

Study Guide and Commentary ACIM[®] Text, Chapter 13, Section IV

The Function of Time

We have seen that the ego uses projection in an attempt to get rid of guilt, and that what we perceive is always an interpretation and not a fact. Our perceptions are colored and distorted by the lens of guilt in our minds. Time, and its purpose or function in our lives, is one of the major factors the ego uses in this distortion.

We will perceive "The Function of Time" (Section IV title) in the same way we perceive our own function. The ego teaches that because of our guilt our function is destruction (1:4): through suffering, death and destruction we are here to prove our guilt and separation from God. The Holy Spirit teaches that because of our innocence as God's creation our function is healing (1:3): through recognition of God's innocent Son in our brother we are here to demonstrate that we are not an ego, to demonstrate our oneness with our brothers and with God.

The function of time for the ego therefore always lays emphasis on the past (4:2), because guilt lies in the past. The function of time for the Holy Spirit always emphasizes the present, *overlooking* the past, since the present is the only time in which healing can occur. The function of time, for the Holy Spirit, is healing.

We serve the process of our healing when we begin to question our own emphasis on the past and to let it go. Instead of focusing on the past, and thus insuring a similar future, let us focus on joining in love, in the present, to create a future that is unlike the past.

Let us notice when we are reacting to the present as if it were the past, and let us learn to discount the importance of such reactions in our lives. It is something we need to unlearn. Let this become a motto for our life: "Use no relationship to hold you to the past, but with each one each day be born again" (T-13.X.5:2). The past is one of the foremost tools the ego uses to blind us to love's presence. As we release past pain we will uncover present love, which is always there. This is time's true function. Through refocusing our thoughts on present healing instead of past pain, we will be released from time, and thus released from guilt.

Paragraph 1

1. ¹And now the reason why you are afraid of this course should be apparent.
²For this is a course on love, because it is about you. ³You have been told that your function in this world is healing, and your function in Heaven is creating¹.
⁴The ego teaches that your function on earth is destruction, and you have no function at **all** in Heaven. ⁵It would thus destroy you here and bury you here, leaving you no inheritance except the dust out of which it thinks you were made.
⁶As long as it is reasonably satisfied with you, as its reasoning goes, it offers you

¹ "As your function in Heaven is creation, so your function on earth is healing" (T-12.VII.4:7).

² "Wanting to kill you as the final expression of its feeling for you, it lets you live but to await death. It will torment you while you live, but its hatred is not satisfied until you

oblivion. ⁷When it becomes overtly savage, it offers you hell.

• Study Question •

1. *Based on this paragraph and the preceding two sections, why are we afraid of the Course? Identify the passages you refer to in Sections II and III.*

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We are afraid of this Course because our egos are afraid we will discover the love in ourselves hidden beneath the cloud of guilt. The ego does not want us to perceive ourselves as loving beings whose “function in this world is healing,” and whose “function in Heaven is creating” (1:3; referring to earlier statements in T-9.III.8:3 and T-12.VII.4:7). Instead, it views us as attack machines with no function beyond our cutthroat earthly existence (1:4).

Notice how three sections in a row (II, III and IV) have referred to your fear of the Course and what it is trying to teach you. I might say this is the central point of these sections, at least in the sense of a practical application of the teaching. Consciously, you don't recognize this fear. After all, you are *studying* the Course! Would you be doing that if you feared it? And yet...and yet... Haven't you, at times, felt some rumblings of fear as you read the Text or the Workbook? Hasn't something within you felt threatened, somehow, by some of the things the Course is saying?

I remember how, during the first few years in which I studied the Course, my fundamentalist learning caused me to greatly fear many aspects of the Course. I had spent the years of my life between ages sixteen and thirty-eight soundly convinced of the truth of conservative evangelical Christianity. I believed that God created the physical world. I believed Jesus was God the Son. I believed all humankind was guilty of sin and condemned to hell unless they accepted God's offer of salvation through Jesus Christ (although I had softened that considerably over the years to the point that I believed people could “accept Christ” without ever hearing the name of Jesus). I believed that the Bible was without error, inspired by God in every detail. What's more, I had many strong, intellectually appealing arguments to support all those beliefs.

To me (as Section II pointed out), to claim to be without guilt was, indeed, blasphemous. When the Course tried to tell me that there is no such thing as sin, I felt fear. When it questioned some teaching of the Bible, I trembled. When it said that God did not create the world I was offended at the effrontery of blatantly contradicting the first verse of the Bible. I was being asked to abandon the beliefs that had been at the root of my thought system for decades. If I was wrong, I could end up in hell. Of course I was afraid!

I think that everyone, to some degree, has fears of this nature. They may not be tied specifically to evangelical Christianity, as mine were; in fact, in my experience, very few fundamentalist Christians are open enough, or willing enough to brave their fears, to even *consider* that the Course might be true. Yet, from what the Course says, everyone who studies the Course will, at the start, be afraid of what it tries to teach them.

