

Study Guide and Commentary

ACIM® Text, Chapter 28

The Little Gap

Section VI

The Secret Vow

Explanation of underlining, italics and footnote formats can be found at the end of the commentary.

Overview of Section VI

The first part of the section teaches us that the body isn't to blame for our woes, and our punishing it with sickness is just nuts. It's a non-sentient *thing* that our minds can use as a tool; that's all it is. The remainder of the section speaks of a "secret vow" we all made with one another to remain separate, and urges us to end the cause of sickness by choosing instead to affirm our oneness.

In an appendix, I have included a long definition of sickness from Robert Perry's Course glossary, and a pertinent long quotation from *The Song of Prayer* about the cause of sickness.

Paragraph 1

Who punishes the body is insane. ²For here the little **gap** is seen, and yet it is not here. ³It has not judged *itself*, nor made itself to be what it is not. ¹ ⁴It does not seek to make of pain a joy, and look for lasting pleasure in the dust. ⁵It does not tell you what its purpose is and cannot understand what it is for. ⁶It does not victimize because it has no will, no preferences, and no doubts. ⁷It does not wonder what it is, and so it has no need to be competitive. ⁸It can be victimized, but cannot feel itself as victim. ⁹It accepts no role, but does what it is told without attack.

The opening three words signal the theme that runs all through the Course, but especially in the first four paragraphs of this section: We *make* the body sick because we are (mostly unconsciously) punishing it (1:1) because we blame it for a variety of crimes. It's a huge list. Most of them probably won't resonate with you, but see if there aren't one or two of these things that give you pause, and make you think, "I *do* sometimes feel annoyed at my body because of that." These supposed crimes include things such as

¹. "It" in this sentence and in the rest of the paragraph is the body.

- victimizing others (1:6)
- being competitive (1:7)
- playing the role in unpleasant things (1:9)
- the sights and sounds it sees and hears (2:1)
- for dying (2:4)
- its hateful uses (2:9)
- its separating behavior (3:2)
- what it gets used for (3:3)
- its frailty and littleness (3:4)
- its acts (3:5)
- its limitations that seem to punish *you* (3:9–10)

Robert Perry's Glossary of Course terms lists several more reasons why we punish the body, reasons given elsewhere in the Course: ²

- to mitigate expected punishment from God (T-5.V.5:4-9 (FIP), (T-5.VI.9:4–9 (CE))
- to prove that the mind is stronger than God (M-5.I.1-2)
- to project the sickness of separation onto the body (T-19.I.7:7 (FIP), (T-19.I.8:8 (CE))
- to demonstrate that the mind is separate from goodness, health and God (T-28.V.1:1-5 (FIP, CE))
- to separate us from others (W-137.1-2 (FIP), (CE))
- to show how another has injured it (T-27.I.3-4 (FIP), (FIP), T-27.I.3:1-5:4 (CE))
- because the body has failed to satisfy (T-19.IV(B).11:4–6 (FIP), T-19.IV.15:1–3 (CE))
- to prove that we are physical beings, not spiritual (W-136.7-8 (FIP), W-136.8:1-9:5 (CE))
- because the mind suspects the body is not real enough to truly act out its fantasies (T-18.VI.3:7 (FIP), (CE))

Of course, to blame the body for all these things “is insane” (1:1). The body isn't doing these things. We are; our minds are. We locate all the problems of separation (the **gap**) in our bodies, but that isn't where the problem lies (1:2). The body hasn't judged itself or tried to be something more than what it is (1:3). That is the mind's doing. The body isn't trying to transmute pain into joy or to find true pleasure in the dust, that is, in material things (1:4). The body does not know its purpose and certainly isn't attempting to *impose* a purpose on itself at your expense (1:5).

Then, with emphasis, Jesus says that the body *does not victimize* (1:6). How could it? The body does not possess a will independent of mind. It is indifferent to how others behave. It cannot doubt anyone's integrity (1:6). There is no reason for the body to victimize anyone, and no way it (on its own) could do so. The world is full of bodies inflicting pain and loss on other bodies, but it isn't the body that is to blame, is it?

