

Guide to Peter Kingsley's *In the Dark Places of Wisdom*

Through Eliade's *The Sacred and the Profane* we were introduced to the notion of the sacred. We found it in its simplest and purest form in archaic *homo religiosus*. We saw traces of it still in the much more recent and sophisticated religions of the world and even in a rather unconscious way in modern secular human life where space and time are not experienced as homogenous, but rather as still deeply meaningful. There are still traces of sacred time and space that are fundamentally qualitatively distinct from the profane. With Kingsley, we are introduced to the idea that something has been lost that was powerfully present in the western world in early Greek *philosophy* (love of wisdom): a deeply felt sense, a deep experience of the sacred. Philosophy was a spiritual practice with many powerful practical techniques for engendering this experience. It was not merely an intellectual pursuit that came to dominate western philosophy (and religion in the form of commitment to doctrines). A central figure in this early practice of spiritual philosophy is known to us as **Parmenides**. However, there is evidence that his name was actually Parmeneides and I shall follow Kingsley here in using that spelling. (Once we have considered what Kingsley has shown us has been lost, we will move into Miller's *In the Throe of Wonder* as a possible path to recovering a deep sense of the sacred, but now in the condition of modernity and post modernity.)

Parmeneides is widely considered one of the most important of the PreSocratic philosophers. He is often referred to as the father of philosophy and founder of western logic who shaped ancient thought, which in turn, has shaped western thinking in general. But Kingsley is going to take us on a journey that suggests that Parmeneides as he comes down to us is a fiction molded to the needs of the development of western thinking as it emerged into sophisticated science and philosophy in the 5th and 4th centuries. It begins with the enigma of fragments of a *poem* of Parmeneides that recounts his journey past the gates of the nether world to the goddess Persephone who is associated with Justice and Truth. It's poetic language is very unphilosophical if compared to philosophy as it developed and used prose to strive for conceptual clarity. It is the language of initiation into the mystery of Being as revealed or unconcealed (*aletheia*) by the goddess. The language itself is an incantation to induce an altered awareness in which a spiritual journey can take place. What Kingsley wants to show is that the founder of western logic actually was challenging all truth and logic instead of trying to establish it. His logic was aimed to undermine the rational/irrational dichotomy in order to "turn people's lives and values upside down... [but] we turned his teaching upside down instead." (p. 171) We turned it into a theory of truth, logic and reality that become the guiding influence in subsequent philosophy, science, and religion. Parmeneides conception of reality as misunderstood is exactly the conception of Plato's "Good" and Christianity's doctrinal conception of God as a perfect, timeless, unity. This logos came to dominate the living mythos of Eleatic Greek spirituality aimed at sacred liberation. (Kingsley's view is in many respects enlightening and persuasive, but I believe that his attack on Plato, which does seem to hit home to some extent, rather fits Platonism and less so Plato.)

Parmeneides came from a Greek city state called *Elea or Velia* located in southern Italy and so the philosophers in this tradition of Greek philosophy are called **Eleatics**. The founders of this Greek city state were originally from an Anatolian Greek city called **Phocaea**. In the 20th century, new archeological discoveries near the site of the ancient city of Elea or Velia have shown that the inhabitants of this city produced memorials at about the time of Christ in tribute to Parmeneides who lived 500 years earlier. It is somewhat controversial how we should interpret these finds, but regardless what interpretation one uses, these finds throw into question the standard understanding that comes down to us from Plato and others who make reference to Parmenides in their works. This is especially so, if you read the few fragments of Parmeneides famous poem that survive that were included in the writings of people who lived many centuries after Parmeneides' death. What the memorials suggest together with the poem fragments is that Parmeneides was part of a tradition going back to ancient Greek world in Anatolia (modern Turkey). This tradition was one of spiritual healers who pursued and were trained in wisdom of the *spiritual* realities of human life. They were facilitators of spiritual exercises that Kingsley calls the practice of stillness, or incubation. This tradition is related to the practices of the famous Pythagoreans who were followers of **Pythagoras** of Samos who moved to southern Italy. The Pythagoreans (600-400 BCE) were great philosophers and mathematicians who practiced philosophy and mathematics as a spiritual way of life, not just an intellectual pursuit. A later well known philosophical movement that also emphasized intellectual pursuits in the service of a spiritual life was Stoicism (300 BCE-200CE). Only works of late Stoicism of the Roman period survive.