These sections are trying to make us aware of our deep-rooted resistance to what the Course teaches. If we did not fear it and resist it, we would be instantly transformed the moment we hear it. The love in our hearts would be irresistibly drawn to God, and we would instantly transcend our foolish egos. But that does not happen, does it? And the reason it does not happen is that we actively, albeit covertly, fear what the Course is trying to bring us. In one part of our minds we are drawn to God, and in another part we

are repelled. That resistance is what we need to become aware of, so that we can recognize its foolishness and let it go.

Two views of our function are presented in this paragraph and those that follow. The Course begins talking about how we see ourselves and our function because it wants to talk about how we see *time*, and *how we see our reason for being here will determine how we see time's function*.

You may think that the word “destruction” to describe our function from the ego’s point of view is extreme. It is related to the concepts so dear to the ego, “attack” and “judgment.” To judge something is to deem it worthy of attack, and why do you attack, if not to destroy? The ego’s entire concept of purification is based on this idea: Find something wrong (i.e., judge), attack it, and destroy it. That is how the ego sees our function in this world.

Beyond this world we have no purpose (1:4). To the ego this world is all there is because it *wants* the world to be all there is; it does not want Heaven to exist. The ego’s plan for you is “to destroy you here and bury you here” (1:5). To the ego, nothing but this world exists; there is no Heaven. Its intention, according to the Course’s unvarnished picture, is to torture us as long as it can before it kills us².

As for life beyond this world—if you do as the ego wants, the ego offers you oblivion, that is, annihilation; if you start to question the ego and anger it, it offers you hell (1:6–7). As we’ll see later in the chapter, the offer of annihilation is really very generous on the part of the ego; it would greatly prefer to punish us eternally.

You can easily see here how our minds have made the image of Satan out of our ego! We have externalized this desire to punish us forever in hell, and have projected it onto the devil—an entity that exists only in our projection.

Paragraph 2

2. ¹Yet neither oblivion nor hell is as unacceptable to you as Heaven. ²[For] Your definition of Heaven *is* hell and oblivion, and the **real** Heaven is the greatest threat you think you **could** experience. ³For hell and oblivion are ideas that **you** made up, and you are bent on **demonstrating** their reality to **establish yours**. ⁴If **their** reality is questioned, you believe that **yours** is. ⁵For you believe that **attack** *is* [established] your reality, and that your **destruction** is the final proof **that you were right**.

• Study Question •

2. *Try to explain how, to the ego, hell and oblivion prove our reality.*

Our destruction validates the ego.

We cannot really understand the first two sentences without reference to the passages in the preceding section that discuss how we define Heaven when we identify with the ego (see T-13.III.3:3–4:5). We have such a corrupted image of ourselves that we think to enter Heaven would obliterate us, like a drop of water in a hot frying pan. We are so

² "Wanting to kill you as the final expression of its feeling for you, it lets you live but to await death. It will torment you while you live, but its hatred is not satisfied until you die. For your destruction is the one end toward which it works, and the only end with which it will be satisfied" (T-12.VII.13:4-6).

convinced that we are unholy and God is immaculately holy that we imagine we are like anti-matter to God's matter. Put us in His Presence and we will disappear. We fear Heaven; we fear God.

Heaven is a threat to the ego, and while we identify with the ego, we literally prefer hell or oblivion to Heaven. We made up the idea of hell (2:3). If we can prove hell is real, we prove our ego identity is real (2:4). To be destroyed proves the ego was real; God's Creation was truly altered. Arriving in hell would just prove that "I did it *my way*." Our ego *wants us to die*; it *wants to kill us*. Somehow, it believes it can survive while we die.

It's a peculiar thought pattern, isn't it? To cease to exist proves that we existed; to die proves that we lived. Jesus will delve into that absurdity more deeply in the next paragraph. The Course's argument here seems so bizarre that perhaps you think, as you read, that the Course is talking about someone else, or about "the ego," which is some negative spiritual essence quite apart from you. But the Course is not talking about someone else; it is talking about you and me. *We* are the ones "bent on demonstrating [hell and oblivion's] reality" (2:3).

Ask yourself honestly: Does it make you at least *uneasy* to think that there is no punishment for sin? When a Workbook lesson says, "There is no sin. It has no consequence" (W-pI.101.6:7), don't you have a strong sense that, somehow, that is a dangerous thing to say, a dangerous way to look at the world? That is what the Course is speaking about. In some weird way, our minds have the reality of hell connected to our own reality (2:4–5). If attack is *who we are* (2:5) then we must deserve hell; if there is no hell, we are not who we think we are, but if there is, we were *right* about our identity.

Paragraph 3

3. ¹Under the circumstances, would it not be **more desirable** to have been wrong, even apart from the fact that you **were** wrong? ²[For] While it could perhaps be argued that death suggests there *was* life, no one would claim that it proves there *is* life. ³Even the **past** life that death might indicate, could only have been futile if it must come to this, and **needs** this to prove that it was at all [that it *was*]. ⁴You question Heaven, but you do **not** question this. ⁵Yet you could heal and be healed if you **did** question it. ⁶And even though you know not Heaven, might it not be more desirable than death? ⁷You have been as selective in your questioning as in your perception. ⁸An open mind is more honest than this.

