and exciting results from people. I thank Eckhart for all of that. I thank them him for myself because these four paths helped to name my journey as well. They're open-ended. I call it an open-ended spiral. It's not climbing a ladder. It's an open-ended spiral. And of course, you go back. The via transformative, bringing justice, is about bringing more people to the table for the via positiva so more people can get the depths and the joy of life, and then go on the other paths. As Eckhart says, breakthrough does not happen once a year, once a month, once a week or once a day, but many times every day. And breakthrough, for him, is what wanting is for Julian. He says, "In breakthrough, I learn that God and I are one."

Kirsten Oates: Beautiful. Thank you for sharing that, Matthew.

Jim Finley: Turning to the Mystics will continue in a moment.

I think also through Eckhart, I guess any teacher teaching, we each find our own way to word the word of Eckhart that touched us so it carries over. That's the way I put it, too, with Eckhart, all the mystics, really, if you look, the seminal passages, is what Eckhart is telling us is to find that act, find that person, find that community, find that form of service or creativity, which when you give yourself over to it with your whole heart, it unravels your petty preoccupation with your self-absorbed self and strangely brings you home to yourself, near your origin.

I think that so much to me is a way of articulating what he's inviting us to do in the midst of our... and regardless of the situation: We're married, it's the depths of the potential in marriage. If you're a parent, if you're widowed, if you're old, if you have a terminal illness, if you're teaching a kindergarten class. What does it mean to be a contemplative politician? What does it mean to be a contemplative attorney? What does it mean to really invest the whole of oneself in this fulfilling way? I think Eckhart's a good patron saint for that way of life, which is really Christ's life.

Matthew Fox: Yeah. I couldn't agree more. One of his teachings that I have fun with has this invitation to play, I think, is his teaching to work without a why and to love without a why. One day, it was a Sunday, I remember, and I went swimming in a lake near where I lived north of Chicago with two friends. There were three of us. And five minutes into the swim, one of my friends lost his teeth. Went down to the bottom of the brown lake. The three of us spent an hour diving for those teeth. We never found them.

I noticed when we got out of the water, I wasn't my usual self after going swimming on a hot August day. I didn't feel relaxed and so forth. Then I realized, we had introduced a why. Instead of just going swimming to swim, we had gone swimming and then had a purpose at which we failed.

Well, the next day, I had to teach Eckhart in the summer program, and sure enough, we were using that little book, and in the reading was that passage to live without a why and work without a why and love without a why. So, we never found the teeth, but I found that truth of that inside of Eckhart. And of course, living in a capitalist culture, everything tends to be for a why, for a purpose. As Jim said earlier, we're so busy doing what. But Eckhart just

really shoots through all that when he says that there is this other dimension to being and to living and to working and to loving. That is just do it for its own sake, as he says. You do to justice, to do justice; live to live. That is the wonderful, I think, fuller, mystical view of the world and of our work. It does say something about obsessive busyness.

Jim Finley: I want to add to that also something, is when I was in the monastery, I had a chance to study medieval philosophy under Dan Walsh about Aventura and Scotus. I was introduced to the thought of Martin Heidegger, the phenomenology of... He had a deep respect for Eckhart, called the master of language and also the turning of Meister Eckhart toward the end, the end of searching for foundations and so on.

Here's a lovely quote from Heidegger, and Sherman has it in the front piece of his book in German and then in English. Heidegger's so Eckhardian. Heidegger says, "What seems easier than to let a being be just the being that it is? Or does this turn out to be the most difficult a task, particularly if such a project to let a being be as it is represents the opposite of the indifference that simply turns its back upon the being itself. We must turn toward the being, think about it with regards to its being. By such a thinking at the same time, let it rest upon its own unique way to be." So, there's a deep kind of non-violence in Eckhart. Instead of moving in to impose oneself and fabricate and change it, to first ponder, respect and reverence the mystery of ourselves and of all things, and then creatively work with that. That's very different than a capitalistic kind of marketing structuring kind of manipulation of things.

Matthew Fox: It's about reverence, as you say, and receptivity.

