

COMMON SENSE

An interview with Peter Kingsley

OVER 2,500 YEARS AGO, PETER KINGSLEY TELLS US,

Parmenides and Empedocles laid the most basic foundations for the world and culture we now live in. Kingsley's original and groundbreaking work has brought back to life, and made accessible again, the extraordinary mystical tradition that lies forgotten at the roots of the Western world.

His connection to the teachings of these two nearly forgotten figures is immediate and palpable. Kingsley has rediscovered the original meaning and sacred purpose underlying our civilization and is committed to transmitting this ancient teaching to us now. His first book, **ANCIENT PHILOSOPHY, MYSTERY AND MAGIC: EMPEDOCLES AND PYTHAGOREAN TRADITION** was published by Oxford University Press in 1995 and, like his later books **IN THE DARK PLACES OF WISDOM** and **REALITY**, broadly hailed as gripping, urgent, unique, pioneering, courageous, original, challenging, learned, and enthralling. These same qualities were very much in evidence as he spoke with **PARABOLA** editors Christopher Bamford and Lorraine Kisly about our theme in New York last fall.

PARABOLA: Living in this culture, we can't avoid the idea that the senses are lying to us. Physics tells us that we see only a small spectrum of what's there, for example, and from the East there drifts vaguely the notion of maya, that all the world is illusion; and so we've lost faith in our senses. But at the same time when one meets developed human beings one is struck by their quality of being embodied, and their senses are wide awake. So do the senses lie or do they bring us to the truth?

PETER KINGSLEY: Parmenides and Empedocles lived just before the time in Western history when, with Plato and the influ-

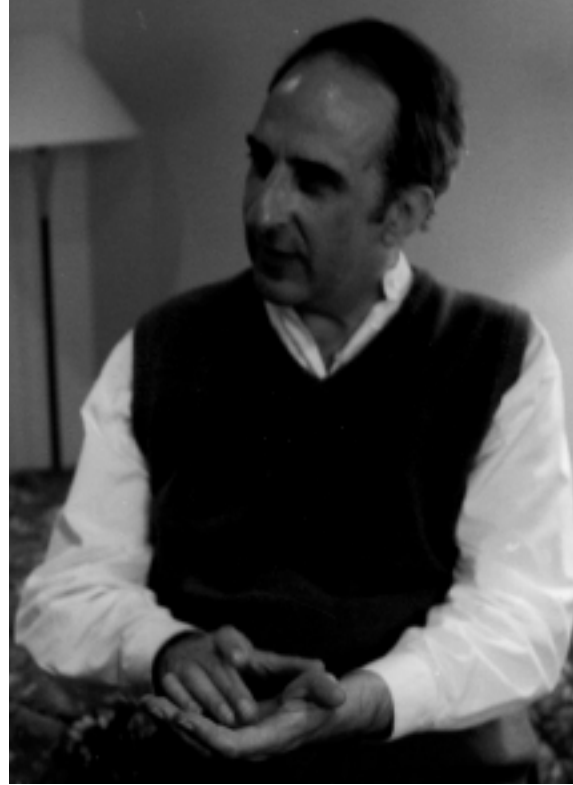
ence of Aristotle's disciples, we start to get the general notion that the senses lie. And because of this idea they were completely misunderstood.

P: So this is not a new idea.

PK: No, no. It's implicit even before Plato, and later Greek philosophers formulate it very clearly: the senses are liars.

Now Empedocles also begins his teaching poem by saying that the senses lead people astray. And so does Parmenides before him. But people don't really read what they say. Instead they think: well, Parmenides and Empedocles tell us the senses are unreliable therefore we have to find truth through some other means.

It sounds very logical. The trouble is Empedocles and Parmenides never said that. What they said is that the senses *as we know them* are unreliable, because we were never taught how to use them. Empedocles in particular was very specific. He explained that our senses are still closed. For him, we humans are plants: human plants. Actually we are seeds and have not yet become plants. We have not budded yet, have not yet started to open and blossom. We have the potential to become full human beings but the potential has not been realized. And I find this amazing and terrifying, that someone 2,500 years ago—someone who was laying the foundations for all our



philosophical and scientific disciplines—said we're not yet human, because what he said then applies just as much to us today.

P: We humans are unfinished.

PK: Well, unstarted. We're unstarted business. There have been over 2,000 years of supposed progress and it's still the same. Both Parmenides and Empedocles in their poems deliver devastating critiques of the human condition, and anyone who reads them superficially might con-

clude that they don't hold out much hope for humankind. To be sure, they said our senses are unreliable but that's only the beginning. As I explain in great detail in *REALITY*, both actually gave a whole system of exercises: very specific training programs, yoga techniques, meditation practices. These practices are



still there in the Greek texts from the dawn of Western culture and they are based on teaching us how to come to our senses. How to allow our senses to open, like buds.

P: It would seem that the practices have to be those that allow us to realize that what is unfinished is the cosmos—because if the human is unfinished the whole cosmos is unfinished.