² See Appendix for the full definition.

Punishing it for this or any of these things is truly insane. And yet, we all do it; that's where sickness comes from.

The body doesn't victimize but it certainly can *be* victimized. And yet it isn't the body that feels itself as a victim; it's the mind (1:8).

The body isn't playing a role of any kind. It's just doing what it is told to do, without any push-back or attack (1:9).

Paragraph 2

2 It is indeed a senseless point of view to hold responsible for sight a thing that cannot see, and blame it for the sounds you do not like, although it cannot hear. ²*It* suffers not the punishment you give, because it has no feeling. ³It behaves in ways you want, but never makes the choice. ⁴It is not born and does not die. ⁵It can but follow aimlessly the path on which it has been set. ⁶And if that path is changed, it walks as easily another way. ⁷It takes no sides and judges not the road it travels. ⁸It perceives no **gap** because it does not hate. ⁹It can be *used* for hate, but it cannot be hateful made thereby.

For all of these reasons, then, it really is senseless to hold the body responsible for what it sees, hears, and does (2:1). In fact the body doesn't even suffer from the punishment you inflict upon it "because it *has* no feeling" (2:2). *You* suffer. The body does just what you want it to do; it never chooses on its own (2:3). In fact, the body doesn't even get born or die (2:4)! The Course points out the reason behind this elsewhere:

"The body neither lives nor dies, because it cannot contain you who are life." (T-6.VII.1:4 (CE), T-6.V.1:4 (FIP))

The body is a bit like a pre-programmed robot that just follows its instructions (2:5). Change the program and it changes directions accordingly (2:6). It has no preferences, and does not judge the path you give it to follow (2:7). It isn't the body that sees a **gap** between you and others. That perception stems from *hate*, and the body isn't capable of hate (2:8). We can *use* it for hate, but that doesn't make the body into a hateful thing (2:9).

All these points are forms of one argument: The body isn't to blame for our woes, and our punishing it with sickness is just nuts. It's a non-sentient *thing* that our minds can use as a tool; that's all it is.

Paragraph 3

3 The thing you hate and fear and loathe and want, the body does not know. ²You send it forth to seek for separation and be separate. ³And then you hate it, not for what it is, but for the uses you have made of it. ⁴You shrink from what it sees and what it hears, and hate its frailty and its littleness. ⁵And you despise its acts, but not your own.³ ⁶It sees and acts for you. ⁷It hears your voice. ⁸And it is frail and little by your wish. ⁹It seems to punish you, and thus deserve your hatred for the limitations which it brings to you. ¹⁰Yet you have made of it a symbol of the limitations which you want your mind to have and see and keep.

What does the Course mean by “the thing you hate and fear and want” (3:1)? How can we hate, fear, and want something all at the same time? Well, I suspect that those reactions are not simultaneous. The Course is speaking about the actions and behavior of our bodies, the things that seem to demonstrate the reality of separation. We want these things (so we believe), but when we get the results of our wanting, we hate the body for giving them to us, and we fear getting more of them (3:2–3).

You may have heard the expression, “You are biting off your nose to spite your face,” which refers to using self-destructive means to try to solve or fix a problem. Our relationship with our bodies is an extreme case of that crazy behavior. We think we want to be something other than “just” a part of God. We want to be independent and separate. But to be something other than perfect health, limitless Wholeness, and absolute holiness, we have to become sick, limited, and sinful. We made our bodies to find separation and to be separate (3:2). But we don’t like what we find when we seem to have found it. We make our bodies to “spite” our true Identity, but we end up fearing and hating what we (seem to) have become (3:3). We don’t like what the body sees and hears, we “hate its frailty and littleness” (3:4). We despise what our bodies do, but we try to disown their acts (3:5).

The body, declaims Jesus, “sees and acts for you” (3:6). It’s just doing what you told it to do. You wanted it to be frail and little in order to become other than divine (3:8). The body may seem to be punishing you by its weakness and ill health, and so deserve to be hated (3:9). The truth of the matter, however, is that you want your mind to have these limitations, see this separation, and keep them; the body is just an outward symbol of your wish (3:10). It is acting out the directions of your mind.

