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## A BETTER WAY

Questioning Every Value That You Hold  
Why the Circle Teaches the Way It Does

by Greg Mackie

At the Circle, we've had many Course students who have been drawn to our teaching approach and have benefited from it. Yet at times, we've also gotten the impression that at least for some, our teaching can be a bit of a downer. While I don't regard our teaching as a downer myself, I can understand where that perception comes from. It's really true that we don't use the kind of "feel good" approach so prevalent in the self-help and alternative spirituality markets today. Given that our teaching style can be challenging and contrarian at times, it's reasonable to ask: Why do we teach the way we do?

I can assure you that it's not because we enjoy being wet blankets. More than once I've found myself thinking, "You know, it would be so much easier to just do the positive thinking thing." Yet, we simply can't do that,

because we believe *A Course in Miracles* itself really requires a more challenging approach. In short, we teach the way we do because we are trying to emulate the way we believe the Course itself teaches. The Course is not a "feel good" teaching that gives us comfort through repackaging old, familiar truths. Rather, it's a radical teaching that often produces discomfort through confronting and replacing our old, familiar "truths" with a whole new way of seeing. In a passage that inspired the title of this article, the Course says, "To learn this course requires willingness to question every value that you hold" (T-24. In.2:1). This questioning process and the new vision it brings is what we aim to facilitate at the Circle.

In this article, I want to explain the rationale for our teaching approach, and why we believe the discomfort it can certainly produce in the short term can lead ultimately to joyful liberation. I will present the conventional way people do things and contrast it with I believe is the Course's way, the way we try to emulate. Before I begin, though, a disclaimer. This article will critique the way Course students often approach the Course, and I want to make clear that I'm not exempting myself from this critique. On the contrary, though I do my best to embrace and teach the Course's world-shattering way, I'm as vulnerable to the temptation of falling back on the "tried and true" as anyone. I'm so familiar with the Course that it's easy for me to lose sight of its radical edge: "Oh yeah, I've read that a million times." I have to make an conscious effort to set aside my sleepy routine and let the Course surprise me, challenge me, refute me, and transform me.

I don't think any of us fully appreciates just how stark a challenge the Course presents to our ordinary way of seeing and living. Hopefully, this article will help you appreciate anew both the challenge of the Course and the promise taking this challenge holds out to us.

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## WHAT IT IS AND WHAT IT SAYS

*A Course in Miracles* is a spiritual path. Its purpose is to train us to work miracles—to accept and extend to others the shifts in perception that awaken us to God. It consists of three volumes, which signify the three aspects of its program:

- ◆ Text : Through studying the teaching, the Course's thought system first enters our minds.
- ◆ Workbook for Students: Through doing the practice, the Course's thought system penetrates more and more deeply into our minds.
- ◆ Manual for Teachers: Through extending our healed perception to others, the Course's thought system receives its final reinforcement and becomes the only thing in our minds.

