

Original Instructions

An Interview with Peter Kingsley

Peter Kingsley is one of a rare class of people: a scholar with a sense of the truths that lie beyond the realm that scholarship can penetrate. A classicist with impeccable credentials—including a Ph.D. from the University of London—he has made a career of venturing past the shores of conventional academics.

Kingsley has devoted much of his attention to the Presocratic philosophers—the collection of thinkers who flourished in ancient Greece roughly between 600 and 430 BC. Every philosophy student has been introduced to these figures, who include Pythagoras, Heraclitus, Parmenides, and Empedocles, but the standard view of them—abetted by the fact that their writings survive only in fragments—is that they were crude materialistic thinkers whose merit lies chiefly in serving as precursors to modern science.

Kingsley's view of the Presocratics is radically different. He contends that their successors, notably Plato and Aristotle, have given us incomplete and distorted views of them. In works such as *Ancient Philosophy, Mystery, and Magic: Empedocles and Pythagorean Tradition*, *In the Dark Places of Wisdom*, and *Reality*, Kingsley argues that the Presocratics—the intellectual fathers of Western thought—were not purveyors of primitive scientific systems but visionaries and esotericists, whose view of the universe went much broader and deeper than the mere workings of the material world.

In his latest book, *A Story Waiting to Pierce You: Mongolia, Tibet, and the Destiny of the Western World*, published in November 2010, Kingsley focuses on a little-known figure from antiquity named Abaris, who, he says, represents a missing link between the wisdom of Central Asia and the knowledge at the heart of Western civilization.

I have known Peter for a number of years, and have always been impressed not only by his scholarly rigor but his capacity for seeing old texts and figures with completely new eyes—as well as his remarkable ability to explain his ideas in simple, direct language. I discussed his work with him in an e-mail interview conducted in February–March 2011.

To find out more about Peter and his work, visit his Web site: www.peterkingsley.org.

—Richard Smoley

Richard Smoley: Your work has focused on the Presocratic philosophers of ancient Greece. Could you begin by telling us a bit about this work? What is the conventional view of the Presocratics, and where do you think it is wrong?

Peter Kingsley: My work on the Presocratics began when I was still a teenager, although I would pre-

fer to say that this is the time when they started working in earnest on me. And it began not as some intellectual or historical inquiry but as a consuming longing—as a burning need to try and discover what is missing in our modern Western world. Friends of mine were immersing themselves in Buddhism and other Eastern religions, but an inner voice that

deeply impressed me with its constant clarity and logic instructed me to stay focused on the West. The intuitive understanding formed itself in me that a true solution to our contemporary ills and restlessness has to be found at the heart of the problem, not by looking somewhere else. And so I was drawn to go back, as far as I could, to the dawn and pre-dawn of what we call Western philosophy: back to the “Presocratics.”

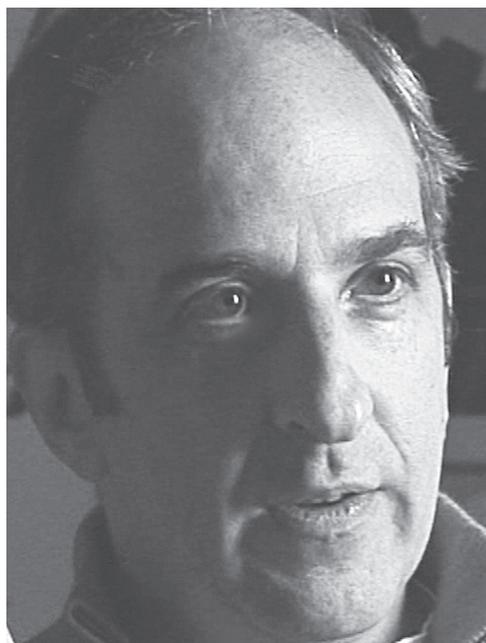
The name “Presocratic” is of course a label for the earliest philosophers who lived before the time of Socrates. And if you go back to Plato, who considered himself Socrates’ direct disciple and successor, you will already find germs of all the various attitudes that have defined how people related to these “Presocratics” ever since: amusement and fascination, a certain mysteriously irresistible attraction coupled with an attitude of intellectual superiority which tends to become more and more unquestioned with the passing of time. God forbid that we really have something to learn from those naive Presocratics! At the very best they are nothing but a perfect foil for our infinitely advanced refinement.