³ Despising the body’s acts, which are seen as not your own, refers to despising behaviors that seem to be motivated by the body’s instinctive drives, such as those for sex, food, or aggression (but are really motivated by the mind).

Paragraph 4

4 The body represents the **gap** between the little bit of mind you call your own and all the rest of what is *really* yours. ²You hate it, yet you think it is your self, and that without it would your self be lost. ³This is the secret vow that you have made with every brother who would walk apart. ⁴This is the secret oath you take again whenever you perceive yourself attacked. ⁵No one can suffer if he does not see himself attacked and losing by attack. ⁶Unstated and unheard in consciousness is every pledge to sickness. ⁷Yet it is a promise to another to be hurt by him, and to attack him in return.

You identify with just a tiny part of your mind. The term **gap** refers to the separation you want between this tiny part and “all the rest of what is *really* yours” (4:1). The body is merely a *representation* of the **gap**. It is “a symbol of the limitations which you want your *mind* to have and see and *keep*” (3:10). What we are is vastly beyond the little bit we’ve chosen to carve off from the rest. The Course describes us using terms such as “limitless,” “holy,” “eternal,” and “all-powerful.” But we have no idea of the true immensity of our Being. There is quite literally nothing in the world to compare it with, nothing in all the universe! You and God *are* the universe!

“If you who hold Him and whom He holds are the universe, all else must be outside, where nothing is.” (T-16.III.6:4 (CE), T-16.III.6:3 (FIP))

The body is just a part of “an outside picture of an inward condition” (T-21.I.1:4 (CE), T-21.Int.1:5 (FIP)), and is nothing like all of your unbelievably vast Self. It cannot possibly contain you:

“The body neither lives nor dies, because it cannot contain you who are life.” (T-6.VII.1:4 (CE), T-6.V(A).1:4 (FIP))

So we end up having a love-hate relationship with our bodies. We hate it for its flaws, yet we think it *is* us, indispensable to our existence (4:2). It is the visual illustration of the ancient “secret vow” we made “with every brother who would walk apart” (4:3). We stood before one another and vowed to be separate, remain separate, attack one another, and feel attacked by one another (4:4). It’s a vow you are *renewing* “whenever you perceive yourself attacked” (4:4).

This secret vow of separation is the source of all suffering and sickness (4:5–6), the cause we are completely unaware of (“unstated and unheard in consciousness”). Suffering and sickness are the out-picturing of our “promise [to our brother] to be hurt by him, and to attack him in return” (4:7).

It may seem hard to accept that this is all going on in our minds, but that we are unaware of it. It may seem difficult to believe that *all* sickness and suffering arises because of an unconscious agreement to be separate. Yet it is not that difficult to see that any perception of giving or receiving attack has to be *based on* separateness. It isn’t hard to understand that, when my body is sick, I feel more separate from the people around me, especially those who are not sick. Or, when someone else is sick, and I am not, I feel separate from them. So we can catch a glimpse at least that our bodies are demonstrating

separation. The Course is trying to get us to see that our bodies were *made* for this demonstration.

Paragraph 5

5 Sickness is anger taken out upon the body, so that *it* will suffer pain.
2It is the obvious effect of what was made in secret, in agreement with another's secret wish to be apart from you, as you would be apart from him.
3Unless you both agree this is your wish, it can have no effects. 4Whoever says "There is no **gap** between my mind and yours" has kept God's promise, not his tiny oath to be forever faithful unto death.4 5And by his healing is his brother healed. 6Let this be your agreement with each one: that you be one with him and not apart. 7And he will keep the promise that you make with him, because it is the one which he has made to God, as God has made to him.

Jesus has explained why we are angry at the body. It has failed us in dozens of ways, or should I say, failed our egos. Simultaneously, however, it serves the ego well, and seems to demonstrate the reality of separation. Sickness is the result of that anger (5:1). Our minds, quite unconsciously, are inflicting pain on the body both to punish it and to demonstrate that we (identified with our bodies) are separate from God's perfection.