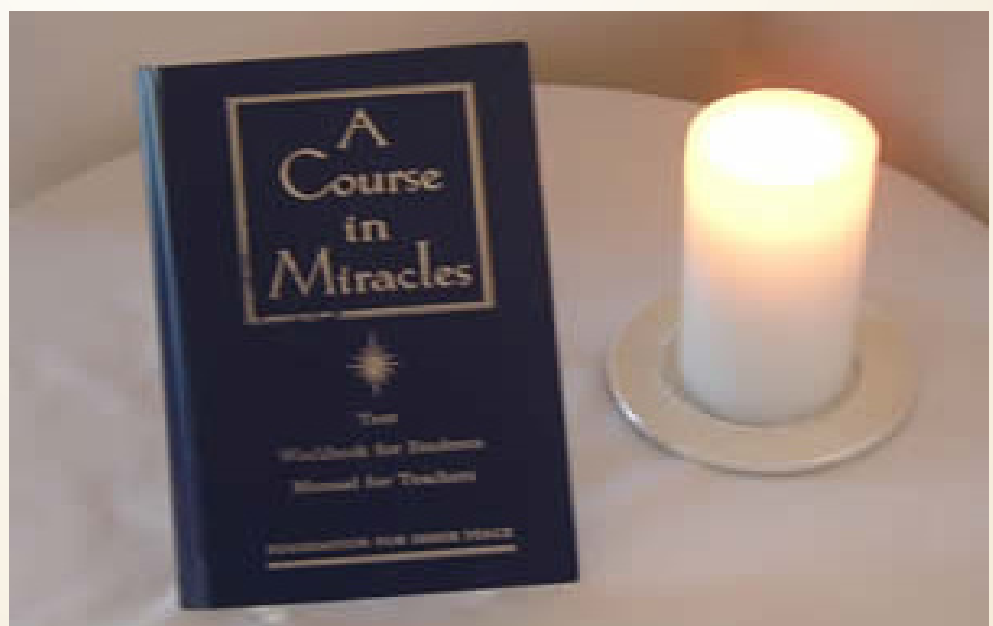
The Course's message is that the source of our suffering is not the world's mistreatment of us, but rather our egocentric attack on the world. This attack convinces us that we have defiled our nature beyond repair, that we are irredeemably guilty. Yet the Course says true reality cannot be defiled; it is a realm of pure, changeless, unified spirit. This realization allows us to forgive the world's apparent mistreatment of us by recognizing that it did not actually occur. And as we see this forgiveness come forth from us—see that we are capable of something genuinely loving and egoless—we gradually realize that we never defiled ourselves. Thus we awaken to the untouched innocence of our true nature.

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## REGULAR CLASSES ♦ PORTLAND, OR

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*A Course in Miracles*  
Tuesdays, 10:30am - 12:30 pm  
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## **The conventional way: We seek comfort by fitting new ideas into our conventional wisdom, which keeps our conventional wisdom firmly in place**

It's human nature to seek comfort in time-honored truths—what historical Jesus scholar Marcus Borg calls “conventional wisdom.” Conventional wisdom is the set of beliefs and ideas that “everybody knows,” beliefs so ingrained that they are taken for granted. It takes a variety of forms. There is the broad conventional wisdom that the vast majority of human beings accept: We are bodies, the earth is our home, we must look out for number one to survive, physical pleasure is desirable, death is everyone's lot, we're the good guys and those other people are the bad guys, we can be unfairly treated, the innocent should be rewarded and the guilty punished, etc.

Then there is the narrower conventional wisdom of particular “in-groups,” which varies greatly from group to group but is taken for granted within the group. For example, in the fundamentalist Christian group, everyone “knows” that evolution is a Satanic deception meant to undermine Christian faith. Whatever form it takes, conventional wisdom is comforting because it gives us a stable framework from which to view life, a community of like-minded people to support us, and a program to follow in order to live “the good life.” Everyone knows what the basic truths are; our goal is simply to align ourselves with them so we can be successful in life.

Spiritual paths often arise as alternatives to conventional wisdom, new ways that subvert the accepted norms. However, given the comfort of conventional wisdom, spiritual paths that start out as bold alternatives to the system are usually watered down and domesticated until they become representatives *of* the system. A great example is Christianity, where the subversive alternative wisdom of Jesus with its indictment of the powers that be became the instrument of those very powers, once it became the religion of the Empire. The founders of such alternative paths continue to be revered, but only in sanitized form; as was written of Martin Luther King Jr., “Now that he is safely dead, let us praise him.” As a result, our religions become simply another version of conventional wisdom. Within each of them, the message is something like this: Everyone (at least within our group) knows the great spiritual truths; the goal now is simply to connect with those truths and embody them so we can have a better life.

