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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

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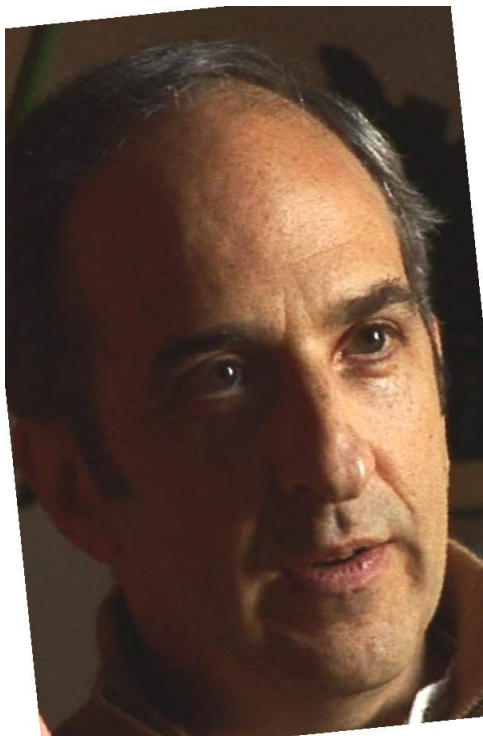
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An Interview with Peter Kingsley

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intellectual fathers of Western thoughtâ€”were not purveyors of primitive scientific systems. Esotericists, whose view of the universe went much broader and deeper than the mere workings of the physical world.

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Richard Smoley: *Your work has focused on the Presocratic philosophers of ancient Greece. Can you tell us a bit about this work? What is the conventional view of the Presocratics, and where do you think it falls short?*

Peter Kingsley: My work on the Presocratics began when I was still a teenager, although I was not until the time when they started working in earnest on me. And it began not as some intellectual curiosity, but as a consuming longingâ€”as a burning need to try and discover what is missing in our modern Western world. At the time, many of my friends were immersing themselves in Buddhism and other Eastern religions, but an inner voice told me that with its constant clarity and logic instructed me to stay focused on the West. The intuitive understanding came to me that a true solution to our contemporary ills and restlessness has to be found at the heart of the West, looking somewhere else. And so I was drawn to go back, as far as I could, to the dawn and birth of Western philosophy: back to the â€œPresocratics.â€

The name â€œPresocraticâ€ is of course a label for the earliest philosophers who lived before Socrates. And if you go back to Plato, who considered himself Socratesâ€™™ direct disciple and successor, you find the germs of all the various attitudes that have defined how people related to these â€œPresocratics.â€ It is a mixture of amusement and fascination, a certain mysteriously irresistible attraction coupled with a sense of superiority which tends to become more and more unquestioned with the passing of time. God forbid that we have something to learn from those naive Presocratics! At the very best they are nothing but a prelude to an advanced refinement.

But as I was drawn back into the world of the Presocratics, as I became absorbed into the

had left behind, I soon started discovering something totally different. These so-called philosophical thinkers or speculators, and they were nothing like rationalists in the modern sense, were immensely powerful spiritual beings. Greek texts which I was soon to realize had been mistranslated for centuries reveal, when the distortions and mistaken interpretations are blown away, spiritual teachings and extremely potent meditation techniques that can still be applied and practiced by them myself, and was transformed. I had been brought into direct contact with the the ancient Masters who, at the dawn of our civilization, helped shape the Western world as a being.

For me, the first few years of these discoveries were incalculably significant in a personal sense. I came to realize their much vaster implicationsâ€”not only for how we approach Western history but also to understand ourselves and the destiny of our culture. These so-called â€œPresocraticsâ€ we know them as they are often presented as. On the contrary, some of them were among the founding fathers of our civilization who consciously brought it into existence to serve a sacred purpose. The price for our illusions of progress has been that we have completely forgotten this sacred purpose, and one direct result is all the chaos and confusion in the world today. Just as Native Americans have their venerated ancestors who gave them their â€œoriginal instructionsâ€ which never be forgotten, we in the West also have our original instructions and the great Master Teachers of our people such as Pythagoras, Parmenides, Empedocles. The trouble is that we no longer have the ability to acknowledge our ancestors or remember where we came from; and the law in this respect is that we forget, when we become so caught up in our complicated ideas that we lose sight of the bigger picture.

But itâ€™s not only that we in the West have lost any memory of our own sacred roots. In the process of uncovering an even more devastating indictment of our forgetfulness, which is that our spiritual heritage is remembered outside of Western culture. For years I felt entirely on my own in the mystery of the spiritual world. But then to my amazement I began to discover how medieval Persian Sufis, Arab alchemists, and others were teaching all the way from Spain through Egypt to Mecca and into Central Asia, had preserved the wisdom of what I had experienced directly for myself: that in fact many of the so-called Presocratic philosophers were wisdom and guides of humanity, major prophets and lawgivers who had laid down the spiritual foundations of our civilization was originally meant to be. Some of these remarkable figures from the Middle East were themselves devoted followers and initiatic disciples in the lineage of Presocratic philosophy. I had known them a thousand years before their timeâ€”an astonishing story which I started telling in my first book, *Mystery, and Magic*. And gradually everything fell into place as I found what it means to be philosophical, just as alive now, just as intensely vital and relevant to the present moment, as it was at the beginning.