But as I was drawn back into the world of the Presocratics, as I became absorbed into the ancient Greek texts they had left behind, I soon started discovering something totally different. These so-called philosophers weren’t theoretical thinkers or speculators, and they were nothing like rationalists in the modern sense. Many of them were immensely powerful spiritual beings. Greek texts which I was soon to realize had been misunderstood and mistranslated for centuries reveal, when the distortions and mistaken interpretations are blown away, extraordinary spiritual teachings and extremely potent meditation techniques that can still be applied and practiced nowadays. I practiced them myself, and was transformed. I had been brought into direct contact with the lineage and teachings of the ancient Masters who, at the dawn of our civilization, helped shape the Western world and bring our culture into being.

For me, the first few years of these discoveries were incalculably significant in a personal sense. Over time, though, I came to realize their much vaster implications—not only for how we approach Western history but also for how we understand ourselves and the destiny of our culture. These so-called “Presocratics” were not the primitive fools they are often presented as. On the contrary, some of them were among the founding fathers of Western civilization who consciously brought it into existence to serve a sacred purpose. The price for our illusions of sophistication is that we have completely forgotten this sacred purpose, and one direct result is all the chaos and confusion of the modern world. Just as Native Americans have their venerated ancestors who gave them their “original instructions” that

must never be forgotten, we in the West also have our original instructions and the great Masters who gave them to us: people such as Pythagoras, Parmenides, Empedocles. The trouble is that we no longer have the intellectual humility to acknowledge our ancestors or remember where we came from; and the law in this respect is very simple. When we forget, when we become so caught up in our complicated ideas that we lose sight of the bigger picture, we suffer.

But it’s not only that we in the West have lost any memory of our own sacred roots. Eventually I began to uncover an even more devastating indictment of our forgetfulness, which is that our sacred history



had been remembered outside of Western culture. For years I felt entirely on my own in the mystery of what I had encountered. But then to my amazement I began to discover how medieval Persian Sufis, Arab alchemists, mystics who were teaching all the way from Spain through Egypt to Mecca and into Central Asia, had preserved the essential awareness of what I had experienced directly for myself: that in fact many of the so-called Presocratics were great Masters of wisdom and guides of humanity, major prophets and lawgivers who had laid down the spiritual laws for what Western civilization was originally meant to be. Some of these remarkable figures from the Middle Ages even considered themselves devoted followers and initiatic disciples in the lineage of Presocratic philosophers who had died two thousand years before

their time—an astonishing story which I started telling in my first book, *Ancient Philosophy, Mystery, and Magic*. And gradually everything fell into place as I found what it means to be part of a tradition which is just as alive now, just as intensely vital and relevant to the present moment, as it was at the beginnings of our culture.

Smoley: *In your books, you've stated that Western philosophy got off on the wrong track at a very early stage of its history. Could you explain what you mean by this, and what you think the consequences have been?*

Kingsley: With our minds we can invent any number of theoretical approaches to history: evolutionary

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explanations and so on. But we will never be able to understand the realities of history by staying on the level of theory. We can only understand it through our own experience, because everything exists inside us right now. And everything depends on how sincere we are willing to be.

If we are truly honest with ourselves, we will start to see how much we have received from life. But we will also see how irresistibly we are drawn as humans to trivialize those extraordinary gifts by taking them for granted—by transforming the miraculous into something ordinary and expected, safe and routine. The process, unless we live constantly on an exceptional level of consciousness, is just as inevitable as our bodies becoming feebler with age or the tires on our car losing their tread.

This explains why, and how, Western philosophy

got off on the wrong track so quickly. The word “philosophy” itself means the love of wisdom; and such a love is immensely dangerous because it means one has to be willing to sacrifice everything for wisdom, even be willing to die for it if necessary. You can see this happen, quite literally, with Socrates—and also with some earlier “Presocratics” who suffered terribly because of their refusal to compromise. But we as humans soon become frightened of such passion and integrity. There is too much intensity required, and the risks at every stage can seem daunting, so we start cutting corners and looking for a safer route. Instead of our primary focus being on the reality of the sacred, on something irresistibly attractive beyond ourselves, we become more and more centered on our own little thoughts and concerns. Before we know what has happened, something that once was unimaginably real has been transformed into just a turn of speech; what originally would have involved the whole of our being has become nothing but an opportunity for empty speculation in the imagined security of our academies; and we then cheat ourselves by explaining all these changes as proofs of our “evolution.” In other words, what started out as the love of wisdom becomes institutionalized to the point where any true wisdom has been excluded. And, without even realizing it, we have lived out one of the great principles taught by a number of Presocratics: that, with the passing of time, everything is inevitably transformed into its opposite.