• Study Question •

3. *Does it really seem possible to you that we fear Heaven more than we fear hell and oblivion?*

Death is a futile victory, isn't it? What's the point of winning or being right if you are dead? Jesus' remarks here (3:1–2) border on the sardonic; he's making fun of our insane reasoning. "Let's see: Right and dead; wrong and alive—which should I choose?" We cannot prove we are alive by dying; that's nonsense (3:2). Even if, by some weird logic, we claim that death proves we were *once* alive, what's the point? We're dead! (3:3).

Yet we don't question it (3:4); just as we pick and choose what we let into our perception, so we pick and choose what beliefs we carefully examine. When it says we have been selective in our questioning, it means we have deliberately avoided

questioning certain things (3:7). We question Heaven's reality while stoutly maintaining that hell is real, that sin must be punished. "An open mind is more honest than this" (3:8). In other words, to Jesus, we are not being intellectually honest if we hold on to a belief in the reality of sin and hell. He is asking us to become aware of the way that our mind *does* feel threatened when death and hell are threatened, and to step back and look at that dispassionately: Does it make any sense? Of course not! That kind of mental inquiry, he tells us, is the key that opens the door both to our own healing and to the outflow of healing power through us to others (3:5). The Course very much wants us to question the ego's presuppositions, particularly those about time, as the next paragraph will bring out.

Perhaps our mental picture of Heaven seems obscure and unclear, or even quite mistaken. I've heard numerous people talk about how, "Sitting around on clouds playing harps, or an existence in which you do not do anything and do not have some drama and struggle and challenge, has to be incredibly boring." Yet how could *Heaven* be boring? If it is boring, it won't be Heaven. It's clear to me that we simply do not, and cannot, truly comprehend what Heaven is like. Yet, even if it is relatively unknown and mysterious to us, it *must* be better than death! (3:6).

Paragraph 4

4. ¹The ego has a strange notion of time, and it is with this notion that your questioning might well begin. ²The ego invests heavily in the past, and in the end believes that the past is the **only** aspect of time that is meaningful. ³Remember that [You will remember that we said] its emphasis on guilt enables it to ensure its continuity by **making the future like the past**, and thus **avoiding** the present. ⁴By the notion of **paying** for the past in the future, the past becomes the **determiner** of the future, making **them** continuous **without** an intervening present. ⁵For the ego regards [uses] the present **only** as a brief transition **to** the future, in which it brings the past **to** the future **by interpreting the present in past terms**.

• Study Question •

4. *Why is the ego so invested in the past?*

Jesus advises us to *begin* questioning the ego's thought system by challenging its view of time (4:1). He calls the ego's views "strange," and yet, if we are honest, they will seem quite familiar and part of what we consider to be common sense.

Remember the context: We have experienced fear about what the Course is saying because we are afraid of love. That fear is also behind our refusal to ask the right questions; we are afraid of what we will find. It's all an elaborate defense system the ego has set up in our minds. If we are going to get free from guilt we have to start asking new questions.

Let's start by questioning the way we (as egos) think about time. The ego lays heavy emphasis on the past, to the point that only the past is seen as meaningful (4:2). This is tied in with the ego's determination to keep us guilty. The ego feeds on guilt. As Ken Wapnick has said, "Guilt is the ego's breath." Guilt comes from attack, and the ego believes it has attacked God and succeeded in making itself separate from Him. Therefore, *guilt is the proof of its success*; if there is no guilt, the attempt at separation

must have failed, and the ego does not exist. So the ego thrives on guilt. No guilt, no ego (T-13.III.2:5).

Guilt is always about some past action, so the past is where the ego focuses our attention in order to keep us guilty. To the ego, the future is determined like this:

Past sin → Present guilt → Future punishment

That leaves no room for change; you may as well say the past *determines* the future and leave the present out of it (4:4–5). The ego makes the present meaningless; the past leads directly to the future:

Past sin → ~~Present guilt~~ → Future punishment

It keeps our attention away from the present to keep us from being healed. When our understanding of the present cannot rise above the events of the past, we have been caught in the ego's way of thinking (4:5). Most of what we call wisdom in this world consists in the acquired skill of using the past to interpret the present. Quite consciously, and to an even larger degree unconsciously, we learn to become wary and cautious, to remember past situations and to treat the present in light of that past. The mind constantly compares the present to the past and makes evaluations on that basis. "This guy looks untrustworthy." Where does a thought like that come from, if not past experience? The mind automatically uses the experiences of the past to build categories and automatically sorts people and situations into those predefined categories. We have a word that describes this, although we generally give it a much narrower meaning: "prejudice," or a preformed opinion often based on stereotypes. We are all prejudiced!

The next paragraph explains in more detail the way that the ego responds to the present as if it were the past, in order to keep us from recognizing salvation in our brothers.