Jim Finley: Yes. Exactly.

Matthew Fox: It's very Taoist. Years ago, I lectured at a college in, it's actually a Lutheran College in California, and I certainly brought Eckhart in and stuff. When I finished, there was a note on my lectern saying, "Please come to my office." It turned out to be one of the professors. He was head of the political science department, but he was from China and he was Taoist. He told me that every weekend he goes to a different church or synagogue around the area to hear if there's any Taoism being taught in America. And he said to me, "That talk you gave is the first Taoist talk I've heard since I've come to America." I said, "Well, it was Meister Eckhart."

That was one of my first awakenings that it's not just West that Eckhart brings with him, but obviously he brings Hinduism because Coomaraswamy actually says that hearing Eckhart is like listening to Sanskrit. He says that it's like reading the Upanishads. For a Hindu, which Coomaraswamy is, and by the way, he was fluent in 36 languages, Coomaraswamy was. 36 languages. But he loved Eckhart. He said that reading Eckhart's like reading the Upanishads. That's the ultimate compliment from a Hindu.

But again, Eckhart is applicable to so many of the deepest truths because he goes so deep. He never read Taoism. He never read Buddhism. But I have a chapter in my book on Eckhart and Thich Nhat Hanh. There are absolutely parallel teachings in both. So many things that Buddhism talks about, Eckhart talks about including his stunning phrase, "I pray God to rid me of God." We have to be detached sometimes even from God and we can cling to our own

versions of what God is. That's where a lot of religious war has come from. A humanist of so much depth because it's not that he was exposed to these traditions, but he went so deep into his own soul and into his own Christian tradition that he found the common ground.

Jim Finley: I want to pick up on what you're saying because this had a big effect on me. If I look at the table of contents of Meister Eckhart: A Warrior Mystic for Our Time, and you go down the list of people in this encounter of Eckhart, and the people you mentioned there are all people who also came to Gethsemane to talk to Merton. Thich Nhat Hanh came there to talk to Merton. You mentioned this meeting. Abraham Joshua Heschel, the Jewish mystic and philosopher, came there to visit with Merton. John Wu, the Taoist from China, came there and gave a talk and he translated the New Testament into Chinese and the opening set lines of John's gospel, "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God," he translated in the beginning was the Dao and the Dao was with God.

Merton said the world will not survive religion based on tribal consciousness, but those who go to the very depths of their own tradition, they converge and recognize each other. If they bear witness, religious faith could be a unit of force in the world. He said that's the great scandal of the Church. It doesn't teach its own mystical heritage. People are leaving because the soul knows where it needs to go, trying to find it.

The depth and beauty of Eckhart bears witness to the depth and beauty of this. He would see it, like you say in his day, he didn't have the opportunity, but certainly had he had the opportunity, he would've immediately resonated with these. He would've seen the underlying unity in these different dialects, these different languages of the ineffable.

Matthew Fox: Yeah. When I wrote Merton and asked him where to go to study spirituality, he told me to go to Paris. He said that to me in his letter back to me. This is the late '60s. "People are taking LSD and everything to have mystical trips," he said, "and the Church is ignoring, not talking about it at all. So, I'm very glad to hear that you're going on to just study spirituality, et cetera." I couldn't agree more. And like you, I will always be grateful to Merton. Like you, I read him as a teenager, his Seven Story Mountain.

Kirsten Oates: I think that concept of living without a why is just very confusing and hard to grasp, I think especially with the way we so long for purpose and meaning in our lives as human beings. So, I'd love to hear from each of you, how does that apply to you and the work that you do and your life right now? That living without a why.

Matthew Fox: There's so much else, I think, in paradox. It's both/and. Obviously, we have to live for whys. We have to pay our bills and keep the roof over the head, et cetera, care for one another. But there's this other dimension. We have to, at times, live, love, and work without a why, which again means to me a purpose [inaudible 00:42:13]. Contemplation, I think by definition, is not for a why. It's not for a purpose. It's to learn to be with being and solitude, emptying for the sake of emptying. Again, playing. I think kids play to play, right? That's why we have to call them in for dinner. That's a wonderful thing because time goes out the door. I've always said to my students, "When you can say, where has the time gone? You've just had a mystical experience," because you're beyond the everyday world of time and even place.