*A Course in Miracles* is the ultimate in unconventional wisdom. However, it seems to me that we've done much the same thing with it as human beings have done with spiritual paths through the ages: watered it down and domesticated it to the point where it has become yet another form of conventional wisdom. In particular, the Course is frequently filtered through the in-group conventional wisdom of New Age beliefs. As much variety as we find in the New Age, there's a whole list of basic principles within it that virtually everyone in the community “knows”: the earth is our Mother, celebrate the body, hierarchy is always bad, get out of your head and into your heart, don't “should” on yourself, everything's perfect, etc. I see New Age principles that are contrary to the Course imported into it on a regular basis. One form of this I see frequently is the statement that “the Course is just like \_\_\_\_\_ [fill in your favorite spiritual teaching]”—a statement that seems to be shorthand for “The Course is just like what I already believe.”

Moreover, Course students have their own version of in-group conventional wisdom. Over the years, the Course community has developed a large body of what we at the Circle call “Course lore.” I think some of it is accurate (the world is an illusion, forgiveness is the Course's central teaching, etc.) and some of it is inaccurate (the holy relationship takes just one, God doesn't know we're here, etc.) While we Course students like to think of ourselves as cutting edge, we too seek the comfort of conventional wisdom. There are all sorts of things that every Course student just “knows,” whether they are true to the Course or not.

I'm not saying that there's absolutely nothing worthwhile or true within the various versions of conventional wisdom. Unconventional wisdom can be found within religions (like the provocative sayings of Jesus preserved in the gospels), the New Age has elements in it that I believe are true, and Course students are quite right when they say things like “forgiveness is the Course's central teaching.” The problem I see is that given our human tendencies, it's all too easy for us to do exactly what Christianity did: wedge radical new ideas into our conventional wisdom, thus robbing them of their transformative power. When we do this with the Course, it simply becomes another confirmation of what we already believe, another way of packaging those familiar

truths so we can connect with them more deeply and live our version of the conventional “good life.”

In short, we get to stay comfortable. We get to sit around with our like-minded Course friends and agree that “everybody knows” these things, but we don’t have to *really* change our minds. We can say things like “the world is an illusion” and watch our friends nod in approval, but meanwhile our lives go on pretty much as before, marching to the beat of the same old drummer. The end result, I believe, is a Course version of what G.K. Chesterton once said of Christianity: “The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and left untried.” Through seeking the comfort of a Course version of conventional wisdom, the radical unconventional wisdom of the Course has largely been left untried.

### **The Course’s way: It induces temporary discomfort by contrasting our conventional wisdom with its unconventional wisdom, so our conventional wisdom can be shined away**

The Course doesn’t offer us yet another way to affirm time-honored “truths.” Instead, like those strands of unconventional wisdom that survive in our largely domesticated religious traditions, it aims to take conventional wisdom of both broad and in-group varieties and blow it out of the water. In its view, our most cherished beliefs are dark and painful illusions that obscure God’s light-filled truth; their darkness must be faced squarely and let go for God’s light to dawn on our minds.

It’s hard to overstate just how utterly out of touch with reality the Course regards our current perception of things. We already saw that “to learn this course requires willingness to question every value that you hold.” The Course is constantly telling us in one form or another, “You are wrong” (T-5.V.6:14). The introduction to the Workbook says that its aim “is to train your mind in a systematic way to a different perception of *everyone* and *everything* in the world” (W-In.4:1, my emphasis). Acknowledging the utterly upside-down nature of our current way of seeing is the necessary foundation for learning the Course: “You do not know the meaning of anything you perceive. Not one thought you hold is wholly true. The recognition of this is your firm beginning” (T-11.VIII.3:1-3).

But the Course doesn’t just tell us how dark and misguided our current views are; it is constantly contrasting them with the light of God’s alternative. We are told that “contrast and differences are necessary teaching aids, for by them you learn what to avoid and what to seek” (T-13.XI.6:3). We must see both how miserable our conventional “truths” have made us *and* how happy the Course’s alternatives are in comparison: “The Holy Spirit cannot teach without this contrast, for you believe that misery *is* happiness” (T-14.II.1:3). Given the need for this contrast, the Course’s primary teaching method is to constantly bring it to our awareness. Every section, lesson, and paragraph explicitly or implicitly (and sometimes quite subtly) contrasts a common view of ours that is bringing us misery with a Course alternative that will free us from misery. This is the key to the Course’s transformative power.

