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THE PERVASIVE APPEAL OF SUPERFICIALITY

It should not come as a revelation to any thinking person that there are aspects of our popular culture which engender a shallow and superficial state of mind. A steady diet of the daily news can lead to a state of uneasy agitation; being plugged into various social media without pause can result in a distracted mind; and the quickness of electronic media may delude us into thinking that the process of self-discovery should require no more effort than performing a routine search on Google.

To discover the inner Self is the work of a lifetime. The disciplines practiced by generations of yogis and seers are aimed at developing a mind that is steady, one-pointed, and able to pierce the veils of illusion, or *māyā*. This requires one to stand apart from the crowd and not mistake the passing illusions of life for reality. James Fenimore Cooper wrote that “All greatness of character is dependent on individuality. The man who has no other existence than that which he partakes in common with all around him, will never have any other than an existence of mediocrity.” Dean Inge, a professor of divinity at Cambridge put it more succinctly: “He who marries the spirit of the age will soon be a widower.”

This is not to suggest we adopt an attitude of worldly denial or escapism. We all have our parts to play in the drama of life, but those with discernment recognize that there exists a greater reality beyond these surface appearances which enthrall the senses. The spirit will endure after the persona perishes. But there is a balance that we must maintain between the inner and the outer, between the surface and the depths, if we are to lead a spiritual life while living in a busy and ever-changing world. Where that point of balance is will be determined by each individual. But sadly, some are oblivious to anything but the surface of life. As theologian Paul Tillich noted in his essay “The Depth of Existence,”

It is comfortable to live on the surface so long as it remains unshaken. It is painful to break away from it and descend into an unknown ground. The tremendous amount of resistance against that act in every human being and the many pretexts invented to avoid the road to the depth are natural. The pain of looking into one's own depth is too intense for most people. . . . But eternal joy is not to be reached by living on the surface. It is rather attained by breaking through the surface, by penetrating the deep things of ourselves, of our world, and of God.

But such a condition of superficiality is not permanent. According to Theosophy, each soul will learn eventually to penetrate the surface and probe the depths of life in its fullness.

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