



The Course's Program

Studying, Practicing, and Extending Jesus' New Meaning, So That It Becomes the *Only* Meaning for You

by Robert Perry

A Course in Miracles makes stunning promises for what its students will experience. Just one list of these promises includes: “peace...happiness...a sense of worth and beauty that transcends the world...the warmth of sure protection always...a deep abiding comfort, and a rest so perfect it can never be upset” (W-pI.122.1:2-6).

How exactly are we going to realize these inspiring promises? Surely, it is not enough just to own the book. And just as surely, simply talking about the ideas is not going to do it either. What, then, is it going to take?

For most of my first decade with the Course, I assumed that we had to devise our own practical methods for applying its teachings. However, I then began to notice that those methods are there in the Course itself, in surprising abundance. I eventually realized that the Course sees itself not as a teaching, but as a *course*—an educational program aimed at guiding us, step by step, to the realization of its teachings. Slowly, the outlines of that program began to take shape for me.

The program is in essence very simple. It's all about meaning. The meaning that we believe in determines the experience that we have. We are all familiar with deciding that a certain situation means something different and then watching our experience of it turn on a dime. That is a tiny example of the Course's overall goal: to have us fully internalize a whole new system of meaning, which will then transform our experience of reality itself.

How do we internalize this new system of meaning? We first *study* it, then we *practice* it, then we *extend* it to others. That simple and logical progression is the basis for the Course's physical layout. The Text represents study. The Workbook represents practice. And the Manual for Teachers represents extension.

These three broad aspects then break down into seven smaller activities, seven ways in which each and every day becomes an exercise in realizing the Course's teachings. These, too, are arranged in a simple, logical order, in which each of the seven activities is founded on the one before it and in turn is the foundation for the one after it. In this way, the activities reach gradually from longer times at the start of our day into smaller and smaller increments of the day. They reach from formal, sit-down sessions to spontaneous, on-the-fly applications, which the Course wants us to make a habit. And they reach from peaceful experience apart from the world into our emotional—and even behavioral—response to the hustle and bustle of the world.

Each of these seven activities is supported by copious instructions in the Course itself. (The Workbook in particular provides extensive training in five of the seven activities.) These instructions are remarkably practical, teaching us in detail how to do these activities, how to make sure they work, how to increase our frequency of them, how to be flexible when circumstances get in the way, and what to do when we forget.

I find the overall program to be incredibly effective. It's like a beautifully designed engine, in which each piece works perfectly to shift my mind in a particular way, and all the pieces work together to drive the overall shift the Course is seeking. I am amazed that such a masterfully designed system exists. Indeed, just as the Course has received widespread recognition for the profundity of its teachings, I think it will one day receive similar acclaim for the brilliance of its program.

But we are a long, long way from that now. We are still in an understandable early phase of being preoccupied with the teachings, in which we think that if we grasp them fully enough and talk about them thoroughly enough that this will somehow be enough. *A Course in Miracles* as currently practiced is a classic example of what philosopher Ken Wilber has called chit-chat religion. As much as we tout the importance of the practical, we tend to be obsessed with theoretical issues like the details of the metaphysics, while virtually ignoring issues of how to practice these ideas.

As a teacher I see this, and struggle with it, all the time. When I talk about Course ideas, students perk up. But when I move on to what we need to do to internalize these ideas, they check out. This lack of interest in what to do has even been taken one step further, so that we have actually explained away the *need* to do. Think of the messages that circulate among Course students: Don't study because words are just symbols of symbols. Don't worry about doing the practice

right; just screw it up and forgive yourself. Don't extend, because there's nobody out there to extend *to*. Don't do anything because you need do nothing.

And yet in many of us there is a yearning that just won't go away. If you feel that yearning, if you are not satisfied with anything less than laying hold of what the Course promises, the good news is that the perfect program exists, and you *can* do it. It really doesn't take all that much time. It can be easily integrated into a busy life; indeed, it is specifically designed for that. What it does take is *focus*, and that is merely a matter of motivation. If you *want* to focus, you can.