Let’s look at an example of this method in action. Workbook Lesson 93 begins by giving us a devastating description of our current view of ourselves:

You think you are the home of evil, darkness and sin. You think if anyone could see the truth about you he would be repelled, recoiling from you as if from a poisonous snake. You think if what is true about you were revealed to you, you would be struck with horror so intense that you would rush to death by your own hand, living on after seeing this being impossible. (W-pI.93.1:1-3)

This paragraph immediately brings up objections in most of us: “Surely, I don’t believe *that!*” Yet if we think about it, our conventional wisdom does say that human beings are flawed by nature; it is a truism that “nobody’s perfect.” We do feel guilty for our self-serving acts, and try to “atone” for our guilt in all sorts of ways. We call slippery people “snakes.” We call people like Hitler and Osama bin Laden “evil.” Traditional Christianity, a basic pillar of our culture, says that everyone is a sinner. We’ve all felt low self-esteem, sometimes to the point of self-loathing, and we all know that this can lead some people to commit suicide.

This paragraph, then, is not telling us something totally foreign to our experience; it is simply saying that our feelings of unworthiness and corruption go *far* deeper than we imagine. If we really engage with what this is saying, it challenges us to contemplate some unpleasant possibilities. Does my conventional view of myself



as a flawed human being really go this deep? Do I really think I'm full of evil, darkness, and sin? Do I think I'm as evil as Hitler (or even worse)? Do I really despise myself *this* much? Am I really afraid that I would do myself in if I saw my true nature? Can I get in touch with the thoughts and feelings this paragraph claims I have?

This dark view of ourselves is then contrasted with the Course's bright alternative:

Your sinlessness is guaranteed by God. Over and over this must be repeated, until it is accepted. It is true. Your sinlessness is guaranteed by God. Nothing can touch it, or change what God created as eternal. The self you made, evil and full of sin, is meaningless. Your sinlessness is guaranteed by God, and light and joy and peace abide in you. (W-pI.93.6:1-7)

What a contrast! After that first paragraph, it is a blessed relief to be told that our sinlessness is guaranteed by God and light and joy and peace abide in us. Yet if we really engage with what this paragraph is saying, it brings its own challenging questions. How can this be true, given all the rotten things I've done? Isn't it arrogant to believe I am *totally sinless*? That's the sin of pride, isn't it? Won't this belief give me license to run amok and justify my attacks by saying, "Hey, I'm sinless"? It just sounds too good to be true. Oh, but how wonderful it would be if this really *were* true. Can I take this in? Can I accept the possibility that in spite of all I think I've done, I really am sinless, and underneath my feelings of self-loathing, I am filled with light and joy and peace?

If we really engage both the dark side and the light side of this contrast, we put ourselves in an ideal position to benefit from the practice the Course gives us for this lesson. If what these paragraphs are saying is true, then our current view is totally wrongheaded and is unnecessarily causing us great pain, while the Course's alternative promises joyous liberation from that pain. What have we got to lose? We now have all the incentive we need to do the lesson's five-minutes-per-hour practice periods, in which we essentially try the Course's alternative on for size. We have every reason to try to set aside "the tiny idols of evil and sinfulness you have made" (W-pI.93.9:5) and experience the light and joy and peace that "God has given you, in place of what you have decreed for yourself" (W-pI.93.8:4). To the degree that we are successful, we will come to recognize that the view we have of ourselves is false, and the Course's view is true. This will bring about a profound transformation of our minds that will make us happy. How could it not?