Paragraph 5

5. ¹ "Now" has no meaning to the ego. ² The present merely reminds it of **past** hurts, and it reacts to the present **as if** it *were* the past. ³ [For] The ego cannot tolerate **release** from the past, and although the past is over [although it is no more], the ego tries to preserve its **image** by responding as if it were present. ⁴ [Thus,] It dictates your reactions to those you meet in the present [*now*] from a **past** reference point, obscuring their **present** reality. ⁵ In effect, if you **follow** the ego's dictates you will react to your brother as though he were **someone else**, and this will surely prevent you from recognizing him **as he is**. ³ ⁶ And you will receive messages from him out of your **own** past because, by making it real in the present, you are forbidding yourself to **let it go**. ⁷ You thus **deny** yourself the message of release that every brother offers you *now*.

³ This sentence was originally in the plural: "In effect, if you FOLLOW its dictates, you will react to your brothers as though they were SOMEONE ELSE, and this will surely prevent you from perceiving them AS THEY ARE."

• Study Question •

5. *Imagine that while you are shopping in a supermarket and buying a lot of candy, a stranger makes a joke about the amount of candy you are buying, and you feel a sudden rush of anger. Given the dynamic of the ego discussed here, why might you be offended by the stranger's remarks?*

Modern psychology totally agrees with this assessment of the human mind. The mind is like a huge library of tape recordings of the past. We've all had experiences where a certain smell or a certain song can suddenly evoke strong emotions related to the past: the smell of baking cookies can bring back the warmth and security of mother and home; a perfume recalls a loved one long gone; a tune on the radio reminds us of a lost love. Irrational fears or phobias are often said to stem from inaccurate associations with the past. Perhaps as an infant we fell from a table; as adults we have an irrational fear of heights. There are many examples; I'm sure you can think of more.

As adults we respond to other people according to unconscious past associations. According to some authorities (such as Harville Hendricks, author of *Getting the Love That You Want* and originator of Imago Therapy), we nearly always "fall in love" with someone who reminds us of one or both of our parents in some way, even if we had a terrible relationship with our parents; in fact, the worse the old relationship, the more likely we will pick someone with the same bad traits. There is a feeling of failure about the parental relationship, and we unconsciously choose someone like the undesirable parent in an attempt to recreate that old relationship. Perhaps our mind tells us we are trying to heal that relationship (and the Holy Spirit can use it that way), but the ego's motive is to get the present person to give us what the past person failed to give. All this is unconscious; all of it is the way the ego works. The ego's entire strategy is to prevent us from finding the salvation offered us by every present moment.

Like a computer, every time you encounter a situation or person in the present, the mind automatically searches its library of tapes and finds an approximate match. Your reaction to the situation or person is based far more on that old tape of the past than on anything in the present (5:2,4). And because pain is often a stronger feeling than pleasure, it is tapes of "past hurts" (5:1) that are most often matched up to the present. Instead of reacting to the present, "you react to the present as if it *were* the past" (5:2). This is how the ego tries to preserve itself (5:3).

If you think about it, the ego's use of time does not make sense. It doesn't make sense, for instance, to react to your husband or boss as if he were your father, yet we do react that way.

Living with the ego's perspective about time, nothing is seen as it is now; it is always filtered through a distorting lens of past images, images the Course, in the next paragraph, refers to as "shadowy figures." You can't actually see your brother or sister as they are now (5:5). The effect is that you are always reacting, not to the people you encounter, but to someone else, to an image from the past you are carrying in your mind and interposing into the present situation. This is why we cannot see our brother's call for help or the "message of release" he is offering (5:7). Our memory of past pain comes in between, and we interpret the call for help as some form of attack.

The mind has been so well trained in this practice that it happens without our thinking about it. In fact, we have to consciously think about it to do anything *different!* Our mind has to be consciously re-trained; that is what the Course is all about—"a course in mind

training” (T-1.VII.4:1). It is a course in unlearning what you have taught yourself up until now.

Your reactions to people in the present are colored by your memories of the past, constantly, with old friends as well as new acquaintances. What makes an old friend different from a new acquaintance, in fact? *Past reference points!* What would it be like to meet everyone, each day, with no reference to the past? If you did not see the past, how could you see guilt?

The “present reality” that is obscured by our focus on the past (5:4) is simply the judgment of the Holy Spirit:

Every loving thought is true. Everything else is an appeal for healing and help, regardless of the form it takes. (T-12.I.3.3–4)

When we let the ego dictate our reactions to the present on the basis of the past, we are denying ourselves healing in the present; we are denying ourselves salvation *now*. *Every brother in every moment* is offering us release from the past, if we have eyes to see it and take it. This is why the Course says that “every encounter is a holy encounter” (T-8.III.4:1).