There's a wonderful French philosopher who died quite recently, Gaston Bachalard, and

he talks about what I call the three eyes. I think it's a wonderful taking apart of a mystical experience. That's so special because it's hard to talk about mysticism, but then to take it apart is even neater. Three eyes. One is immensity, the other is intensity, and the other is intimacy. He says that we humans, we have these experiences of immensity where we feel connected to the universe, for example. And we have experiences of intensity, and we know we have them because we remember them. The intense experience are the memorable experiences. But to me, what wraps it up is the intimacy. In spite of the fact that it's immense, that we connect to the universe and that it's intense, it is also intimate. He's so poetic when he talks about these things, but he talks about how we go beyond the now and the place into a bigger place. He doesn't use the word mysticism, but I think that it's a marvelous naming of what happens in a mystical experience: immensity, intensity, and intimacy.

Jim Finley: Yeah. For me, Dan Walsh, I think it's from Dan, Philosophy and Duns Scotus, that the love of creation is, in a sense, greater than the love of redemption because the love of redemption had a why. The love of creation had no why. The word I use for it is the anarchy of the ineffable because in the ground, there's no intentionality in the ground. We're rising without a why. The welling up of the ground's pregnant with the Trinity, the ebullitio flows over as the universe's life. To me, what it is to me, it's this: is that in moments of mystical awakening, like quickening or moments of deep intimacy, but also moments of where you're immersed in trauma, the reflective view that has reasons falls apart. You know what I mean? You're just left bare and empty-handed in the immediacy of something. That's what I think solitude is, too, that we're less and less able to explain to anybody, including our ourselves, what's happening to us. That anarchy at the center, the God's infinity of that unfolding, incarnate infinity intimately realized.

But as soon as you have a why, there's a kind of attachment in that the why you choose or all the other whys you didn't choose. But if you're infinitely open and let things flow and come to you like the Dao, it's not getting fixated on. It's like a wayless way rather than fixated on a way.

Anyway, those are some things that touched me poetically, but also my deep experience is people in therapy where they share these moments with me, where they're awakened, it's really the reflective self that had a why is all of a sudden transcended. And it's a boundary, like T.S. Elliot, the axis of, the still point of the turning world. You're left empty-handed without a why, is an overflowing fullness that washes over you and you experience it as homecoming. You feel this. Then that permeates our why's, as the intention to elicit that depth that's in every intention, hopefully, the mark of which is love, I guess. You don't get closed in. Those are some things that come to me.

Kirsten Oates: Both of those, so helpful. Helping that concept that can be confusing, becoming much, much clearer. Thank you.

Jim Finley: Love interviews with poets or Mary Oliver, poets or philosophers or someone who's deeply in love like this, and you ask them to try to find words that could adequately explain what they live by and they're empty-handed do. There's like a, "I don't know from whence it comes." I yield to it and it flows through me, where it grants itself to me. But the price I pay for is nothing less than everything. I lay down myself for this flowing that it's almost what

my whole life is.

Matthew Fox: That's the *via creativa*.

Jim Finley: Yeah, it is.

Matthew Fox: Aquinas says the same spirit that hovered over creation at the beginning hovers over the mind of the artist at work. I just love that because it marries the creativity of the universe with our own creativity. It is co-creating. We participate in the same work of the Holy Spirit. That's kind of how I see it.

I heard Mary Oliver speak. Shortly before she died, she came to San Francisco and filled the theater, acted in, and when she finished her talk, she said, "Now, I want to speak to the young people here. I'm 84 years old, and I want to tell you everything I've learned about life. Three things I've learned. First, pay attention. Second, be astonished. Third, share your astonishment. That's everything I've learned about life. The rest is all details."