It will take time to make this program your way of life. Our minds tend to be very undisciplined and on a functional level we are convinced that conventional sources of happiness will deliver more. And yet the program is self-reinforcing; the results speak for themselves. In spite of all inclinations to the contrary, we gradually become convinced that this is the way to happiness. We tend to go after the program with surges of motivation and effort, followed by periods of distraction and apathy. Yet if we possess that unquenchable yearning, it will always drag us back to the program and pull us up to the next level.

A key in this process is to keep the program in front of us. We have to be aware of it, to reconcile ourselves to the need for it, to reinforce its importance in our minds, and to review it. That is why I have put together the following summary. I strongly encourage you to print this out and review it on a regular—even daily—basis.

Just a few points about how I've laid this out: The major headings are study, practice, and extension, and I have described each one as part of a single process of internalizing the Course's new meaning. With the minor headings—the seven activities I mentioned earlier—I've tried to describe them so as to make clear their role in the overall process. Finally, there is a series of practical points about how to do each of the seven activities. Each of these bullet points (with the exception of "Keep your head down" under "Daily study") is grounded directly in passages in the Course or in private comments to Helen Schucman and Bill Thetford. The sheer number of these bullet points—and I've tried hard to include only the really essential ones—shows just how central this program is to *A Course in Miracles*.

Study

*Reading the Course slowly and intentionally
in order to learn the new meaning it teaches,
as the basis for practicing and extending that meaning.*

Daily study: *feeding your mind the meaning that you will practice and extend*

- "Set yourself the goal of really studying for this course. There can be no doubt of the wisdom of this decision, for any student who wants to pass it" (Jesus to Helen and Bill).
- "Introduce structure" (Jesus to Helen), such as a reading schedule and daily study periods. Think in terms of reading at least a Text section or Workbook lesson each day.
- Read *slowly* and even repeatedly, paying attention to each word and thinking about what you read.
- Treat it as a course "that means exactly what it says" (T-8.IX.8:1).
- "*Be very careful* in interpreting this" (Jesus to Helen and Bill): Consciously say no to the ego's distortions (W-pI.196.2:4)
- Keep your head down: Be sensitive to immediate context rather than projecting your favorite themes onto each passage. *Aim to learn something new.*
- "Take this personally" (Jesus to Helen): Insert your name.
- Treat it as practical, rather than as an intellectual game. If a practice is given, do it.
- Review! The intention to learn is *always* attended by reviewing.

Practice

*Dwelling on and applying a new meaning
in order to experience and internalize it,
and thus perceive everything through its lens.*

Morning and evening quiet time: *using extended practice (5-30+ min.) to found and end the day on a mindset of peace*

- Wake with a thought of God on your mind.
- As soon as possible after waking (considering the need to have few distractions and to be reasonably ready) take your quiet time, alone in a quiet place.
- To prepare for your practice, you may want to have some study time.

- The first phase of the quiet time is often an *active phase* of applying ideas to the specifics of your life. Another good active beginning is Course-based prayer (see Part II of the Workbook).
- This prepares you for a longer *receptive phase*, usually meditation.
- Meditation in the Course is all about holding a single-minded focus on your goal—using few words, one word, or no words, watching for mind-wandering and bringing your mind back every time, and holding a heightened sense of confidence and desire along with a sense of the importance and holiness of what you are doing.
- “Do not let the time be less than meets your deepest need” (W-pI.193.10:6).
- Make sure you have an idea to practice for that day, which will become the central pole of your day. (If you are doing the Workbook, it provides that.)
- Set your goal for the day of really learning that idea. Because of this goal, consider it a day of special value and even “a time for special celebration” (W-pI.75.9:2).
- Do not make an idol of your morning routine (M-16.2:5). Your satisfaction comes from the effectiveness of your quiet time, not from the mere fact that you did it.
- You should start the day over if you start it without God (M-16.2:7).
- In the evening, as close to bedtime as is feasible (considering the need to not be drowsy), take your evening quiet time, a mirror of the morning time. This is a final reaffirmation of the lesson and preparation both for sleep and for the next day.
- Give the time gladly, in gratitude and joy. See the entire day as preparation for this time.
- Dedicate your sleep to God. Bring your idea with you into your sleep.