Paragraph 6

6. ¹The shadowy figures from the past are precisely what you must **escape**.
²[For] They are not real, and have no hold over you unless **you** bring them **with** you. ³They carry the spots of pain in your mind, directing you to attack in the present in retaliation for a past that is no more. ⁴**And this decision is one of future pain.** ⁵[For] Unless you learn that **past** pain is an illusion [is delusional], you are choosing a future of illusions [delusions] and losing the many [the endless] opportunities you **could** find for release in the present. ⁶The ego would **preserve** your nightmares, and **prevent** you from awakening and understanding **they** are past. ⁷Would you **recognize** a holy encounter if you are merely perceiving it as a meeting with your **own** past? ⁸For you would be meeting no one, and the **sharing** of salvation, **which makes the encounter holy**, would be excluded from your sight. ⁹The Holy Spirit teaches that you always meet **yourself**, and the encounter is holy because **you** are. ¹⁰The ego teaches that you always encounter your **past**, and because your dreams **were** not holy, the future **cannot** be, and the present is without meaning.

• Study Question •

6. *How does a holy encounter differ from an encounter guided by our memory of shadow figures?*

The line of thought turns now to what we can do about all this, that is, “the function of time” for us if we want to find peace. To bring the discussion of time down from an abstract to a practical level, Paragraph 6 introduces the idea of shadow figures, which are images of specific people from our past whom we feel attacked us, failed us, or deprived us in some way. Shadow figures confine us to re-experiencing past pain. By carrying these images of past people around and projecting them onto present relationships, we feel justified in “retaliating” against people in the present on the basis of the past crimes of others.

The “shadowy figures” of the past, carrying the pain of the past, are “precisely what [we] must escape” (6:1,3). How can we do that? Here we are, seemingly trapped in this pattern of fearing the future as some kind of punishment and of reacting to the present as if it were the past, dredging up the garbage of the past and spreading it over the present so that the present is totally obscured. What can we do about it?

The first thing the Course says about these figures from the past is, “They are not real” (6:2). This isn’t a form of denial; it is the truth. If something is real, it is here now, and whatever you say about the past, it isn’t here now! The past is over. The past, with its shadowy figures, exists only in one place: in your mind. You are giving it all the reality it has for you. You give the shadow figures any power they seem to have to control you and your reactions to the present (6:2). As it does so often, the Course is pointing out that you are doing this to yourself (T-27.VIII.10:1); nothing outside your mind is doing it to you (W-pI.70.2:3). There is something you are actively doing in the present that brings the past into it. To free yourself from the past, you have to *stop bringing it into the present*.

In the present moment, you are making a decision to attack in retaliation for the past (6:3). That decision guarantees future pain (6:4). By refusing to let go of the past, you are making a choice for pain, present and future; you are saying, “I choose to continue to hurt.” We need to realize we are making that choice, and change it.

Guilt must always be handled in the present. You can’t erase *past* guilt; to be healed, it seems to be necessary to bring guilt into the present, where the Holy Spirit is. If we are always reviewing the past and seeing our sin or mistake as something we did in the past, but which is not now present, it never quite gets dealt with. Healing always occurs *now*, in the present. So in order to be healed of guilt we have to bring that guilt into the present.

From personal experience, I have learned that when I avoid looking at my thoughts as things that are in my mind *now*, I am probably trying to deny responsibility for them. I imagine that I had these thoughts in the past, but do not have them now. The way it usually looks to me when I am doing this is, “Oh, gee, I see *now* what I was doing. I really was angry with you. But I didn’t realize it at the time. I didn’t realize I was listening to my ego. Gosh, I’m sorry I did that.” Claiming that “I didn’t realize” or “I wasn’t aware” is just a subtle way of denying responsibility for what I did. I have had to wake up to realize that, if I am not aware, it is because *I choose to be unaware*. I choose to hide my attack thoughts from myself.

There is nothing the ego fears more than being caught in the act. It doesn’t mind so much if you catch its actions in the past. That’s OK, because the past is past and can’t be changed. But it hates being caught red-handed.

To me, this is the real meaning of *repentance*. It means, first of all, that right now, in the present, I see that I want to attack, I want to block love, to refuse my friend’s love, or to deny my own. I recognize that I am in this moment withholding love from you. I recognize that, I own up to it, and I acknowledge what I am doing.

In a way, it is saying, “Yes, I am guilty.” Really, you aren’t saying you are guilty but that you are *responsible* and you *think* you are guilty. Repentance means facing up to the blinding agony of guilt in the immediate present. It is a terrible process. But it is a *gentle* terribleness. Because when you do this, guilt vanishes at once. There is a line in the Clarification of Terms about how sin and Atonement must lie together on the altar for an instant, and then guilt vanishes forever (C-4.6:7–8); that is what this is like. It is bringing your darkness into the light. You are so utterly terrified about doing this, you are afraid of

the ugliness that will be exposed, but when you bring darkness into the light, the darkness simply ceases to exist!

Healing lies only in the present. So the present is where you must bring your guilt. You need to see it *now*, in the choices you are making in this present moment. Only in that way can you choose again, and find a future different from the past.

When the Course says that “past pain is an illusion” (6:5), it does not mean we are supposed to deny that some event that happened in the past actually happened. It does mean that the *pain* we felt connected to that event was then, and is now, an illusion. If you can't quite grasp yet that pain is always illusion, you can at least get hold of this idea: Pain about the past is illusion in the present. The past is not here now, so how can it be hurting you? The pain is coming only from your own thoughts.