This lesson illustrates a vital point: To really get the full transformative impact the Course wants us to get, we need to *face the contrast*. We need to look at our current perception without blinders, place the Course's alternative alongside that perception, and come to terms with how profoundly different the two are, both in what they claim and in their experiential results. Our tendency is to find ways to wriggle out of this by softening the contrast. Sometimes we soften it by saying that the Course's alternative is really what we already believe. Or we soften it by turning away from the darkness on our side and just reveling in the Course's bright side. But to get the most out of the Course, we need to avoid both of these tendencies. Just as in exercise people say "feel the burn," so in working with the Course, we need to say "feel the contrast."

Of course, just like "feeling the burn" during a workout, "feeling the contrast" in our work with the Course is not particularly comfortable. It robs us of the comfort of our conventional wisdom. None of us likes to be told that we're totally wrong and the "truths" that have sustained us for years are all wet. Having your worldview turned completely upside down is not going to be a bed of roses. Why would we expect it to be?

The Course itself acknowledges that discomfort is part of its process. It speaks of experiencing periods of discomfort (T-20.VII.2:1), disorientation (T-16.VI.8:5), undoing (M-4.I(A).3:1), and unsettling (M-4.I(A).7:1). It says that certain stages of the spiritual journey are "always somewhat difficult" (M-4.I(A).4:2), and can "engender enormous conflict" (M-4.I(A).5:2). It tells us that when we contrast our new spiritual goal with our old entrenched patterns, we are "inevitably appalled" (T-17.V.5:6). It says that learning how to let go of our perceptions of the world so God can replace them with truth "can be quite difficult and even quite painful" (W-pI.14.3:2). In sum: "Undermining the ego's thought system must be perceived as painful, even though this is anything but true" (T-4.II.5:1). The Course's path of undoing our conventional wisdom is ultimately one of joy, but our resistance makes discomfort and sometimes even acute pain on the journey virtually inevitable.

Of course, I'm not saying that the journey is nothing but pain and discomfort. On the contrary, there's lots

of joy along the way. My life since I began the Course is so much more joyful than the life I had before that nothing could induce me to go back to my old ways. Moreover, the Course stresses that the discomfort it sometimes engenders is *temporary*, and serves only to facilitate the correction process that will end discomfort: “Discomfort is aroused only to bring the need for correction into awareness” (T-2.V.7:8). It’s like an intervention for an alcoholic: We won’t seek help until we see clearly what a complete train wreck we’ve made of our lives with our current way of doing things.

There is a paradox in the Course’s teaching method that can be expressed in a version of what has been said to be the goal of religion: “to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.” This phrase is usually taken to mean that religion should comfort the suffering of the world’s victims and afflict the consciences of the victimizers. In my version, though, the “comfortable” and the “afflicted” are both *us*. With this in mind, the goal of the Course is to temporarily afflict the comfortable *in order* to comfort the afflicted. In other words, the Course afflicts our comfort by showing us how dark and wrong and painful our conventional wisdom really is, in order to comfort our affliction by giving us the unconventional wisdom that will bring us joy. This is the Course’s way.

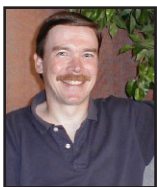
### **The Circle’s teaching method: We do our best to emulate the Course’s way**

As you can see, the Course is light years removed from the “feel good” platitudes that so often pass for spiritual teaching. Yes, the Course ultimately wants us to feel very good indeed, but its way to that goal takes us through a challenging collision between our conventional ways of thinking and the Course’s “better way.” This is how we try to teach at the Circle: We constantly contrast conventional views with the Course’s view, in an attempt to facilitate the transformation the Course is trying to bring about. Now of course, I’m not saying that we do this anything close to perfectly. Like everyone else, we ourselves are resistant to the Course’s challenge, and can easily dull the Course’s sharp edge with our own version of conventional wisdom. But we do try to teach as the Course does to the best of our ability, given our human limitations.

Reactions to this vary quite a bit. Some people really get into the spirit of what we’re trying to do; they make a heartfelt effort to challenge their own views and let the Course correct those views. But we also see other reactions. Some praise what we do, but don’t seem to really engage in the process of facing the contrast between what they believe and what the Course teaches. Others respond with blank stares—I can recall more than one awkward silence in a class. Still others assume that what we’re saying must be incorrect, even when we have solid evidence from the Course to support it. Newcomers especially (though certainly not all of them) frequently seem to be mystified by what we are doing. Why do we talk about all that dark stuff so much?

