

Commentary

ACIM® Manual for Teachers

24: Is Reincarnation True?

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

If you read the chapter title, “Is Reincarnation True?”, you might think the chapter will tell you whether or not people who die return to another life. It doesn't! The content of the Course that has preceded this does not firmly support the concept of reincarnation. It hints at it once or twice, as in Workbook Lesson 132, Paragraph 6, where it says not everyone will learn in this life that there is no world, but they will return and go further toward the truth and perhaps return “yet again.” Eventually, everyone will learn the lesson. That does seem to imply the bare bones of reincarnation, but there is no hint of the detailed theories about it found in many other thought systems.

This section instructs us, as teachers of God, how we should deal with ideas from outside the Course. Reincarnation is such a concept. First, recall what Chapter 31, Section V, “The Concept of the Self,” taught about concepts in general:

“Concepts are learned; they are not natural. Apart from learning they do not exist. They are not given, and they must be made. Not one of them is true, and many come from feverish imaginations, hot with hatred and distortions born of fear... all of them are made within the world; born in its shadow, growing in its ways, and finally “maturing” in its thought. They are ideas of idols painted with the brushes of the world, which cannot make a single picture representing truth.”

“A concept of the self is meaningless“ (T-31.V.6:1-7:1 (CE))

All concepts are made by us. Not one is true. The world makes them. They are all meaningless. Since reincarnation is a concept, it, too, must not be true and must be meaningless. And yet, as this section will demonstrate, it can sometimes be useful. The principles the Course applies here to reincarnation can be applied to any concept.

Paragraph 1

In the ultimate sense, reincarnation is impossible. ²There is no past nor future, and the idea of birth into a body has no meaning, either once or many times. ³Reincarnation cannot, then, be true in any real sense.¹ ⁴Our only question should be “Is the concept helpful?” ⁵And that depends, of course, on what it is used for. ⁶If it is used to strengthen the recognition of the eternal nature of life, it is helpful indeed. ⁷Is any other question about it really useful in lighting up the way? ⁸Like many other beliefs, it can be bitterly misused. ⁹At least, such misuse offers preoccupation and perhaps pride in the past.² ¹⁰At worst, it induces inertia in the present.³ ¹¹In between, many kinds of folly are possible.

The section begins with an unequivocal answer: Reincarnation is impossible “in the ultimate sense” (1:1) or “in any real sense” (1:3). The only thing ultimately true is Heaven, God, or Oneness. The world, the body, and time are *not* true in the ultimate sense, so how could reincarnation (return to the world in a new body) be true (1:2)?

The real issue in dealing with concepts from other thought systems, such as reincarnation, is to ask ourselves, “Is it helpful?” (1:4). How we use a concept, any concept, determines its usefulness (1:5).

For instance, reincarnation can be used “to strengthen the recognition of the eternal nature of life.” Used like that *it is very useful* (1:6). But why bother trying to take it further than the eternal nature of life? Why ask, “Who was I in past lives?” or “Who, or what, will I be in my next life?” Jesus asks us if such questions help to light up our way home in this life (1:7). They don’t.

The problem with the concept of reincarnation is that it can be “bitterly misused” (1:8). We may feed our egos by imagining that we were famous or important historical figures. We may try to blame a past life for poor behavior in the present. We may blame our pain or misfortune on “karma from a past life” instead of its true cause: our thoughts. In the simplest form of misuse, we may become preoccupied with reincarnation, preventing us from doing constructive work on ourselves. At worst, when we locate causation in past lives or look to a future life for salvation, we may induce “inertia in the present” (1:10). There are a lot of possible intermediate misuses (which the Course calls “folly”). Perhaps you’ve encountered some of the follies that grow up around reincarnation.

One takeaway is that it isn’t necessary to convince anyone about reincarnation, and you don’t need to dissuade them from it, either.

¹ That reincarnation cannot be true “in any real sense” means it cannot be true *on the level of reality*. How can we actually enter into a succession of bodies over time when bodies and time do not really exist? This does not mean that reincarnation cannot happen within the dream. It just means that if reincarnation does happen within the dream, then like the rest of the dream, it is not real.

² “Preoccupation” probably means preoccupation with *one’s own* past lives. “Pride” probably means pride over one’s supposed past lives as important personages.