This is, I think, one of the traps people get into while digging into their past and admitting the hurt they felt. Seeing your wounded child can be wonderful therapy because you *do* need to recognize the anger and pain you felt, but the mistake you may make would be to continue to hold on to it, to continue to suffer the pain that is in reality past and gone.

What is so tragic about this is that by cherishing pain from the past in our minds we are guaranteeing a similar future. We are totally blocking out the opportunities for healing that are here, right now, in the present (6:5). By occupying our mind with past pain we prevent our healing in the present, and thus assure ourselves of continued pain in the future.

Everyone we encounter is offering us salvation every time we meet them (T-8.III.4:6); the ego wants to “protect” you from that salvation. What prevents salvation, on both sides, is that each person perceives the encounter as a meeting with their own past (6:7). We don't see the person in front of us; we see shadows from the past. We *could* be using the present for “the sharing of salvation” (6:8); instead, we are using it to preserve our nightmares (6:6). When we notice ourselves reacting to the present as if it were the past, the fact that we are *noticing* it is good; but we need to realize we do not have to continue to react in that way. We can choose again.

It is not easy to change all this. To *tell* you to let go of the past and meet each person fully in the present is easy; *doing* it is difficult. The habit patterns are very, very deeply ingrained in us. The shift must begin with a conscious effort. The first step is simply becoming conscious. Begin to notice how past pictures are governing your reactions to the people you meet. It doesn't help to blame yourself for that; in fact, blame is always counter-productive. Just notice how the past colors your perceptions of the present; notice it without judging yourself. Become aware of what your mind is doing. If you notice yourself feeling dislike toward someone, tell yourself, “I am seeing the past.” You don't need to identify the exact past thought you are seeing, although that can be helpful at times. Just remind yourself that the slight upset feeling you have in regard to this person is coming from some past picture, and therefore isn't anything to be concerned about in the present.

Somewhere in that “other person” is yourself. “You always meet yourself” (6:9). How are you treating yourself in this moment? Watch how you treat the other person. How would you *want* to be treated? Try doing that and see what happens. (It's the Golden Rule, isn't it? “Do to others as you would have them do to you” (Luke 6:31, NIV).

Go through life like this and you are using time as the Holy Spirit intends it to be used. You are using it for healing. Don't despair that you are not healed yet; that is why

you are here! You are going to encounter incredible resistance to all of this, and the resistance will seem to be coming from yourself. That's OK. That's part of the process; in fact I could almost say that noticing the resistant *is* the process. You have to uncover the ego to transcend it. You have to see it before you can let it go. You have to notice your resistance to love before you can acknowledge that you are generating the resistance, and therefore you can choose to stop it, and allow love in. You can use every moment of your life like this as a wonderful classroom, as a therapy, and as healing. When you do this, the present moment is always full of meaning.

Paragraph 7

7. ¹It is evident that the Holy Spirit's perception of time is the exact opposite of the ego's. ²The reason is equally clear, for they perceive the **goal** of time as diametrically opposed. ³The Holy Spirit interprets time's **purpose** as rendering the need for time **unnecessary**. ⁴He regards the function of time as temporary, serving only His teaching function, which is temporary by definition. ⁵His emphasis is therefore on the **only** aspect of time that **can** extend to the infinite, for *now* is the closest approximation of eternity that this world offers. ⁶It is in the **reality** of "now," without past **or** future, that the beginning of the appreciation of eternity lies. ⁷For only "now" is **here**, and only "now" presents the opportunities for the holy encounters, in which salvation can be found.

• Study Question •

7. *True or false: The present moment is crucial because in it you leave the machinations of your conceptual mind and encounter direct, tactile, sensory experience of the natural world.*

To the ego, the past is the only meaningful part of time. To the Holy Spirit, the present is the only meaningful part. The difference in what part they value stems from a difference in the way they perceive time's *goal*, that is, "the function of time," or what time is for (7:2).

In the next three paragraphs we are going to see, first, the goal of time as the Holy Spirit sees it, and how that works out in practice. Second, the goal of time as the ego sees it, and how that works out. The two views are in stark contrast to one another (7:1–2). And finally, we will see the choice we have between those two views. The way we see our own goal is the way we will experience time (9:1).

Time's purpose is "rendering the need for time unnecessary," according to the Holy Spirit (7:3). That sounds mystical and obscure, but it is really quite simple. You need to learn something. Time provides the means for you to learn it. When you have learned it, you won't need time any more. Any "teaching function...is temporary by definition" (7:4). You attend a class to learn what the class has to teach; once you've learned it you don't need the class any more. Any good teacher always intends to work himself out of a job; he tries to impart to you all that he knows, and when he is done, you don't need him any more.

Time is just our classroom for learning what the Holy Spirit has to teach us (7:4). It has no other purpose, and when that purpose is complete, time will no longer be necessary. We graduate. What we are learning is that time was never a necessary part of God's plan, and we don't need time to create as He intended us to create. To me, this is

an emphasis of the Course that is often hard for us to take, because it implies that all our other purposes—goals to which we attach so much importance—are fundamentally meaningless. The entire world has no inherent purpose beyond teaching us to transcend itself. So, when I go to school, my real purpose isn't learning Spanish (or whatever); its purpose is learning spiritual lessons. When I take on a job as a computer programmer my real purpose isn't writing programs, it is learning lessons in forgiveness and extending love. And so on.

