

Commentary

ACIM[®] Text (CE)

T-3.I. The Need to Study

An explanation of underlining, italics, and footnote formats can be found at the end of the commentary. See also the note there on the effects of switching from the FIP edition to the Complete and Annotated Edition.

Please note that the FIP and CE versions may differ in where paragraph breaks occur.

Overview

Lesson 169

The Section emphasizes the importance of attention and study in learning, framing the course as a form of mental training. It encourages students to allocate dedicated study periods, particularly of the first two chapters, suggesting that many of their challenges may have solutions within the course material. It warns against the misuse of mental defenses like “mental retardation” (“I just can’t seem to grasp this material.”). The course stresses the need for a solid foundation to avoid confusion between fear and awe, especially as it prepares students for direct engagement with spiritual concepts and God Himself. Finally, the section underscores that while healing is the ultimate goal and is rooted in God, understanding the means outlined in the course is crucial for achieving this end, even if occasional moments of revelation hint at the ultimate destination.

Paragraph 1

T-3.I

All learning involves attention and study at some level. ²This course is a *mind-training* course. ³Good students assign study periods for themselves. ⁴However, since this obvious step may not have occurred to you and since we are cooperating in this, I urge you to make the obvious assignment now. ⁵You may understand the need to study this course yet still not realize that many of the problems you keep being faced with may already have been solved here. ⁶Perhaps you do not think of the course in this way at all. ⁷Or perhaps you do from time to time, but then think the answer is probably in here and do not look it up. ⁸You vaguely know that the course is intended for some sort of preparation. ⁹But are you prepared?

Every sort of learning requires attention and study at some level (1:1). Even just learning how to apply some glue requires reading and understanding the instructions.

Something as profound and important as the Course demands serious study. It's a course in retraining our minds, retraining how we think (1:2). That doesn't come easily. Jesus points out that, in regard to his course, getting serious and specific about studying it may not have occurred to us (1:4), which is why he is taking time in this section to *urge* us to do so. In particular, he reminds us that "good students assign study periods for themselves" and urges us "to make this obvious assignment now" (1:3–4).

Has it ever occurred to you to assign yourself study periods in the Course? Too many of us think that somehow we'll absorb the Course by some kind of mysterious osmosis. We read it, but make no effort to understand what we are reading. If it sinks in, good; if not, it's too obtuse, or it makes no sense, or it just isn't for us right now. So we let it go by without really trying to understand it.

Writing commentary is my way of studying. It works for me, and I'm happy to share it with you. But you should not be depending on me or anyone else to understand the Course for you; you need to do it for yourself! You are the only one who can apply the Course to *your* problems and *your* life and *your* relationships.

Stop for a moment and just look at the ways Jesus confronts us with this topic:

- Are we devoting "attention and study" to the Course for the sake of learning it, as a way of training our minds (1:1-2)?
- Have we assigned study periods for ourselves (1:3)?
- Do we think of problems that we keep being faced with as perhaps being solved in the material we're studying (1:5)?
- Do we then look up the place in the Course where our recurring problem has been solved (1:7)?
- Do we assign review periods to ourselves (4:1)?
- Are we approaching study of these early chapters as "very careful preparation" for what is coming in the Course (6:6)?

Paragraph 2

² Mental retardation is a defense which, like the others (with the exception of the Atonement), can be used on behalf of error or truth, as elected. ³When it occurs in the literal sense, it is a temporary device, agreed on beforehand, to check the miscreative activities of a strong but misdirected will. ³The lesson involves not only the individual himself but also his parents, siblings, and all of those who come in close relations with him. ⁴The person himself is a poor learner by definition, but only as a step toward changing from a bad to a good one.

In Paragraph 2, Jesus addresses a very common defense mechanism people use to avoid applying the Course's teaching to themselves. He uses the term "mental retardation" as a kind of defense mechanism. Like all defenses, it can be used on behalf of truth or error. First, he describes *literal* mental retardation (a person with a serious learning disability) as a positive thing, used on behalf of truth. It is a *temporary* device,

“agreed on beforehand” (2:2). This can only refer to a before-birth agreement, one that involves “not only the individual himself but also his parents, siblings, and all of those who come in close relations with him” (2:3). The purpose is “to check the miscreative activities of a strong but misdirected will” (2:2).

This passage clearly supports the picture many people now have about the way individual souls consciously select the kind of life they want to have in their next incarnation. It isn't something I've tended to give credence to, but it certainly appears to be the way Jesus sees it. It is more than in individual choice, too; it involves parents and siblings, and even “all of those who come in close relations with him.” The person involved is one who has a “strong but misdirected will” who chooses to incarnate as “a poor learner by definition” — someone we would describe as having a learning disability.