³ One way that reincarnation can induce “inertia in the present” is that it can make the mistakes of the past seem more powerful than our ability to choose in the present, thus making real change seem impossible.

We may wonder, “We do experience being *incarnated* for this one lifetime. Isn't it possible we might experience living *many* lifetimes?” The Course doesn't answer that question because it considers it irrelevant. Our only question should be, “Is it helpful?”

Pause for a moment to think how this principle of “Is it helpful?” can be applied to other spiritual concepts from other spiritual teachings. A Roman Catholic goes to confession. We should not concern ourselves about the ultimate validity of confession; we know the Course would say that since there is no sin, there is no need to confess sins. But, “Is it helpful?” If a person finds it helpful to support their sense of innocence, then let them be. If it is harmful, not so good. For example, some people have been known to use confession (and the forgiveness offered by the priest) to be a way that allows them to do as they please and then “confess” to avoid punishment.

Paragraph 2

2 Reincarnation would not, under any circumstances, be the problem to be dealt with now. ²If it were responsible for some of the difficulties the individual faces now, his task would still be only to escape from them now. ³If he is laying the groundwork for a future life, he can still work out his salvation only now. ⁴To some there may be comfort in the concept, and if it heartens them its value is self-evident. ⁵It is certain, however, that the way to salvation can be found by those who believe in reincarnation and by those who do not. ⁶The idea cannot, therefore, be regarded as essential to the curriculum. ⁴ ⁷There is always some risk in seeing the present in terms of the past. ⁵ ⁸There is always some good in any thought which strengthens the idea that life and the body are not the same.

In the present moment, reincarnation is never an issue. Even if a past life is responsible for some current difficulty you are experiencing, your only task is to handle the current problem (2:1–2). If what you are doing is setting up some future life, all you can do now is to work out your present salvation (2:3). Some people find the thought of reincarnation comforting, and that gives it some value for them (2:4).

What should be clear is that anyone can find the way to Heaven, with or without belief in reincarnation (2:5). Belief in reincarnation can't be considered essential (2:6). To state the pros and cons of belief in reincarnation simply (2:7–8):

- Con: Seeing the present in terms of the past is a bit risky since time is an illusion.
- Pro: It strengthens the idea that life and the body are not the same.

We can see, then, that even if we like the idea of reincarnation, we must avoid using the past to explain the present and embrace the idea that life exists independent from bodies.

⁴ Given that this statement follows from the idea that “salvation can be found by those who believe in reincarnation and by those who do not,” it seems to mean that the idea of reincarnation is not essential to the *universal* curriculum (not just the Course's curriculum). See T-5.VII.1:1: “The whole question [of karma, which is linked with reincarnation] is not really necessary to religion at all.”

⁵ See “The Question of Karma” (T-5.VII) for a discussion of the dangers of “seeing the present in terms of the past.”

At this point, it might be helpful to read T-5.VII in the CE, which contains a discussion of karma not in previous editions of the Course.

Paragraph 3

3 For our purposes, it would not be helpful to take any definite stand on reincarnation.⁶ ²A teacher of God should be as helpful to those who believe in it as to those who do not. ³If a definite stand on it were required of him, it would merely limit his usefulness as well as his own decision making. ⁴Our course is not concerned with any concept that is not acceptable to anyone, regardless of his formal beliefs.⁷ ⁵His ego will be enough for him to cope with, and it is not the part of wisdom to add sectarian controversies to his burdens. ⁶Nor would there be an advantage in his premature acceptance of the course merely because it advocates a long-held belief of his own.⁸

The presence of potential problems arising from the belief in reincarnation makes it clear why the Course does not take a definite stand on the issue (3:1). To the teacher of God, it should make no difference whether or not a person believes it (3:2). If the Course required you to take a definite stand on reincarnation, it would be imposing limits on you in two ways: * it would limit your usefulness as a teacher of God (particularly in sharing the Course with others), * and it would limit your own decision-making (3:3). Let's look at each of those limitations.