Because time's only real purpose is to prepare us for eternity, the Holy Spirit emphasizes the present, "*now*," which "is the only aspect of time that can extend to the infinite" (7:5). Think a little about "*now*." It's always "*now*," isn't it? You exist only in the "*now*" of time. The past has an end; the future has a beginning. But "*now*" is endless; therefore, although "*now*" is not exactly the same as eternity, it *approximates* eternity (7:5). It's natural that, given His view of time's purpose, the Holy Spirit would emphasize the present over the past or future.

Think about it. It is really pretty obvious. Can you be healed yesterday? No. Can you be healed tomorrow? No. If you are to be healed at all, when you are healed, it will be "*now*." There is no other time in which you can possibly be healed. *You are never present except in the present!* When else but "*now*" holds the opportunity of holy encounters in which healing can occur? (7:7).

Paragraph 8

8. ¹The ego, on the other hand, regards the function of time as one of extending itself **in place** of eternity, for like the Holy Spirit, the ego interprets the goal of time as its own. ²The continuity of past and future, **under its direction**, is the only purpose the ego perceives in time, and it closes over the present so that no gap in **its own** continuity can occur. ³**Its** continuity, then, would **keep** you in time, while the Holy Spirit would release you **from** it. ⁴It is **His** interpretation of the means of salvation that you must learn to accept, if you would share His goal of salvation **for** you.

• Study Question •

8. *How does the ego try to make time eternal?*

We've seen the Holy Spirit's view of time and its function. Now we'll compare it to the ego's view.

While the Holy Spirit sees time as a means of *leading* us to eternity, the ego sees time as a means of *replacing* eternity (8:1). It wants time to stretch out forever. It wants this because it wants to stretch out *itself* forever; it wants the ego to be eternal (8:2). Both the Holy Spirit and the ego appropriate time for their own purposes (8:1), but where the Holy Spirit's purpose is to help us transcend the ego and awaken to God, the ego's purpose is to lock us into our identification with itself. As we read earlier in the Text, "the ego's goal is...ego autonomy" (T-11.V.4:4). It uses time to achieve that end.

The ego emphasizes the past, making the future like the past, and skips over the present (8:2), avoiding those divine moments in which the ego can be seen not to be non-existent. If you are fully in the present the ego does not exist; it consists of past and future, without the present. The ego wants to keep you in time; the Holy Spirit wants to release you from time (8:3).

In very simple terms, sentence 4 means that, if we want to awaken, we must begin to emphasize the present and de-emphasize the past and future, as the Holy Spirit does. The next paragraph goes on to elaborate this idea. Note that when the Course talks about living in the present, it does not mean the same thing as many other spiritual teachings that talk about staying in the present. To most such teachings, staying in the present means being totally focused on what is occurring in the physical world right now: What do you hear? What do you feel in your body? What do you smell, or taste, or see? This cannot be what the Holy Spirit means by emphasizing the present, because His reason for emphasizing the present is its close similarity to eternity. The physical senses, and the objects of those senses, are hardly eternal! Rather, the Course is speaking of an inner mental focus on the timeless, divine light that exists in every one of us—the Christ that is within us. To be in the present with my brother or sister is to see him or her in timeless purity, as the holy Son of God.

Paragraph 9

9. ¹You, too, will interpret the function of time as you interpret yours. ²If you accept your function in the world of time **as one of healing**, you will emphasize **only** the aspect of time in which healing can occur. ³[For] Healing **cannot** be accomplished in the past. ⁴It **must** be accomplished in the present to **release** the future. ⁵This interpretation ties the future to the present, and **extends the present** rather than the past. ⁶But if you interpret your function as **destruction**, you will lose sight of the present and hold on to the past **to ensure a destructive future**. ⁷And time **will** be as you interpret it, for **of itself it is nothing**.

• Study Question •

9. *What is the connection between healing and the present?*



In this final paragraph, having contrasted the Holy Spirit's view of time and the ego's, the Course contrasts what our lives will be like if we accept one view or the other. The basic principle, already seen in the ego and in the Holy Spirit, applies to us as well: "You, too, will interpret the function of time as your interpret yours" (9:1). In other words, ask yourself what *your* purpose is. What is your function? The way you see your own function or purpose will determine how you interpret the function of time.

The Course has very recently clarified our true function within this world: healing (9:2; see 1:3 and references given there). To accept healing as our function is to focus on the present, because healing occurs in the present, not in the past or future (9:2–4).

The first paragraph of this section spoke of our function in this world. It said the ego sees our function as destruction, while the Holy Spirit sees it as healing. What is it that needs to be healed? The previous section spoke of how we are terrified of God and His love because we believe we betrayed Him; we believe we broke those bonds of love. To the ego we are here to be punished for our sin. To the Holy Spirit our purpose in this world is to be *healed of our fear of God*, which is our fear of love. The way we see and use time stems directly from whether we agree with the ego or with the Holy Spirit. If we accept guilt, the purpose of time is destruction; if we accept the Atonement, the purpose of time is healing and release from guilt.