Aside from the word “philosophy” itself, there are hundreds of other examples one could mention. Take, for instance, the expression “common sense.” Now, nobody has the faintest idea what it means. Frustrated parents will yell, “Use your common sense!” at youngsters even though they are as clueless as their children about what this mysterious common sense really is. And, as I have explained in my book *Reality*, it is a mystery: a profound mystery. In fact it refers back to what at the dawn of Western philosophy, among Presocratics such as Empedocles, was the extraordinary practice of becoming conscious simultaneously through all our different senses. This was a very rare, and very esoteric, technique used in certain circles for awakening the spiritual powers fast asleep inside each of us and starting to trigger the evolutionary process of becoming a conscious human being. But by the time Aristotle picked up on the expression “common sense” and started throwing it around as if he knew what it meant, everything that could go wrong had gone wrong. In his arrogance he assumed this common sense (which already was just the dimmest of memories for his teacher Plato) must be something fully active in every human being, himself included. He no longer realized that it's only the very rare fruit of an extremely arduous initiatory

training, because he no longer had the humility to test out Empedocles' teaching in his own experience. And this is the harsh reality involved in trying to convey esoteric truths: those who see no need for them can never imagine there might be something they are missing, because they assume they have it already.

You can also see this same basic process unfolding in the history of what we cheerfully refer to as logic. Nowadays we all tend to assume we have a fair enough idea of what logic is, and that we even know how to be very logical when we want. But with Parmenides, generally considered the founding father of Western logic and perhaps the most influential Presocratic of all, everything was almost the exact opposite of what it is now. For him, logic was a divine gift offered to us humans by the goddess at the heart of all existence so as to help guide us back to the realization of true oneness which is our ultimate source. To him it was sacred in every possible respect: in its origin, even in the sacredness of the incantatory poetry that he used for communicating it, and also in its overall purpose. Of course you could say all his talk about the divine is nothing but mythological clothing that we more knowledgeable moderns need to strip away—until you start to see exactly what this logic was meant to achieve. In Parmenides' hands, as in the hands of his famous successor Zeno, it was an infinitely potent tool for shredding all our human illusions about ourselves and about the nature of reality. And this same destructive force of logic is dramatically evident in the figure of Socrates, who became famous at Athens for paralyzing people's minds and stunning them into absolute silence.

But then, subtly at first with Plato and then much more crudely with Aristotle, everything begins to change. Logic is pressured into performing functions quite at odds with what it was designed for, like using a fine sword for chopping vegetables. Rather than allowing the divine to penetrate us with its all-knowing wisdom, logic starts being used to prove our human cleverness. As a result, it completely loses the sharpness of its original focus. Instead of helping us to free ourselves, it ends up being made to bolster and reinforce our illusions; instead of cutting straight through our human imaginings and deceptions and discriminations, it tangles us up inside them even more than before. In other words logic, too, turns into the opposite of itself—just as surely as a ball falling, step by step, down a flight of stairs. It becomes more and more a purely mental, masculine discipline while the feminine mystery at its origin is buried deeper and deeper. Here too we have tried to make everything safe and manageable for ourselves, but at a terrible cost.

In each single one of these cases—philosophy, common sense, logic—we can see how something

profoundly esoteric is stripped of its sacred meaning and discarded in the marketplace, trampled, misused. And the consequences of this process are, very simply, what we see all around us. The end result is the world we now live in, where we have lost any connection with reality and try to get by in a strangely lifeless existence that never is able to satisfy us. We are taught as children that when we grow up we will become real human beings, whereas in fact even the oldest adults are no more than tentative seeds of humanity: seeds that no one knew how to plant or grow. We all lay claim to faculties and abilities that are far beyond our reach—thinking we already have

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logic, wisdom, common sense, instead of remembering that we need to strive for them and that we need help to find them. We have become very adept in the West at getting rid of the Masters.