Hourly remembrance: *renewing the peace with which you began the day with a few moments of practice on the hour*

- This can take many forms. For example:
 - Repeat the idea (or a longer version of it) and allow your mind to rest a few moments in silence and peace.
 - Thank God “for all the gifts He gave us in the [hour] gone by” and ask “what He would have us do the hour that is yet to come” (W-pI.153.17:2).
 - Apply the idea to the upsets of the previous hour, “so that the next one is free of the one before” (W-pI.193.12:2).
 - Meditate.
- Take what time you can, when you can—ideally, between 2 and 5 minutes. When you cannot (or will not) do more, at least repeat the idea (W-pI.93.10:1-3).
- Give the time gladly: “Be thankful and lay down all earthly tasks, all little thoughts and limited ideas, and spend a happy time again with Him” (W-pI.98.11:1).
- “Throughout the hour, let your time be spent in happy preparation [through practice] for the next five minutes you will spend again with Him” (W-pI.98.10:1).
- Remember the benefits: you give a few minutes “in return for everything” (W-pI.98.6:3). “Sometimes a thousand years or more are saved” (W-pI.97.3:2). Your gift is used to heal minds around the world.
- Forgive yourself for your lapses (no matter how long) so that you can put them behind you and return immediately to practicing (W-pI.95.7-10).
- Learn to distinguish situations in which a practice period is not feasible “from those that you establish to uphold a camouflage for your unwillingness” (W-pI.rIII.In.3:4). For the second kind of situation only, *do* make up the practice periods you missed.
- When you feel a pull to do something else instead, realize you would be worshipping false gods that “gave you nothing. But your practicing can offer everything to you” (W-pI.rIII.4:4-5).

Frequent reminders: *briefly repeating the idea for the day in order to experience its meaning*

- Repeat the idea as often as possible, about 4 or 5 times an hour, allowing no long gaps.
- “Set a definite time interval for using the idea when you wake or shortly afterwards, and attempt to adhere to it throughout the day” (W-pI.27.3:4).
- When you miss, don’t be disturbed, just get back to your schedule (W-pI.27.4:4-5).
- Repeat the words *slowly*. “Hold these words in full awareness” (W-pI.193.6:4) and think about what they mean.
- Repeat them with *sincerity* (mean them) and *certainly*, remembering their power and importance.
- Repeat them happily, as a joyful reminder, as “glad tidings of your release” (W-pI.75.5:3).
- After repeating them, rest a moment in silence, “attempt[ing] to feel the meaning that the words convey” (W-pI.95.11:5).
- *When necessary*, repeat the idea with eyes open. This can be done “even if you are engaged in conversation” (W-pI.27.3:5).
- *When possible*, take a minute or so, sit quietly, close your eyes, and slowly repeat the idea several times, perhaps adding your own additional thoughts.
- This will lead to a habit of constantly thinking about God: “In time, with practice, you will never cease to think of Him” (W-pI.153.18:1).

Response to temptation: *protecting your peace by repeating the idea in response to upsets*

- Have the idea at the ready. After your frequent reminders, “try to keep the thought with you” (W-pI.rIII.In.10:6).
- Be constantly vigilant for *any* kind of disturbance of your peace.
- Be sure to respond to each one *immediately* by repeating today’s idea (or longer version) with certainty, seeing it as a mighty force that has “power to remove all forms of doubt and fear forever” (W-pI.11:1), and perhaps adding your own related thoughts.
- Success in dispelling the upset depends on your conviction you will succeed, and your certainty that success is not of you, but will be given you (M-16.8:3-4).
- Gather a “problem-solving repertoire” (W-pI.194.6:2)—a list of ideas you find useful for response to temptation.
- This *must* become a habit—“the habit of using the idea as an automatic response to temptation” (W-pI.95.5:3).