Sickness, therefore, "is the obvious effect of what was made in secret" (5:2). We agreed with "another's secret wish to be apart from you, as you would be apart from him." Sickness is the effect of that secret vow. The vow's secrecy lies in the way we have mutually hidden this promise from our own minds, stashing it away in our subconscious. But there is an important fact to notice: The secret vow is "*in agreement*" with another person who is also vowing to maintain separation. Therefore, if we do not *both* agree with the wish to be separate, "it *can* have no effects" (5:3), which means that sickness cannot exist unless we are both choosing separation.

If you or I were to say, and mean, "There is no **gap** between my mind and yours," I would be keeping "*God's* promise," and not my own "tiny oath" to remain separate (5:4). That would change the whole picture. That would mean my mind had been healed, and my healing would precipitate the healing of my brother (5:5).

So we must agree with everyone that there is no separation between our minds, that we are "one with him and *not* apart," instead of accepting that separation is real (5:6). If we do that, Jesus says, our brother "will keep the promise that *you* (my emphasis) make with him." It's a promise that we both exchanged with God in the moment of our creation (5:7; see also T-10.V.10:6-7 and sentences 1-4 of the next paragraph)⁵.

⁴ Revelation 2:10 (KJV): "Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life." In this Bible verse, being faithful unto death means being faithful even if it results in one's death. In the Course, being "faithful unto death" is a play on words, in which we have vowed to be faithful to death itself.

⁵.

Sometimes it seems (to me at least) that I'm attempting to assert to someone that we are not separate, I'm doing my best to see him or her as one with me and not apart, but I don't see the other person making the same attempt. Or that one or the other of us is still manifesting physical sickness. I'm not sure how to interpret that. Assuming that what Jesus is saying is entirely accurate, there are only a few possibilities. Is it because my promise of oneness isn't pure, somehow still tinged with a desire for separateness? Is it because the reciprocation of my promise of unity is delayed only by time, which is meaningless?

Whatever the explanation for the apparent delayed response, it seems there is only one course of action: Stay the course. Continue to affirm oneness. Continue to search my mind for shreds of separation consciousness. And continue to have faith that the brother or sister will, indeed, will keep the same promise of oneness with me.

Paragraph 6

6 God keeps His promises; His Son keeps his. ²In his creation did his Father say, "You are beloved of Me and I of you forever. ³Be you perfect as Myself, for you can never be apart from Me."⁶ ⁴His Son remembers not that he replied, "I will," though in that promise was he born. ⁵Yet God reminds him of it every time he does not share a promise to be sick, but lets his mind be healed and unified. ⁶His secret vows are powerless before the will of God, Whose promises he shares. ⁷And what he substitutes is not his will, who has made promise of himself to God.

We made a mutual promise with God in our creation. God and His Son always keep their promises; this is why the outcome is as certain as God. God pledged eternal love to us and declared our love for Him to be equally eternal. He called us to be perfect as He is because we can never be apart from Him (6:1–3).

What we've forgotten in our insanity is that we replied to Him, "I will." We agreed to be perfect as God is and to love Him forever. That agreement—that promise—was the catalyst that precipitated our creation. "In that promise was he (us) born" (6:4). But it is still true that God's Son keeps his promises (6:1). We made that promise, and it remains in effect. We *cannot* escape from it.

Every time we refuse to share the promise to be sick with a brother or sister, allowing our minds to be healed and unified with the other, God reminds us of that primal promise (6:5). The secret vow to be separate is "powerless before the will of God." We share God's promises with Him (6:6). That sharing is how creation happened. What we've substituted in place of that promise of oneness and eternal love—our secret vow to be separate—is *not* our will. It isn't what we really want! We've promised ourselves to God,

⁶ Matthew 5:48 (KJV):

"Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect." In the above reference, being perfect as God is perfect is not an injunction that we should strive to fulfill now, but the pronouncement with which God brought us into being in the beginning, and which is thus forever true.

and without that pledge, we would not exist (6:7). That union with God and all of creation *is* our will, and it will prevail.