We may wonder how generally applicable this is. Do people born with deformities or debilitating diseases *choose* that kind of birth? Do abused women *choose* to marry abusive men? I don't know. If so, it is meant to be a temporary learning device. It is not “negative karma” designed to punish.

Paragraph 3

³ Mental retardation can also be used, however, as a maladaptive defense, if the wrong (or attack) side is employed. ²This produces the “pseudo-retardation syndrome,” which is justly classified as a psychiatric (or disturbed-level) symptom. ³You may well be using this defense as you read this course. ⁴This represents a joint attack on both yourself *and* me, because it renders your mind weak and mine incompetent. ⁵Remember, this puts you in a truly fearful position. ⁶If you cannot understand either your own mind *or* mine, you do not know what is really willed. ⁷It is thus impossible to avoid behavior-will conflict (as defined before), because even if you acted according to will, you wouldn't know it.

Where our attention needs to focus, however, is on what he calls “mental retardation...as a maladaptive defense” (3:1). He calls this the “pseudo-retardation syndrome” (3:2). It's something we all can do. I believe I pointed out in an earlier commentary several ways we do this. We just stubbornly “don't get it.” We cling to our cherished vices. We avoid getting quiet and meditating because we don't like what we find when we do. We criticize the Course's “archaic language.” We continually ask unanswerable questions such as, “How did the separation ever happen?” Pseudo-retardation: We're playing dumb to avoid understanding his clear message..

Jesus says this is “a psychiatric (or disturbed-level) syndrome, and suggests we are using this defense as we read the Course (3:3). I think that applies to nearly all of us! I know I do it more than I like to admit.

We are not only attacking ourselves when we do this, we are attacking Jesus! We are making ourselves mentally weak, and we are implying that Jesus is too incompetent to state his message clearly (3:4). We understand him far better than we are willing to admit. We just don't like what we're hearing, so we *pretend* or perhaps fool ourselves into

believing that we don't get it, and can't understand. We have lifetimes invested in honing and perfecting our egos, and we are extremely reluctant to let go of them.

Pseudo-retardation puts us “in a truly fearful position” (3:5). If we are incapable of understanding not only what Jesus is saying but our own minds, we do not “*know* what is truly willed” (3:6). As much as we may claim that we want to know God's will for our lives, we've very effectively cut ourselves off from any chance of knowing. It has become impossible for us to avoid conflict between what we really want and what we actually do. Even if you actually began to do the right thing, you would not *know* it. (3:7)

Paragraph 4

4 The next part of this course rests too heavily on the earlier part not to *require* its study. ²Without this, you will become much too fearful when the unexpected does occur to make constructive use of it. ³However, as you study the earlier part, you will see some of the obvious implications, unless you still persist in misusing the defense of mental retardation. ⁴Please remember that its constructive use, described above, is hardly a real part of your own real equipment. ⁵It is a particularly inappropriate defense as you use it, and I can only urge you to avoid it.

Sentence 1 strongly advises us all to *study* the first two chapters of the Course if we want to fully understand everything that follows. The rest of the Text “rests too heavily on the earlier part not to *require* its study” (4:1, italics mine). And this refers to the chapters *as revised in the CE*! If you were familiar with the FIP version and have been studying the CE version along with me, you know how much material in the original notes was omitted from those two chapters and how drastically they were re-arranged. Did you get that word “required”? Every student of the Course needs to spend some time reading over Chapters 1 and 2 and doing their best to get a clear understanding of everything they say and to do so before attempting to understand the rest of the Text.

What may happen if you do not study the first two chapters well enough to grasp the foundational material presented later is that you may become “much too fearful” when “the unexpected” occurs to *make use of* the unexpected (4:2). What he seems to be referring to by fearing “the unexpected” is being afraid when you begin to have direct experiences of God. That becomes evident in the following paragraph; I'll comment on it later. It's less obvious in this paragraph, but he does refer to our “misusing the defense of mental retardation” (4:3). As you should recall from the discussion in Paragraph 3, this pseudo-retardation occurs because we feel threatened by the truth being revealed to us and react with fear. We still have a lingering fear of God—perhaps even strong fears. When we begin to have moments of revelation—which I believe we all will have, and indeed, we all must have—we will be frightened. These lines from the Workbook describe such fears:

You cower fearfully lest you should feel Christ's touch upon your shoulder and perceive His gentle hand directing you to look upon your gifts. (W-166.8:1 (CE))

Your ancient fear has come upon you now, and justice has caught up with you at last. ²Christ's hand has touched your shoulder, and you feel that you are not alone. (W-166.9:1–2 (CE))

But if we do study these two early chapters more carefully, we will “see some of the obvious implications” (4:3). We will understand what is happening to us and will not react with fear. Jesus assures us that we do not have *real* mental retardation, and using it as a defense is “*particularly* inappropriate...as you use it” (4:4–5) He urges us to avoid it.