Smoley: *In your books, youâ€™ve stated that Western philosophy got off on the wrong track at the beginning of 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: evolution, progress, and so on. But we will never be able to understand the realities of history by staying on the level of the mind.

understand it through our own experience, because everything exists inside us right now. And 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 how irresistibly we are drawn as humans to trivialize those extraordinary gifts by taking transforming the miraculous into something ordinary and expected, safe and routine. The constantly on an exceptional level of consciousness, is just as inevitable as our bodies becoming tires on our car losing their tread.

This explains why, and how, Western philosophy got off on the wrong track so quickly. The itself means the love of wisdom; and such a love is immensely dangerous because it means sacrifice everything for wisdom, even be willing to die for it if necessary. You can see this ha Socratesâ€”and also with some earlier â€œPresocraticsâ€ who suffered terribly beca compromise. But we as humans soon become frightened of such passion and integrity. The required, and the risks at every stage can seem daunting, so we start cutting corners and I Instead of our primary focus being on the reality of the sacred, on something irresistibly attracti become more and more centered on our own little thoughts and concerns. Before we kn something that once was unimaginably real has been transformed into just a turn of speech; w involved the whole of our being has become nothing but an opportunity for empty speculation ir our academies; and we then cheat ourselves by explaining all these changes as proofs of our â words, what started out as the love of wisdom becomes institutionalized to the point where ar excluded. And, without even realizing it, we have lived out one of the great principles Presocratics: that, with the passing of time, everything is inevitably transformed into its opposite

Aside from the word â€œphilosophyâ€ itself, there are hundreds of other examples one (instance, the expression â€œcommon sense.â€ Now, nobody has the faintest idea what it m will yell, â€œUse your common sense!â€ at youngsters even though they are as clueless as this mysterious common sense really is. And, as I have explained in my book *Reality*, it is mystery. In fact it refers back to what at the dawn of Western philosophy, among Presocratics s the extraordinary practice of becoming conscious simultaneously through all our different sens and very esoteric, technique used in certain circles for awakening the spiritual powers fast asle starting to trigger the evolutionary process of becoming a conscious human being. But by the ti the expression â€œcommon senseâ€ and started throwing it around as if he knew what it me; go wrong had gone wrong. In his arrogance he assumed this common sense (which already memories for his teacher Plato) must be something fully active in every human being, himsel realized that itâ€™s only the very rare fruit of an extremely arduous initiatory training, becau humility to test out Empedoclesâ€™ teaching in his own experience. And this is the harsh re convey esoteric truths: those who see no need for them can never imagine there might be son 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. We all tend to assume we have a fair enough idea of what logic is, and that we even know how to use it. But with Parmenides, generally considered the founding father of Western logic and perhaps the most Presocratic of all, everything was almost the exact opposite of what it is now. For him, logic was a gift to us humans by the goddess at the heart of all existence so as to help guide us back to the reality which is our ultimate source. To him it was sacred in every possible respect: in its origin, even in the incantatory poetry that he used for communicating it, and also in its overall purpose. Of course, much of what we know about the divine is nothing but mythological clothing that we more knowledgeable moderns need to shed if you start to see exactly what this logic was meant to achieve. In Parmenides's hands, as in the hands of his successor Zeno, it was an infinitely potent tool for shredding all our human illusions about the true nature of reality. And this same destructive force of logic is dramatically evident in the figure of Protagoras, 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 be pressured into performing functions quite at odds with what it was designed for, like using a hammer to dig vegetables. Rather than allowing the divine to penetrate us with its all-knowing wisdom, logic serves to bolster our human cleverness. As a result, it completely loses the sharpness of its original focus. Instead of cutting straight through our illusions, it ends up being made to bolster and reinforce our illusions; instead of cutting straight through our imaginings and deceits and discriminations, it tangles us up inside them even more than before. 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 becomes deeper. Here too we have tried to make everything safe and manageable for ourselves, but at a cost.

In each single one of these cases—philosophy, common sense, logic—we can see how the sacred esoteric is stripped of its sacred meaning and discarded in the marketplace, trampled, misused. The consequences of this process are, very simply, what we see all around us. The end result is the world we now live in, a world that has lost any connection with reality and try to get by in a strangely lifeless existence that never is as it seems. We are taught as children that when we grow up we will become real human beings, whereas in fact we are no more than tentative seeds of humanity: seeds that no one knew how to plant or grow. We are given tools and abilities that are far beyond our reach—thinking we already have logic, wisdom, courage—without remembering that we need to strive for them and that we need help to find them. We have been led West at getting rid of the Masters.

And the other consequence is that anybody growing up in this seemingly hollow world of ours, with the slightest longing for a fuller reality is almost bound to be drawn to search for that reality somewhere else, in some more spiritual realm or in the welcoming bosom of some exotic culture that calls to us with its promises and rituals. But to look elsewhere for the reality we have lost at home risks turning out to be the biggest mistake of all. No greater spiritual adventure than to turn back to our own, apparently empty shell of a culture and find the jewels and pearls at its core. Then we have served a purpose larger than ourselves.

beginning to the end, have done the work of a noble human being.