And the other consequence is that anybody growing up in this seemingly hollow world of ours who feels even the slightest longing for a fuller reality is almost bound to be drawn to search for that reality somewhere else—in another, more spiritual realm or in the welcoming bosom of some exotic culture that calls to us with its fascinating customs and rituals. But to look elsewhere for the reality we have lost at home risks turning out to be the biggest trap of all. There is no greater spiritual adventure than to turn back to our own, apparently empty shell of a culture and prize it open until we find the jewels and pearls

at its core. Then we have served a purpose larger than ourselves and, by connecting the beginning to the end, have done the work of a noble human being.

Smoley: *Maybe you could speak a little more to the issue of Western scholarship, and why it has presented a picture so at odds with what you are describing.*

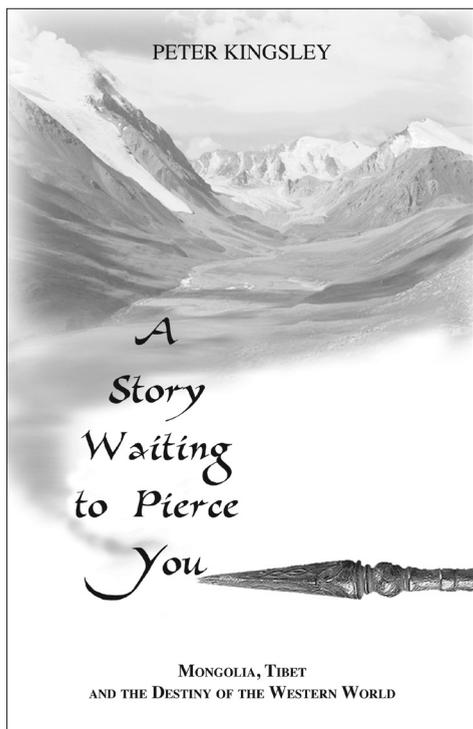
Kingsley: One could be tempted to say Western scholarship is a failed experiment, but that would be untrue and unfair. In fact it has stayed remarkably faithful to its initial function and purpose. The term “scholar” derives originally from an ancient Greek word for people who have nothing better to do with their time than to sit around all day talking. Nothing

deceives us into believing we have time. It tricks us into forgetting the urgency of life, because the reality is that we have no time to spare. Now this happens to be truer than ever, not only because each of us is going to die but because our whole culture is dying around as well as inside us. Whenever such a phase is reached in the life span of a culture, it always brings with it a tremendously pressing need to gather the essence of the past into the present moment for the sake of the planet’s future. Unfortunately—as I explain in my new book *A Story Waiting to Pierce You*—most scholars are quite clueless about this essential dynamic behind our, and any other, culture.

Everything becomes clear once we accept the fact that scholarship as a whole is not concerned with finding, or even looking for, the truth. That’s just a decorative appearance. It’s simply concerned with protecting us from truths that might endanger our security; and it does so by perpetuating our collective illusions on a much deeper level than individual scholars are aware of. This is why—when it comes to the Presocratics—there is no point in arguing rationally with most scholars because they will misunderstand whatever you try to say, ignore the obvious, cover over or manipulate the evidence they have been entrusted with, and come up with the most absurd pseudoarguments in the hope of pleasing their peers while appearing to sound rational. This whole bizarre charade is nothing more than the human mind gone hopelessly out of control, because scholars have never learned to submit to the rigors of the search for wisdom or logic or common sense as it once was taught.

And this brings me back to my very first point, which is that how we understand or misunderstand the so-called Presocratics is not just a matter of intellectual or historical concern. To obscure or distort the reality of what they represent is to cut off the breath, the lifeblood, of our Western world: is to separate us from the sacred source and purpose of our culture. This is why, at the very beginning of my book *In the Dark Places of Wisdom*, I point out that scholars entrusted with understanding the Presocratics have become like the scribes and Pharisees denounced by Jesus: “They hold the keys of knowledge but hide them; and they don’t go in themselves or open the doors for anyone else.” There is a tremendous need for truth in the modern world. Scholars are not innocent if, however unconsciously, they play a role in helping us to forget.

Smoley: *Your latest book, A Story Waiting to Pierce You, has the subtitle Mongolia, Tibet, and the Destiny of the Western World. Clearly it reaches far beyond the confines of Greek philosophy, or even of Western civilization as a whole. Can you say a little bit about why you were drawn in this particular direction?*



could better describe the basic dynamic that powers the endless wheelings of scholarly research and discussion nowadays. But at the same time, nothing could be further removed from the impulse that guided the greatest of the Presocratics—who constantly drew attention to the infinite fragility of our fleeting lives and emphasized the urgency of finding reality before we die.