Paragraph 5

5 The reason why a solid foundation is necessary at this point is because of the highly likely confusion of “fearful” and “awesome,” which most people do make. ²You will remember that we said once before that awe is inappropriate in connection with the Sons of God, because you should not experience awe in the presence of your own equals. ³But it was emphasized that awe *is* a proper reaction of the Son in the presence of his Creator.

We need the solid foundation that comes from in-depth study just because we are likely to confuse awe with fear. It's appropriate to feel awe in God's Presence, but *not* fear (5:1). We should not be in awe of any of the Sons of God because we are their equals, but awe *is* the “proper reaction of the Son in the presence of his Creator” (5:2–3).

Paragraph 6

6 So far, this course has had only indirect recourse to God and rarely even refers to Him directly. ²I have emphasized that awe is not appropriate in connection with me, because of our inherent equality. ³I have been careful to clarify my own role in the Atonement, without either over- or understating it. ⁴I have tried to do exactly the same thing in connection with yours. ⁵The next step, however, does involve the direct approach to God Himself. ⁶It would be most unwise to start on this step at all without very careful preparation, or awe will surely be confused with fear, and the experience will be more traumatic than beatific.

The key thing to notice in this paragraph is that, unlike the part of the Text we've studied, which has “only indirect recourse to God and rarely even refers to Him directly,” “the next step...*does* involve the direct approach to God Himself” (6:1, 5). If you find yourself becoming fearful or resistant as you go on in your study, go back and re-study the first two chapters! You've missed something.

When the Course says we should not react with awe to any Son of God, that includes Jesus (6:2). The equality we share with every Son of God is true of Jesus as well. In the material we've studied, that has been made quite clear. He has been “careful to clarify [his] own role in the Atonement, without either over- or understating it (6:3). (See the CE footnote for references.) He's done the same with our role, making it clear he expects us to extend miracles and extending the Atonement to others (6:4).

But the next step—what follows in the Text and Workbook—*does* involve a direct approach to God (6:5). None of us should embark on this step “without very careful preparation.” If we were to do so, we would “surely” confuse awe with fear, making our encounter with God “more traumatic than beatific” (6:6). Beatific means blissful, rapturous, ecstatic, happy, or joyful. We might say “blissed out.” We all want that kind of experience of God, don’t we? We don’t want it to be traumatic, which means horrible, unbearable, tragic, painful, unsettling, disturbing, alarming, or awful. But that could happen if we are not properly prepared for it. The purpose of the first two chapters is just such preparation.

Paragraph 7

7 Healing is of God in the end. ²The means are carefully explained in this course. ³Revelation may occasionally show you the end, but to reach it the means are needed.

We want healing, and we will ultimately receive it from God (7:1). Obviously, in order to receive it, we will have to encounter God, which requires some preparation.

You vaguely know that the course is intended for some sort of preparation. But are you prepared? (T-3.I.1:8–9 (CE))

The Course carefully explains the means, the things that prepare you and take you through the necessary experiences with God (7:2). But are you ready? To be sure you are, you may need to read over Chapters 1 and 2 carefully. I recommend taking our time off this summer to do just that. You have my commentaries to aid in your understanding.

Legend:

Light underscoring indicates emphasis that appears in the Urtext or shorthand notes.

The Text is taken from the Circle of Atonement's Complete and Annotated Edition (which I refer to as the "CE" for "Complete Edition" or "Circle Edition"). Please be aware that, even when the wording is identical to the FIP version, the division into paragraphs is often entirely different in the CE, which restores the paragraph breaks found in the original notes. This results in different reference numbering as well. I will indicate for each paragraph the corresponding sentences in the Foundation for Inner Peace (FIP) edition. You should be able to locate specific sentences in that edition if you need to, with a minimum of visual clutter in the commentary. References to quotations are from the CE unless another version is being quoted, in which case that version is indicated.

Footnotes by the commentary author are shown in this font and size. Other footnotes come from the Complete Edition itself.

Effects of Differing Editions of the Course

There were significant changes made in the CE, although for the most part there was no alteration in the meaning of the text, and the *Manual for Teachers* had far fewer changes. There are some changes in section and paragraph breaks and sentence structure that result in different numbering in references to the same text in the two editions. When there is a major difference I will indicate it with a footnote.

I have attempted for all references to add a separate FIP reference if it differs from the CE reference, but I may have missed some. If so, I apologize. Please let me know of any referencing problems you find.

I have also tried to edit my commentary so as to reflect any wording changes in the CE. For instance, the CE Text restored the plural use of "you" where the FIP had substituted the phrase "you and your brother." One such instance will illustrate the kind of change, significant in actual words but nearly identical in overall meaning:

FIP: Thus you and your brother but shared a qualified entente, in which a clause of separation was a point you both agreed to keep intact.

CE: You shared a qualified entente, in which a clause of separation was a point which you had both agreed to keep intact.