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

Kingsley: One could be tempted to say Western scholarship is a failed experiment, but that would be wrong. In fact it has stayed remarkably faithful to its initial function and purpose. The term *scholasticism* comes from an ancient Greek word for people who have nothing better to do with their time than to study. Nothing could better describe the basic dynamic that powers the endless wheelings of discussion nowadays. But at the same time, nothing could be further removed from the impulse of the Presocratics—who constantly drew attention to the infinite fragility of our fleeting lives and 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 methods; but the irony is that they have very little idea of how to use them rightly. This is because of the level of the mind, most often without any awareness of what lies behind the mind or of what is required to work wisely. And the mind, you may have noticed, always deceives us into believing we have time, forgetting the urgency of life, because the reality is that we have no time to spare. Now this is true ever, not only because each of us is going to die but because our whole culture is dying around us. Whenever such a phase is reached in the life span of a culture, it always brings with it a tremendous gathering of the essence of the past into the present moment for the sake of the planet's future. I explain in my new book *A Story Waiting to Pierce You*—most scholars are quite clueless about our, and any other, culture.

Everything becomes clear once we accept the fact that scholarship as a whole is not concerned with looking for, the truth. That's just a decorative appearance. It's simply concerned with maintaining that might endanger our security; and it does so by perpetuating our collective illusions on a level that individual scholars are aware of. This is why—when it comes to the Presocratics—there is a disconnect with most scholars, because they will misunderstand whatever you try to say, ignore the evidence they have been entrusted with, and come up with the most absurd conclusions in the hope of pleasing their peers while appearing to sound rational. This whole bizarre charade of the human mind gone hopelessly out of control, because scholars have never learned to submit to a higher power 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 Presocratics is not just a matter of intellectual or historical concern. To obscure or distort their thought or to represent is to cut off the breath, the lifeblood, of our Western world: is to separate us from the very purpose of our culture. This is why, at the very beginning of my book *In the Dark Places of*

scholars entrusted with understanding the Presocratics have become like the scribes and Pharisees of Jesus: "They hold the keys of knowledge but hide them; and they don't go in themselves to anyone else." There is a tremendous need for truth in the modern world. Scholars are unconsciously, they play a role in helping us to forget.

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

Kingsley: On the most obvious level this new book has to do with the origins of our Western wisdom is that either Western culture was conceived through some kind of virgin birth in comparison to the rest of the planet, or that if there were any external influences they must have come from other cultures—such as Egypt or Babylonia or Persia. In fact there certainly were influences from these cultures that have documented over many years. But when we look at all the evidence carefully, patiently, even a vaster picture also emerges—a picture of Presocratics such as Pythagoras in very real connection with what we now refer to as Central Asia and Mongolia. There is no longer any need to place all one's intuitions about the historical importance for humanity of areas such as the Altai Mountains or the Himalayas. The evidence is there, in the written texts and archaeological records. But as for how all this fits into our understanding of Western civilization or its origins, no one has been willing to connect the dots together.

And it happens to be a story of tremendous oneness—not some nice sentimental oneness with our prejudices intact or a refined spiritual oneness only accessible on some elevated plane. It's a deep, raw, vibrant oneness which is the soil our entire reality is built on. This is a story that connects the shamanic cultures of Central Asia, Mongolia, Tibet, not to mention the traditions of Native America. It also is *our* story, the story of how our own civilization came into being as well as of spiritual evolution as a whole.

But being able to show that East and West have always been intimately interconnected, and that our civilization has from the start been inextricably linked to the cultures of eastern Asia, is only the outermost beauty is that when you start to observe very closely how any culture such as our own came into being, you are shown the spiritual principles according to which all civilizations come into existence: how they are born, how they germinated, how they tended. You also begin to see why they eventually are allowed to fade away—they grow up inside a particular culture either rise to the occasion by working respectfully with what they have, or they 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 even our seemingly materialistic Western world, has a sacred source and destiny. And I should

from all the labor involved in sifting and understanding the historical evidenceâ€”everything experienced directly inside oneself by accessing the consciousness that brought our Western ci

But then, on an even deeper level, one comes to a place where the book is not about an something we have completely forgotten in the West: that certain texts are not *about* anything speak straight *from* the reality they are describing in a way our minds, obsessed as they are w may not understand or even notice. I find it particularly interesting that the first person who rea was not a Westerner at all, but a Native Americanâ€”Joseph Rael, who wrote the bookâ€”s was written as an incantation intended to work directly on the readerâ€”s being.

This means that as far as I am concerned, the less I say *about* the book, the better. But there mention, which of course connects back to the bookâ€”s title. *A Story Waiting to Pierce You* is there is nothing safe about reality or about the wisdom that brings us to it. Reality is not somet or discuss, because we are reality; and we gain wisdom not through a process of accumula through being touched and pierced by the consciousness that lies behind everything and keep is what gives access to the greatest privilege and delight possible for a human being: the oppo thing might sound, to participate in the cosmic process that lies behind even the birth and death

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

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