These observations aren’t intended to pass judgment on anyone. Rather, they are simply meant to invite us all to consider how we walk the path of the Course. Do we just use it to reinforce those comfortable beliefs we already have, thus cementing our current worldview in place and thwarting the fundamental change of mind the Course is attempting to bring about? Or do we really make the effort to come to terms with what the Course is telling us: unflinchingly bringing our beliefs to it for evaluation, facing the contrast between its way and our way of seeing, admitting it when we’re wrong, and thus letting the Course do its transformative work in us?

Letting the Course do its work on us can certainly arouse discomfort, but this discomfort can actually be exhilarating if we bring the right attitude to it. If we constantly remind ourselves that holding on to our conventional wisdom is painful while accepting the Course’s unconventional wisdom is joyful, we can relish the process. We can celebrate when we find out we are wrong. We can rejoice when yet another sacred cow of ours is slaughtered. For each time this happens, we move one step closer to the joyous promise of liberation the Course holds out to all who are willing to question every value that they hold.



E-mail your comments to the author at: [greg@circleofa.org](mailto:greg@circleofa.org)

Greg Mackie is the author of *How Can We Forgive Murderers? And Other Answers to Questions about 'A Course in Miracles.'* He has been a student of *A Course in Miracles* since 1991, and a teacher for the Circle of Atonement since 1999. He writes Course Q & A's and a popular blog on the Circle of Atonement's website, and teaches the Circle's weekday Workbook class in Sedona, Arizona (along with Robert Perry). He sees his primary function as helping to develop a tradition of Course scholarship.

## RECENT WEB SITE POSTINGS

Many of you know this, but for those who don't, we post new material on the web site every week. Here are some of the articles we have recently posted:

**Darren Main Interviews Robert Perry.** Darren Main is a well-known yoga and meditation instructor and author in the Bay Area. Three interviews, entitled "Understanding '*A Course in Miracles*,'" can be found at Darren's website at: [http://darrenmain.libsyn.com/index.php?post\\_id=240835](http://darrenmain.libsyn.com/index.php?post_id=240835)

**"The World as a Dream"** [Read more.](#) **"Sacred Tenets of Egoic Relationship"** [Read more.](#) **"Who Was Jesus?"** [Read more.](#) by *Robert Perry*. **"A Course in Cause and Not Effect"** by *Allen Watson*. [Read more.](#)

**Blog:** *Greg Mackie's* most recent blog entry is "Trust all things to Him." [Read more.](#)

**Course Meets World Commentary** by *Greg Mackie*. Greg has recently posted the following commentaries relating *A Course in Miracles* to a topic "in the news": "All My Relations"; "The Atheist and the Martyr"; and "Freedom is Free"; "Give 'Til It Feels Good"; "Forgiving Doctor Mengele"; "Are Psychic Abilities Real?"; "Apocalypse 2012"; "Mother Antonia: The Prison Angel"; "Is Hierarchy Really Such a Bad Thing?"; "Are Little Children Really Egoless?"; "The Agony of Mother Teresa"; "Are We Living in a Virtual Reality"; "Immaculée Ilibagiza: Forgiving the Rwandan Holocaust". [Read more.](#)

**Questions and Answers** by *Robert Perry* and *Greg Mackie*. Robert and Greg posted answers to several questions recently: "What is the relationship between fear and hate?"; "How do we reconcile our unique, individual "special function" with the Course's contention that there is no unique individuality?"; "Why does the Course never mention Jesus' mother?"; "I cannot be unfairly treated?"; "Sex"; "Should We Read the Gospel of Thomas?"; "How Do I Know the Course Is True?"; "Did Jesus really dictate *A Course in Miracles* to Helen?"; and "Do we forgive because people are doing their best?" [Read more.](#)