First, limiting your usefulness as a teacher of God. How? You will be sharing the Course with people who don't believe in reincarnation and those who do. If you were required to believe in it as part of the Course, you would have problems with both kinds of people. Those who believe in it might be attracted to the Course *because* it taught reincarnation. It might lead them to accept the Course prematurely (3:6) before they understood its core teachings. Likewise, people who did not already believe in reincarnation might be put off by its being part of the Course (3:4). Dealing with their egos will be

⁶ Based on the rest of the paragraph, “for our purposes” probably means “for purposes of presenting the Course’s own teachings to pupils” (see 5:5 for a direct reference to these pupils)—in other words, the teacher should not teach reincarnation as *part of the Course*. The statement that the teacher should not take a “definite stand” on reincarnation, then, means that he should not take a definite stand *in his presentation of the Course’s own teachings to pupils*. This does not mean that he cannot talk about reincarnation at all, given the later statement that a teacher of God *can* “believe in reincarnation himself... [and] discuss it with others who do” (5:1).

⁷ This sentence may mean the following: Regardless of our “formal beliefs”—what we outwardly profess, our consciously held belief systems—as we encounter the Course’s teachings, something in us directly perceives their internal logic and psychological accuracy. As a result, we may find ourselves able to accept those teachings regardless of whatever formal beliefs we may hold.

⁸ These final two sentences show two different pupils in the first phase of their journey with *A Course in Miracles*. The first pupil, who is against reincarnation, is struggling to cope with his ego acting up in response to the Course’s teachings. Why, then, would his teacher “add sectarian controversies [like reincarnation] to his burdens”? The second, who believes in reincarnation, needs to work through those same difficulties with his ego and come to a *mature* acceptance of the Course. So why would his teacher risk rushing him into a “premature acceptance of the course merely because it advocates a long-held belief of his own [reincarnation]”? Either way, if the teacher taught reincarnation as part of the Course, he could jeopardize his pupil’s passage through this crucial initial phase with the Course.

problem enough. It would not be wise to raise possible “sectarian controversies” around reincarnation, adding to the new students' troubles (3:5).

Second, limits on your decision-making. How? This limitation, I think, is the subject of discussion in the fourth paragraph so that we can move on to that now.

Paragraph 4

4 It cannot be too strongly emphasized that this course aims at a complete reversal of thought. ²When this is finally accomplished, issues such as the validity of reincarnation become meaningless. ³Until then, they are likely to be merely controversial. ⁴The teacher of God is therefore wise to step away from all such questions, for he has much to teach and learn apart from them. ⁵He should both learn and teach that theoretical issues but waste time, draining it away from its appointed purpose.⁹ ⁶If there are aspects to any concept or belief that will be helpful, he will be told about it. ⁷He will also be told how to use it. ⁸What more need he know?

When the Course says something about itself that “cannot be too strongly emphasized,” we need to sit up and listen. Here, in (4:1), it informs us that the aim of the Course is “a complete reversal of thought.” This aim should not be news to the student who has read the Text and Workbook. The Course has made it plain numerous times. It repeatedly tells us that all our perception is upside down and needs to be inverted or reversed. For instance:

“It is essential it be kept in mind that all perception still is upside down until its purpose has been understood.” (T-24.VII.8:5 (CE)).

“Perception’s laws must be reversed, because they are reversals of the laws of truth. The laws of truth forever will be true and cannot be reversed, yet can be seen as upside down” (T-26.VII.5:1-2 (CE)).

“The world will end when its thought system has been completely reversed” (M-14.4:1 (CE)).

The following sentence relates this thought reversal to reincarnation. In essence, it says that concepts such as reincarnation become meaningless when this aim is achieved (4:2). If we realize once and for all that we are not bodies, subject to birth and death, it makes reincarnation irrelevant. The same is true of any concept that does not entail a complete reversal of thought.

Before such thought reversal, concepts such as reincarnation “are likely to be merely controversial” (4:3). If you have ever discussed reincarnation with people with opposing viewpoints, you have probably experienced such controversy.

⁹ In this context, the term “theoretical issues” does not refer to the theoretical level of the *Course*’s teachings, but rather to “formal beliefs” (3:4) and “sectarian controversies” (3:5) such as reincarnation. These theoretical issues just “waste time,” rather than promoting practical change. This stands in contrast to the *Course*’s “theoretical foundation,” which is actually “necessary” (W-In.1:1) for understanding its practical exercises.