Jim Finley: In the interview she did with Krista Tippet just before she died on being, Krista Tippet dropped this poem where Mary Oliver says it's a poem where she was burdened with things and she went down to the coastline, the waves crashing on the beach, and she poured out all her problems to the ocean, all these waves, and the ocean said, "Pardon me, I have work to do." See?

Matthew Fox: That's good. I like that.

Kirsten Oates: That's beautiful. Just to close this wonderful conversation that we've had today, I just wanted to ask you about Eckhart's approach to prayer. I have a quote. Matthew, this is a quote from your book: "Whoever seeks God in a special way gets the way but misses God, who lies hidden in it. But whoever seeks God without any special way gets God as he is in himself, and that person lives with the sun and is life itself." Could you just comment on how we might take Eckhart's way of being forward today?

Matthew Fox: Well, I think Eckhart is saying we can get attached to anything, including our modes of prayer, to remain open, that phrase that Jim just shared about being open. That the Spirit is always present and approaching us and often through surprise ways. We meet a new person, have a conversation, and just so many ways. Reading a book, meditating on our pets and with them. I think what he's saying radically is stay open. There is a danger of being so attached to our methods.

Another teaching and similar, he talks about how some people, sometimes if you're attached to your methods, it's like wrapping God up in a blanket and putting God under your bench or under your pew. For him, there is this radical openness that is essential. I think that statement of his is very Dominican, and it's what we began our conversation with: When you're in the world, anything can happen, and it doesn't mean you have to flee back to your cell. He says, "Once you've learned to let go and let be, you are always in the right place at the right time, whether you're in the market, a lot of people and noise, or whether you're in a monastic cell or any place in between."

Here's one more example. He says, "A person worked in a stable. He had breakthrough.

What did he do? He went back to the stable.” The gift of contemplation and the gift of communion and presence is something that doesn’t have to change the outside of our life. It changes us on the inside, and we just bring that breakthrough to whatever we’re called to do.

Jim Finley: There’s these letters of Plato. In one of the letters, Plato says, “As regard to my essential teaching, I have never written it down and never will. It’s handed on from master to student in a face-to-face encounter, and a fire catches hold in the heart of the student.” Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, the Tibetan [inaudible 00:51:51], he said that the artist needs to learn the discipline of art, perspective, but the art begins when a birth breaks open. John Cage says, “The artist doesn’t begin in earnest until they no longer know what they’re doing.”

So, I think prayers like that, too. You look at the mystics, what they’re really concerned about, all these mystics, they’re looking at this tipping point. We have to start out some way with an understanding. We need to a place to get our balance. But they all talk about discerning this tipping point, like Teresa in the fourth mansion where you realize your heart’s being enlarged to divine proportions, where John of the Cross starts talking about finding God in a passage through a dark night. They each have their own metaphor. I think this metaphor of letting go of all ways is a wayless way that pours out in every way and incarnates it in every way as long as you’re not attached to any of them. That doesn’t mean you don’t have a way. It just mean it’s an open-ended way that’s woven and is harmonious with all these ways, that we walk our way. It’s given to us and it shifts and changes.

That’s my sense of it. Because there’s always a method. Like therapy has a method or writing a book has a method, but when it’s real, it’s a method in the service, or the breaking through is something that can’t be methodized. It’s not reducible because you can tell when it is a method. It has the feeling of a method. It has that feeling to it. But when it’s art or love, it has this luminous quality to it, and God’s the infinity of that luminosity, I think Eckhart would say. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Well, it’s felt like a very luminous conversation today. What a gift to bring the two of you together to talk about Eckhart and a little bit about Merton and your common experience with his contemplative, gifted and kind, compassionate personality as well.

Jim Finley: And I want to say, again, Kirsten, thank you for your skillful mentoring of this and letting it flow. But Matthew, I’m so blessed by our dialogue. I’m so grateful that you joined us like this. I’m so touched by it, and the resonance with... Anyway, it was beautiful. I’m so grateful. Thank you.

Matthew Fox: I assure you it’s mutual. I thank you. It’s a joy to meet you, especially having read more of your own story and your most recent and courageous book. I, too, say thank you Kirsten for mediating and being the leader in this process.

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.