When your main focus in life is to seek healing in the present moment, you will always be looking for ways to experience healing and salvation *right now*. You will see

this whole world as a giant “recovery program.” When the past arises in your mind, you will simply notice it happening but you won’t pay attention; you won’t let the past run you. You’ll choose to let it go. You’ll constantly remind yourself that the past is over and gone; it is no big deal and can’t affect you now *unless you choose* to let it. “What am I doing now?” you will ask yourself. “What am I thinking now? Am I choosing love or fear, right now?”

Focusing on present healing will result in a future that is free from guilt, fear, and pain. Instead of perpetuating our past pain, it will end it and extend our instant of freedom on into the future (9:5).

By focusing on the present you open the door to healing. You make it possible for the future to be different from the past by choosing love in the present moment.

Why don’t we emphasize present healing more often? Why is it we hold on to the past and the pain it brings to the present? We do it “...to ensure a destructive future” (9:6). We do it to punish ourselves because we think we are guilty. If we succumb to guilt, time’s purpose becomes our punishment, which leads us to (subconsciously) overlook healing opportunities and hold on to thoughts that punish us.

“Time will be as you interpret it” (9:7). Our experience of time is directly related to our belief in guilt or in innocence.

To the ego the world is a place to which you have come to prove that you are guilty and truly separate from God. The way to prove that is to experience separation and eventually destruction. The function of time is therefore to emphasize past guilt and future punishment, overlooking the present.

To the Holy Spirit the world is a place to which you have come to prove that you are innocent and completely one with God. The way to prove that is to experience joining and eventually total Oneness. The function of time is therefore to emphasize the present, overlooking the past, since “now” is the only time in which healing can occur.

How you see yourself completely determines how you see the world and time. As I pointed out as we began this chapter, it all hinges on guilt, and the world you perceive arises from what you do about guilt. Do you see yourself as guilty or innocent? The choice is yours, and your experience of time will demonstrate your choice.

Answer Key

1. We are afraid of the Course because it is about love, about who we really are, and discovering this love is our real fear. We fear love because it means the end of the ego, with which we have become identified. The Course seems to restrict our freedom (T-13.III.7:3). We fear the innocence it offers us, afraid it will bring us crucifixion (T-13.II.6:3–4).
2. If we truly merit annihilation or eternal punishment, we must have truly sinned. That means the ego is real.
3. Personal question—there is no right or wrong. Try, however, to be honest, to look objectively at your own thoughts and behavior. Based on what you do, and the thoughts you think, which do you seem to fear most: Heaven, or hell?
4. The ego's interest in the past is due to its desire to preserve its own existence, because by repeating the past in the future the ego can avoid the present (4:3), which is the only aspect of time in which we can transcend the ego.
5. Perhaps because your mom used to lecture you because you ate too many sweets.
6. In a holy encounter you meet with a brother in the present and share salvation, thus encountering your holy Self. In encountering one of your shadow figures you meet with no one. You encounter an unholy past, which you retaliate against. There is no sharing.
7. False. The focus in the Course on being in the present is on the mental experience of the timeless light in us and in our brothers, not on the sensory experience of present physical events.
8. The ego tries to make time eternal by endlessly repeating the past in the present and future.
9. The present is the only time healing can occur (9:4) because it is the time in which you can have holy encounters.

IV. The Function of Time—Summary Notes

Our perception of time is the best place to begin questioning the ego's thought system.

Main Message

Learning to attain “the guiltless world” which is the subject of this chapter obviously entails a change in the way we perceive time. Guilt and time are tied together. So this section now returns to concentrate on the question of time, and to discuss the function of time in the process of Atonement, because if we are to become free from guilt, the way we view time must change. A change in this one key area will change everything else.

We habitually react to the present as if it were the past. We carry around shadow figures from the past in our minds and filter our perceptions through them. This supports the continuation of guilt. To be free of guilt we must become free from the past.

Key Thoughts

We will perceive the function of time as we perceive our own function. How we see ourselves determines how we will see time.

The ego teaches that because of our guilt our function is destruction: through suffering, death and destruction we are here to prove our guilt and separation from God.

The Holy Spirit teaches that because of our innocence as God's creation our function is healing: through recognition of God's innocent Son in our brother we are here to demonstrate that we are not an ego, to demonstrate our oneness with our brothers and with God.

The ego always emphasizes the past because guilt lies in the past. The Holy Spirit always emphasizes the present since only in the present can healing occur.

We serve the process of our healing when we begin to question our own emphasis on the past and to let it go. Instead of focusing on the past, and thus insuring a similar future, let us focus on joining in love, in the present, to create a future that is unlike the past.

Begin to notice when we react to the present as if it were the past, and learn to discount the importance of the past in our lives.

As we release past pain we will discover present love. This is the true function of time, releasing others and ourselves from all guilt.