What you as a teacher of God have to teach and to learn is quite removed from such controversies. Therefore, steer clear of them. Step away from them (4:4). Such theoretical issues are just a waste of time (4:5)! Note the words “all such questions”; it extends what the Course is saying about reincarnation to every such theoretical issue, any psychological or spiritual teaching where there are seemingly valid arguments on both sides of the issue. Groups of people on both sides are utterly convinced they are right. Not only should you, as a teacher of God, steer clear of them, but you should also teach others to do so as well.

One such issue related to the Course itself is the question that often comes up: “Did Jesus really dictate the Course to Helen? Or was it her higher consciousness?” Or, perhaps, “How did the separation happen? How did a mad idea enter the mind of God's Son if he was perfect?”

But it relates to all sorts of questions in Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, or any religion. “Did Jesus have both a human and a divine nature, or was he only divine, or only human?” There are countless examples of such “sectarian controversies.” Just look at the number of sects in any religion; behind each is what the Course calls a meaningless concept. I've referred to this as “majoring in minors”; we, God's teachers, need to avoid such time-wasters. They drain time of its only real purpose: completely reversing our thoughts.

However, Jesus implies that *some* concepts or beliefs can *sometimes* be helpful (as he pointed out earlier about how a belief in reincarnation can support a realization that we are not bodies and do not die). He says that if there is something helpful about a particular belief, even one that might be sectarian, the Holy Spirit will let us know and tell us how to use it (4:6–7). That's all we need to know about any concept (4:8).

Paragraph 5

5 Does this mean that the teacher of God should not believe in reincarnation himself, or discuss it with others who do? ²Certainly not! ³If he does believe in reincarnation, it would be a mistake for him to renounce the belief unless his internal Teacher so advised. ⁴And this is most unlikely. ⁵He might be advised that he is misusing the belief in some way that is detrimental to his pupils' advance or his own. ⁶Reinterpretation would then be recommended, because it would be necessary. ⁷All that must be recognized, however, is that birth was not the beginning and death is not the end. ⁸Yet even this much is not required of the beginner. ⁹He need merely accept the idea that what he understands is not necessarily all there is to learn. ¹⁰His journey has begun.

Even after all this, Jesus tells us that it's OK to believe in reincarnation and to discuss it with others who also believe (5:1–2). I must point out this seems to rule out discussing it with people who *don't* believe in it already. If you believe in reincarnation, don't let this discussion derail your belief! The only reason to change your mind about it is that the Holy Spirit, your “internal Teacher,” lets you know you should (5:3) — which is “most unlikely” (5:4)!

It's a lot more likely that the Holy Spirit will let you know that you are "misusing the belief in some way that is detrimental to [your] pupil's advance or [your] own" (5:5). At that point, the Spirit would lead you through some necessary reinterpretation (5:6).

The only key point to gain from the idea of reincarnation "is that birth was not the beginning and death is not the end" (5:7).¹⁰ Not even that is required of a beginner. Beginners need only to accept that they do not understand everything yet; there is still a lot to learn (5:8–9). It's what the Buddhist teacher, Shunryu Suzuki, called having a Zen Mind or Beginner's Mind in his book bearing that title.

Get that! It's hugely comforting. The essential thing we need on our journey home is the realization that we don't yet know everything; we have a lot to learn. Once anyone accepts that, his journey home has begun (5:9–10). It's the person who thinks they already have all the answers who is truly stuck!

Where I went to college, the theme of our entire curriculum was, "Learn to re-examine all your basic assumptions." It's the main thing I remember from that college. We must continually entertain the possibility that our current beliefs are always subject to revision. Ernest Holmes, the author of *The Science of Mind*, described this mental attitude as "remaining open at the top," always ready to receive revisions from our inner Teacher. In the Course, the process is described as *unlearning*:

"It is the function of God's teachers to bring true learning to the world. Properly speaking it is unlearning that they bring, for that is true learning in the world." (M-4.X.3:1–2 (CE)).

Paragraph 6

6 The emphasis of this course always remains the same: It is at this moment that complete salvation is offered you, and it is at this moment that you can accept it.² This is still your one responsibility.¹¹ ³Atonement might be equated with total escape from the past and total lack of interest in the future. ⁴Heaven is here. ⁵There is nowhere else. ⁶Heaven is now. ⁷There is no other time. ⁸No teaching that does not lead to this is of concern to God's teachers. ⁹All beliefs will point to this if properly interpreted.¹² ¹⁰In this sense, it can be said that their truth lies in their usefulness. ¹¹All beliefs that lead to progress should be honored. ¹²This is the sole criterion this course requires. ¹³No more than this is necessary.