And this is where the crux of the problem lies. Scholars have a wonderful array of tools and instruments available to them; but the irony is that they have very little idea of how to use them rightly. This is because they function only on the level of the mind, most often without any awareness of what lies behind the mind or of what is needed to make the mind work wisely. And the mind, you may have noticed, always

Kingsley: On the most obvious level this new book has to do with the origins of our Western world. The received wisdom is that either Western culture was conceived through some kind of virgin birth in complete isolation from life on the rest of the planet, or that if there were any external influences they must have come only from other “high cultures” such as Egypt or Babylonia or Persia. In fact there certainly were influences from these sources, as I myself have documented over many years. But when we look at all the evidence carefully, patiently, open-mindedly, another even vaster picture also emerges—a picture of Presocratics such as Pythagoras in very real contact with the regions we now refer to as Central Asia and Mongolia. There is no longer any need to place all one’s faith in occultists’ intuitions about the historical importance for humanity of areas such as the Altai Mountains or Gobi Desert: the tangible evidence is there, in the written texts and archaeological records. But as for how all this evidence affects our understanding of Western civilization or its origins, no one has been willing to connect the dots and put the story together.

And it happens to be a story of tremendous oneness—not some nice sentimental oneness which allows us to keep all our prejudices intact or a refined spiritual oneness only accessible on some elevated plane of consciousness but a deep, raw, vibrant oneness which is the soil our entire reality is built on. This is a story that embraces the neglected shamanic cultures of Central Asia, Mongolia, Tibet, not to mention the traditions of Native Americans. At the same time it also is *our* story, the story of how our own civilization came into being as well as of spiritual life on the planet as a whole.

But being able to show that East and West have always been intimately interconnected, and that Western civilization has from the start been inextricably linked to the cultures of eastern Asia, is only the outermost shell of this book. The beauty is that when you start to observe very closely how any culture such as our own came into being, you begin to be shown the spiritual principles according to which all civilizations come into existence: how and why they are seeded, germinated, tended. You also begin to see why they eventually are allowed to fade away—and how the people who grow up inside a particular culture either rise to the occasion by working respectfully with what they have been given or end up squandering the divine seed.

So on a much deeper level this is what *A Story*

Waiting to Pierce You is really about: the fact that every single culture, even our seemingly materialistic Western world, has a sacred source and destiny. And I should emphasize that—aside from all the labor involved in sifting and understanding the historical evidence—everything I am saying can be experienced directly inside oneself by accessing the consciousness that brought our Western civilization into being.

But then, on an even deeper level, one comes to a place where the book is not about anything at all. And this is something we have completely forgotten in the West: that certain texts are not *about* anything because their words speak straight *from* the reality they are describing in a way our minds, obsessed as they are with facts and information, may not understand or even notice. I find it particularly interesting that the first person who realized this about my book was not a Westerner at all, but a Native American—Joseph Rael, who wrote the book’s foreword and saw that it was written as an incantation intended to work directly on the reader’s being.

This means that as far as I am concerned, the less I say *about* the book, the better. But there is just one thing I should mention, which of course connects back to the book’s title. *A Story Waiting to Pierce You* is not a safe book, just as there is nothing safe about reality or about the wisdom that brings us to it. Reality is not something we can think about, or discuss, because we are reality; and we gain wisdom not through a process of accumulating anything but simply through being touched and pierced by the consciousness that lies behind everything and keeps everything going. This is what gives access to the greatest privilege and delight possible for a human being: the opportunity, strange as such a thing might sound, to participate in the cosmic process that lies behind even the birth and death of civilizations.

Then we can start to remember what it means to cooperate with the great ones rather than working against them, and to help the waters of life to flow again in the desert of the Western world. The only problem is that, just as we have forgotten the original meaning of logic or philosophy or common sense, we have forgotten even what it means to remember. Really to re-member is not to clutter our minds with complicated facts and data but to bring all the scattered parts of ourselves back together into the present moment in an utter simplicity that allows us to move forward into the future—unburdened, free of regrets, leaving no trace of the past behind. ■