You know, I think that was what Martin Luther King saw when he declared,

“Well, I don’t know what will happen now. We’ve got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn’t matter with me now, because I’ve been to the mountaintop. And I don’t mind. Like anybody, I would like to live – a long life; longevity has its place. But I’m not concerned about that now. I just want to do God’s will. And He’s allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I’ve looked over. And I’ve seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land. So I’m happy, tonight. I’m not worried about anything. I’m not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.”

The fulfillment of the promise may be delayed, but our response should be, as Martin’s was, “I just want to do God’s will.” We need to know that “we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land.”

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 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. Passages that lie outside the current section will continue to have footnoted references. 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.

APPENDIX
Definition of "sickness"

sickness

1. Sickness is of the mind. It is insanity, mental illness, wrong-mindedness, the condition of the mind that believes in separation. 2. Physical sickness is made by us, by projecting onto the body our mental sickness. This projection is for a purpose: It reinforces the supposed "reality" of the ego. The Course mentions many ways in which sickness serves this purpose: a) The mind punishes the body to mitigate expected punishment from God and so usurp His perceived function (see T-5.V.5:4-9); b) the mind makes the body sick to prove that it is stronger than God Who would heal (see M-5.I.1-2); c) the mind punishes the body as a way of blaming the body for the "sins" the mind had the body act out (see T-18.VI.6:1); d) the mind punishes the body as a way of punishing itself for its supposed sins; e) the mind made the body out of the sickness of separation and projects this sickness onto the body (see T-19.I.7:7); f) the mind uses sickness to demonstrate that the mind is separate from goodness, health and God (see T-28.V.1:1-5); g) the mind produces sickness to separate us from others (see W-pI.137.1-2); h) the mind makes the body sick to show how another has injured it (see T-27.I.3-4); i) the mind attacks the body because the body has failed to satisfy (see T-19.IV(B).11:6); j) the mind attacks the body to prove that the body is real (see T-29.II.8:1-3), that we are physical beings, not spiritual (see W-pI.136.7-8); k) the mind attacks the body because it suspects the body is not real enough to truly act out its fantasies (see T-18.VI.3:7). 3. The one true remedy for sickness is not physical medicine (though this can be appropriate to use; see magic), but the miracle, which heals all sickness regardless of form, thus proving that sickness is an illusion (see W-pI.140).

2.

Song of Prayer, Chapter 3, Section I

I. The Cause of Sickness

1. 1 Do not mistake effect for cause, nor think that sickness is apart and separate from what its cause must be. 2 It is a sign, a shadow of an evil thought that seems to have reality and to be just, according to the usage of the world. 3 It is external proof of inner "sins," and witnesses to unforgiving thoughts that injure and would hurt the Son of God. 4 Healing the body is impossible, and this is shown by the brief nature of the "cure." 5 The body yet must die, and so its healing but delays its turning back to dust, where it was born and will return.
2.
 - 2.1 1 The body's cause is unforgiveness of the Son of God. 2 It has not left its source, and in its pain and aging and the mark of death upon it this is clearly shown. 3 Fearful and frail it seems to be to those who think their

life is tied to its command and linked to its unstable, tiny breath. 4 Death stares at them as every moment goes irrevocably past their grasping hands, which cannot hold them back. 5 And they feel fear as bodies change and sicken. 6 For they sense the heavy scent of death upon their hearts.

- 2.1 1 The body can be healed as an effect of true forgiveness. 2 Only that can give remembrance of immortality, which is the gift of holiness and love. 3 Forgiveness must be given by a mind which understands that it must overlook all shadows on the holy face of Christ, among which sickness should be seen as one. 4 Nothing but that; the sign of judgment made by brother upon brother, and the Son of God upon himself. 5 For he has damned his body as his prison, and forgot that it is he who gave this role to it.
- 2.2 1 What he has done now must God's Son undo. 2 But not alone. 3 For he has thrown away the prison's key; his holy sinlessness and the remembrance of his Father's Love. 4 Yet help is given to him in the Voice his Father placed in him. 5 The power to heal is now his Father's gift, for through His Voice He still can reach His Son, reminding him the body may become his chosen home, but it will never be his home in truth.