The Course's *emphasis* is subtly different from its *purpose*. The purpose is the desired goal or effect in and on us, the desired *outcome*. The emphasis refers to its *methodology* and the content of the lessons it presents. Here, it reminds us that this and every moment offers us complete salvation (6:1–2).

¹⁰ The Text identifies another major lesson: There is. no. hell. See T-8.VII.1:2.

¹¹ T-2.VIII.5:1: "The sole responsibility of the miracle worker is to accept Atonement himself."

¹² "Properly interpreted" here probably refers to Jesus' penchant for *reinterpreting* ideas. For instance, he reinterprets Freud's idea that we can become fixated at certain stages in our infancy, so that it becomes the idea that "You were eternally fixated on God in your creation" (T-5.IX.9:2).

Purpose

But you must remember that the Course repeatedly states that its purpose is the escape from fear. (T-9.II.1:4 (CE&FIP))

It is the purpose of these exercises to train the mind to think along the lines the course sets forth. (W-Int.1:4 (CE&FIP))

No course whose purpose is to teach you what you really are could fail to emphasize there is no difference in what you are and what love is. (W-127.4:1 (CE)&FIP)

Emphasis

Ideas leave not their source. The emphasis this course has placed on that idea is due to its centrality in our attempts to change your mind about yourself (W-167.3:1-2 (CE&FIP))

There is no world! This is the central thought the course attempts to teach. (W-132.6:1-2 (CE&FIP))

Forgiveness is the central theme which runs throughout salvation (W-169.10:5 (CE))

The passage we are studying emphasizes salvation's immediate and continual availability. The other statements of emphasis I have just quoted fit into that thought. Ideas leave not their source. Therefore we have not left the mind of God, so our salvation is always immediately available. There is no world; therefore, nothing unreal exists, and salvation is always available. Forgiveness is the central theme because it is the recognition of these facts and sharing it, something that is always a possibility for us in every encounter.

We can offer salvation in every moment, every *now*, and “it is at this moment that you can accept it.” And that remains our only responsibility (6:2).

To drive home the irrelevance of reincarnation (which deals with the past and the future), Jesus points out that “Atonement might be equated with total escape from the past and total lack of interest in the future” (6:3). As he pointed out in 2:2-3, salvation is available only in the present moment. In 6:4-8, which are among my favorite lines in the Course, He stresses the central importance of the present moment, now, so much so that I'll quote them again here:

Heaven is here. There is nowhere else. Heaven is now. There is no other time. No teaching that does not lead to this is of concern to God's teachers (M-24.6:4-8).

Or, as it says in the Text:

For only now is here, and only it presents the opportunities for the holy encounters in which salvation can be found. (T-13.IV.8:5 (CE), T-13.IV.7:7 (FIP)).

If this is true, what possible importance is it what your past life may have been, or what your future life may be? Even the Bible declares, “Now is the acceptable time. Now is the day of salvation (2 Corinthians 6:2)”.

It's worth noting in passing what is said above about Heaven. It is here, and it is now. There is no other place. We are in Heaven right now! Teachings (like reincarnation) that do not lead us to this truth should be of no concern to a teacher of God **(6:8)**. And if we properly interpret all beliefs (!), this is where they will lead us **(6:9)**. The conclusion we must reach, then, is that the truth of any teaching depends not on its content but on its usefulness in pointing us to salvation in the here and now **(6:10)**.

It says that “all beliefs,” whether reincarnation or any other belief that isn't part of the Course, “that lead to progress should be honored” **(6:11)**. That even applies to beliefs that *are* a part of the Course. Even they can be misused. The only criterion the Course requires is, “Does it lead to spiritual progress?” **(6:12)**. Does it discourage wrong-minded thinking and lead to right-minded thinking? Does it foster forgiveness? Does it help you remember who you are (the perfect, holy child of God, wholly lovable and wholly loving)? Does it lead us all to oneness with one another and with God?

We do not need to argue for or against any belief. If it leads to progress for you, or for the one who holds the belief, that's all that is necessary **(6:13)**.

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.