## WHAT WE'RE READING

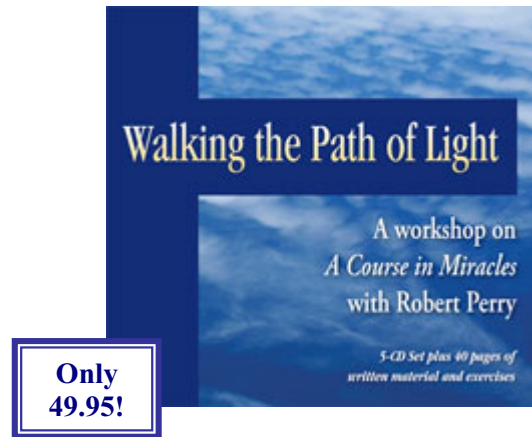
### **Greg Mackie:**

***Excavating Q: The History and Setting of the Sayings Gospel* by John S. Kloppenborg Verbin.**

This is a comprehensive examination of scholarly research on "Q," the hypothetical document that modern Jesus scholars posit as a source for material that is in the gospels of Matthew and Luke but not in Mark. Though it is a difficult read for non-Jesus scholars like me (the references to the original Greek rendered in the Greek alphabet are, well, all Greek to me), I'm able to follow along well enough to find it fascinating. I'm especially enjoying this book as a window into how modern Jesus scholars do their work.

# Walking the Path of Light

A workshop on *A Course in Miracles*  
with Robert Perry



## A new 5-CD set from the Circle of Atonement

Providing practical, step-by-step instruction on how to walk the pathway to enlightenment that *A Course in Miracles* sets out.

Following the success of his book *Path of Light: Stepping into Peace with "A Course in Miracles,"* Robert Perry led *A Course in Miracles* students in an intensive three-day workshop training.

The workshop's purpose was to help participants discover, in a unique setting, what it really means to walk the path of light. And now this same workshop is available to you, in this new CD set. Consisting of five CDs and over 40 pages of written material and exercises, it gives you the chance to deepen your own understanding under the guidance of Robert Perry, one of the Course's most respected and most experienced teachers.

Whether you work through the CDs on your own, or share them with a friend or study group, you will find them a powerful aid in your own spiritual journey, and a resource you will in all likelihood want to turn to again and again.

### You will learn how to:

- **walk** this path of light, incorporating the Course's transformative teachings into every area of your life
- **use** the Course's practical tools, such as meditation, prayer, forgiveness practices, guidance seeking, experiential reading techniques, and exercises for healing daily upsets
- **experience** the Course's blessings and promises of deep peace of mind, happiness, and joy, as well as healing in your relationships



“Since the workshop and now that I am reading Path of Light, I am experiencing real change! And I am excited about the Course again!”

“I came to the workshop to gain more ‘knowledge’ about the Course, but I have come away committed to choosing it as my path—can’t wait to get started!”

**To help you get started we have two special offers for you:**

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Includes **FREE** study guides

(Available for download on the Circle website)

**And a copy of the book *Path of Light:  
Stepping into Peace with ‘A Course in Miracles’***

**\$59.95**

**How will you benefit from having both the book and the CD set?** The CD set complements the book, being more narrowly focused on the how-to of walking the Course’s path—what things does a student actually *do*?

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**Buy Now**

In this 5-cd set you will learn the basic elements of how to actually walk along this path of light. Here are the topics covered in the five CDs:

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- 2- What Is the Day For?
- 3- How to Read the Course
- 4- The Workbook: Finding Happiness Through Changing Perception
- 5- What Are Decisions For? Deciding with the Holy Spirit
- 6- What Is God For? How to Meditate
- 7- What Are Relationships For? Forgiveness
- 8- What Is Behavior For? “As You Teach So Shall You Learn”
- 9- What Am I Here For? Taking Your Place Among the Saviors of the World
- 10- What Is the Course For? Finding and Committing to *Your* Path of Light