Extension

*Extending a new meaning to others
in the form of expressions of love,
which heal them and strengthen the new meaning in your own mind.*

Asking for guidance: *letting the Holy Spirit guide your behavior to serve His plan*

- Ask for guidance at the beginning of the day, at the beginning of each hour, and whenever it is feasible to do so, knowing that if you do, “wisdom will be given you when you need it” (M-29.5:8).
- Realize that “failure to ask for guidance [is] a sign of fear” (Jesus to Helen and Bill).
- Suspend judgment about the situation and then ask for guidance with confidence and desire. Then listen in patience, confidence, deep silence, and open-mindedness.
- Value *all* forms of receiving: words, feeling/sensing/knowing, images, impulses, dreams, coincidences.
- Do not evaluate what you hear “in terms of [your] own convenience” (Jesus to Bill), but do exercise discernment to see if what you hear has the marks of coming from a wisdom beyond your own.
- *Follow* the guidance you receive. “Follow it without judging it” (Jesus to Bill).
- Remember that asking will make possible a happy day (T-30.I.4:1-2).
- When you “feel yourself unwilling to sit by and ask” (T-30.I.5:3), admit that your day has gone off track. Reason yourself back by realizing you have nothing to lose by asking and everything to gain.
- Strive to make asking a habit, “until the habit of asking becomes involuntary” (Jesus to Helen and Bill).

Giving miracles: *expressing love to others in order to heal them and to receive the gift you gave*

- “Hold yourself ready” (Jesus to Helen and Bill) at all times (through the practice). Hold a vision of the Christ in others.
- Notice another’s need and your impulse to respond.
- Ask “What should I do for him, Your holy Son?” (S-2.III.5:1).
- Perform the behavior as a way of conveying to the other person his or her “inestimable worth” (T-7.VII.7:3) and equality with you.
- “Give gladly” (W-pI.187.5:1), realizing this is “the only means by which you can receive” (W-pI.105.3:2).
- Trust that the other person receives your gift, and that the entire Sonship does as well.
- Accept gratitude from the receiver (if offered) and let it heal you. Let yourself feel your own gratitude and God’s gratitude.
- See giving miracles as the purpose of the day. “Each day should be devoted to miracles” (T-1.I.15:1).
- This must become a habit: “Miracles are habits, and should be involuntary” (T-1.I.5:1).



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CIRCLE MAILBOX

We received the following comments on Greg's article in A Better Way #127, "Purpose, Vision, Guidance: The Foundation for a Fulfilling Life."

Thank you for giving us some succinct ideas to carry into every day.

- One, walking the path of the Course consists of study, practice and extension.
- Two, and very beautifully said, "Extension is the purpose of life, vision is what we extend, and guidance tells us how to extend."

The Course can seem so big at times and so hard to wrap my mind around, but practicing and keeping these simple steps in mind is something I can do.

— Peggy Noll

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I just finished reading your "Purpose, Vision, Guidance" article and thought it was outstanding.

The Course and NDEs, as you and Robert well know, sure have a lot in common. It's been helpful for me to hear you and Robert (and Ken) talk about spiritual path issues from the perspective of the Course. It helps me see NDE ideas and perspectives more clearly.

Anyway, I just wanted to thank you. It's nice to share the journey with people who are not only living guided lives, but who are also able to discover effective ways to think about complicated situations—and then clearly share those pearls with others!

— David Sunfellow

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Your article is wonderful. The Course is so comprehensive that it usually feels like I can only inhabit a small part of it. At any point of time, my grasp on the whole path seems feeble. I really liked the sense of relevance that your template confers. If I am also doing Workbook practice and Text study, and somehow your article motivates me to be activating all cylinders, I could be sure that I would be well focused in both learning and extending. I would have a motor taking me through service to my brothers and a motor deepening my understanding of the nature of true Love. The basis of what life is and how to extend it would be optimally expressing and deepening through my days.

This is hugely appealing to me, and I also love the simple powerful way that you have written it. It is a superb article, well written in plain English and obviously practical. I love it.

— Barb Hembling