PK: Absolutely. The usual idea we have is that meditation is to enlighten us, make us better, give us peace, or whatever. But for these people, meditation is not for oneself. It is an act of service for the sake of the cosmos. The purpose wasn't to get something out of it. It was to attune oneself to the cosmos for the sake of the cosmos. I suspect that in traditional

shamanic cultures this is implicit. But in the West, we've somehow become so individualized that we think it's for us. It is for the sake of the cosmos and it has to do with the senses. It all comes back to the senses.

The Platonic tradition has been deeply ingrained in us: this is a world of multiplicity and if we want to find Oneness we have to look elsewhere—we have to go inside, transcend, come to another level of reality, step up the hierarchy. The One is up there and we're down here. But if Oneness is up there you have already created a duality by placing it somewhere else. Empedocles and Parmenides both show us that the idea of leaving multiplicity and movement behind so as to find oneness and peace is based on a misunderstanding. What they both say is that while there seems to be a world of movement, a world which is not one, if you start to use your senses consciously you will come to perceive stillness in the middle of movement. Not by turning away from movement, because even to turn away from movement creates movement, but if you really are in the now there is total stillness. And that stillness has to be realized through the senses.

The key here is that we believe we are sense-perceptive beings, that we are oriented to the senses if we like fast cars and enjoy ice cream. However, Empedocles explains that we don't use our senses but instead are used by them. He says quite specifically we are dragged along by them, that the art is how to use the senses rather than be used by them. This requires very subtle changes in our consciousness where instead of letting the senses just bombard us with data and carry us along, we actually turn our attention back to face what is coming toward us.

P: What you say about turning back our attention reminds me of *ta'wil* in Islamic tradition, the returning of phenomena back to their source.

PK: Yes, and it's also found in Taoist exercises as well as particular strands of Buddhism. This passage from Han Shan describes beautifully what happens when you actually put the teachings of Parmenides and Empedocles into practice:

As one coming suddenly out of darkness, I perceived the full meaning of the doctrine of immutability and said: "Now I can believe that fundamentally all things neither come nor go." I got up from my meditation bed, prostrated myself before the Buddha shrine and did not have the perception of anything in motion. I lifted the blind and stood in front of the stone steps. Suddenly the wind blew through the trees in the courtyard and the air was filled with flying leaves which, however, looked motionless. I said to myself: "This is the whirlwind which will destroy Mount Sumeru and which is permanently still." When I went to the back yard to make water, the urine seemed not to be running. I said: "That is why the river pours but does not flow." Thereafter all my doubts about life and death vanished.

It's fascinating to see how Empedocles and Parmenides explain things just as clearly as this man but scholars have mistranslated and even altered the Greek texts because they have no frame of reference, either intellectual or experiential, for understanding what they are saying. This process of mistranslation is incredibly significant because it's on the basis of such misunderstandings that our Western civilization has been founded. To cite just one vivid example: right at the start of his esoteric teaching poem Empedocles tells his student that "if

you press my words down underneath your dense-packed diaphragm," in other words if you breathe them in deeply into your belly, then they will stay with you and they will grow and they will change you. This description of words as seeds, just like in the Parable of the Sower, and of pressing them down as you would



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press seeds into the earth, is perfectly consistent with his agricultural imagery. But even though the meaning of his words is very clear, over and over scholars mistranslate Empedocles as saying "if you press my words into your crowded brain"—as if our brains were not full enough already! If you know something of yoga it makes perfect sense. You have to breathe in Empedocles' words, you have to let them transform you.

P: It seems necessary to quiet the mind so the words will stay below and germinate and have an action. The idea that openness to the senses brings stillness, that the way to this stillness is through the senses being active instead of turned off, is a surprising one.

PK: Much of Theravada Buddhism is

based on awareness of the moment through our senses, but the crucial difference is that in those Buddhist practices you are still focused on what you are doing. Here, it is to be open everywhere. The beauty of this tradition is that we are given everything we need already. We don't need anything else.

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It's very economical. We start with our own senses, it's a completely organic process and there's nothing to learn, no need for a mantra or some discipline imposed from outside. Parmenides and Empedocles spoke about *metis*, a quality of very fluid awareness which we all possess and is aware of everything that's going on without any effort. And what we approach here is common sense—the real common sense, where by being aware through all our senses together we merge with the infinite stillness all around us.

P: Is this an empty awareness? To achieve this purer sense-perceiving do we need to empty our consciousness? Usually we label things: we don't follow the bird in flight, but shoot it down.

PK: Even simpler than emptiness, this is an openness that gives birth to the silence. It's actually a tremendous act of humility just to listen, to sense, to receive. It's a totally simple presence—natural and rare. To perceive that you are perceiving, aware of yourself seated on a chair, seeing and hearing and feeling together—that is the original meaning of the expression common sense. And Aristotle, God bless him, sent the whole thing in the wrong direction when he proudly insisted that of course we're aware that we are aware, of course we perceive that we perceive. He didn't see how rare this state really is, because he was thinking rather than looking. He didn't see how we go off to sleep. And we've been in this sleep for over two thousand years.

