

January 2014

THE TASK AT HAND

One of the central challenges faced by many people today is how to remain focused on the task at hand. The ability to concentrate the mind for a period of time—without interruptions, without distractions—is essential to the accomplishment of anything of value. Whether one is an engineer or an artist, a detective or a playwright, the ability to consciously direct the movements of the mind is crucial to achievement.

Some people find it easier than others to inhibit the wandering tendencies of the mind, but even those with a natural facility for sustained mental concentration are bound to be challenged by the conditions of our technological world. The temptations that divert and seduce our attention are endless, especially those arising from cyberspace. Perhaps more than in any previous age, constant distraction and fickleness of thought are endemic to the popular culture of our time. While the Internet has provided us with many wonderful resources, it also brings problems. In 1971, the economist Herbert A. Simon noted: “A wealth of information creates a poverty of attention.” How prescient his comment seems today! With the mind of an accountant, accustomed to dealing with ledgers and balance sheets, Simon knew instinctively that a surplus of X leads to a deficit of Y.

Each of us is here for a purpose; at least many of us believe that to be the case. Our time in this incarnation is limited; of this there can be no debate. The question then arises: What are we doing with our allotted time? In the fourth circle of his *Inferno*, Dante placed those souls who had committed the sin of prodigality. To be prodigious is to be wasteful, to squander one’s resources. Money is a resource, but so is time. Money lost can be earned again, while time lost is a non-recoverable asset. Like many others, I have lost (or wasted) both money and time. As I get older, and the inevitable but unknown time of my departure from this world approaches, the loss of the former bothers me less and less, while my foolish misuse of the latter brings pangs of regret.

David P. Bruce is the National Secretary of the Theosophical Society in America.