P: You write that we have traveled very far out on the arc into knowledge and action and that we have to return to this contact with stillness in movement. But has it all been a waste? Has anything been learned or gained?

PK: Every civilization comes into existence and lasts a few hundred or thousand years and then dies. We think we are different, but I'm sure the Babylonians felt the same way and the Egyptians and the Romans. Every culture is a certain experiment. Civilizations don't just happen. As Rumi says, look back to the origin of every science and culture and you will find revelation or divine guidance at their source. We reject revelation in favor of reason, but what we have forgotten is that reason and logic are themselves gifts from the gods and have a sacred purpose. At the beginning of the Western world it was understood and taught that before

you can start to learn chemistry or biology or astronomy or anything else you have to learn to breathe consciously, you have to learn a certain quality of attention and respectfulness. That is what Empedocles and other ancient teachers tell us. Reason, logic, the scientific disciplines, were all brought into existence from another world into this one as divine gifts and with certain warning labels attached: before attempting this, read the manual. Learn common sense, what it really is. Learn that everything given you is to serve a cosmic purpose.

So has this been a failed experiment? I don't think it's right to talk in terms of failure or success. What I do know is there is a certain quality of consciousness that appears at the beginning of civilizations which has to come back and be present at the end of civilizations. To me it is quite obvious that this is the end of a certain period in world history. We're going through a period of huge transition from what used to be Western culture into something new. And now a certain stock-taking is needed. A return to the essence is required. The essence of each civilization needs to be carried consciously from the past into the present for the sake of the future. The legacy of the West, its true legacy, is a tradition now calling out to be redeemed. The spiritual impulse that originally gave rise to our Western culture is still present in its genes, its DNA; and if we ignore this impulse I think we are doomed. We will walk into the future empty-handed. There is a sacred purpose behind this culture and if we forget it we can import every other spiritual tradition in the world but nothing will make up for the dying, shriveling roots of our own culture.

P: Why in this process are humans able, or called upon, to serve more than any other creature or plant? It's frequently pointed out that animals have senses far more acute than ours, so what's special about what a human being can bring?

PK: Everything in existence is crying out for a particular quality of consciousness

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that only humans can give. This doesn't mean we are superior to nature, only that there's an incredible need for a certain cooperation. The famous mystic Rudolph Steiner has said that for the agricultural process to happen, for seeds and plants and trees to grow, birdsong is absolutely essential. This is a beautiful truth that very few people know. But we also need to take what he said one stage further, because birds call and sing not only to quicken the plants: they also call to awaken the human seed that we are. They are actually singing for our sake as well. If we can start to listen to them, really listen, they will draw us into this greater consciousness I have been talking about. They will be our teachers, because outer

nature is able to point us to our inner nature.

P: The birds are calling us, but what exactly are we called to?

PK: We are called to be there. When we can listen to what the birds have to say,

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to what nature has to say, and when we perceive the beauty of nature, then we are completing the circle and returning this physical world to its source through our own consciousness.

P: St. Paul speaks of all of creation groaning in travail and pain until now, awaiting the revelation of the children of God. So the whole cosmos depends on human beings coming once again to find this sense of service, of cosmic and divine service that Empedocles and the founders of our tradition had, but which is lost.

PK: The mention of groaning is significant. The epidemic of depression sweeping Western culture stems from this pain of the earth. When depression touches us there is a sense of shame: we want to go away and hide. But really it's not we, as individuals, who get depressed. Our depression is creation's depression. And so there is a very fine line where, ultimately, if we are able to stay conscious then even to be depressed can be an act of service. This,

too, is a process of redemption.

P: Your orientation is fundamentally different because to take up our tradition is to realize that we are here for the sake of the cosmos and to realize what this means.

Awareness is not for its own sake, to make me more aware, to improve me. In a sense we are called to embody love for the world.

PK: Yes. It's love for the world, love of the world. It comes from the world and we're just there to give it back to the world. And the senses are the sacramental instruments that we've been given. It's all here. Here we have everything we need—we don't have to go looking for extraordinary rituals. We are just given, everywhere, right now. Every sound is an opportunity to be conscious. It's the cosmos calling.

P: Rilke wrote about the silence at the crossroads of the senses. Amid all the gifts we are given we are asked to give back attention. And attention at every moment, not just from time to time. So there is a constant call to give our attention to the world?

PK: Yes, everything is calling to us. These senses that we believe we know and use are in fact divine powers. Through them we can serve the cosmos, but if we don't they work against us. This is something the Greeks understood very well: divine gifts can be a blessing but also a curse. There is no safe ground, no neutrality. We are called to a certain responsibility. As human beings we've been given something divine, meaning something intensely mysterious and real, and we can't hand it back. ||