The spiritual traditions of the early Greeks of 600 BCE to 200 BCE have disappeared and we only know them by name and very little about what they practiced. However, the new finds at Elea/Velia, together with what little we know about the ancient Pythagoreans and about their forebears the ancient Anatolian Greeks and their spiritual practices, provides a powerful way of approaching an interpretation of Parmeneides fragments and opens a whole new way of understanding that tradition and its mostly lost influence upon us today.

Certainly Christianity is a pursuit of the sacred, but from the first century it has increasingly become a pursuit of truth, truth as correspondence of our words to reality. It is about what we should believe in order to save ourselves from the catastrophe of corruption, decay, and death. It is, of course, ironic that within such traditions, there are always those liberating realizations and experiences that breathe new life into the insights that come to us from the inspirational source (Jesus, Buddha, etc). These primordial insights were NOT about what to believe, but how to live and the possibility of a profoundly liberating transformation here and now in our altered way of experiencing this supposed catastrophe of finitude. One is not in a catastrophe, but rather caught

in a way of living and thinking that is hell and the liberation from this is immediately possible. That is the good news of the Evangel and the Dharma. But as with most religions, it gets turned into dogma and ritual that attempts to preserve these founding insights and transformations experienced by the enlightened figures at the center of the religions and by those who were initially profoundly affected by being oriented toward this possibility directly or indirectly through this founding figure.

When we look for spiritual practices beyond what Christianity has provided over the last 2000 years, we are typically drawn to Asia including India and the Far East. But what Kingsley is doing with this powerful rediscovery of understanding Parmeneides is suggesting that at the beginning of our western philosophical tradition is a spiritual way of life that we can look to for a renewal of a way of approaching the sacred that is not doctrinal, not about intellectual pursuit of truth, but *aletheia*, which translates into English as *truth*. However, what truth has come to mean is something that is a product of the *logic of propositions* (see essay on this). The word *aletheia*, however suggests something else. It comes from Greek *lethe*: conceal + *a*: not or un = *unconcealment*, which means something hidden is revealed to us. This leads us to raise the questions: what is it that is concealed, from whom is it concealed, by what is it concealed, and why? What is the way to this *aletheia*? Unfortunately, it is only the intellectualization of this early wisdom or philosophy that has survived and not the spiritual practice that underlies that intellectual tradition, spiritual practices that lead to a direct awareness and unconcealment. Wisdom was a way of opening oneself and connecting to something deeply sacred, an unconcealment of what is. Being, the divine.

Wisdom for Socrates was still about how to live and the method, though via intellectual inquiry, still had its practical goal of living a virtuous life. We still get a sense that Socrates was a spiritual man, even Plato still was. But with Plato and Aristotle in response to the emergence of Greek science, the pursuit of wisdom had become primarily an intellectual pursuit of *theoretical* understanding of reality, truth, goodness. Even Christianity has been turned into a kind of theory about the world, what is true, what to believe, instead of a spiritual path.

Spiritual is a word that indicates something about ourselves that does not reduce to any belief or truth, rather it points to the very finitude and vulnerability that is the source of any yearning for truth to begin with. That is why, also ironically, every religion is at its core a humbling recognition that we DO NOT KNOW, that we are deeply fallible but that nonetheless there is a way to tap into this deep vulnerability that is more powerful than our fears and insecurities and our desperate desire for control and salvation from our vulnerability.

Becoming receptive to the need for a spiritual journey and awakening is usually precipitated by a crisis, a spiritual crisis in which we experience ourselves as disconnected, lost, and we can no longer ignore this yearning that pulls us. We pursue a deeper truth about what we might be. However, we must come to understand that truth as *aletheia* is not epistemological. It is not about finding something to believe or to believe in. It is not truth in the sense of the logic of propositions, but rather about what can be *experienced* by and revealed to human beings. As moderns, we are deeply suspicious of anything that does not come to us via our intellectual pursuit of truth our skeptical testing procedures. For good reasons: Superstition, guru worship, gullibility to the most ridiculous forms of illusion, wishful thinking, self-deception, and being taken advantage of ARE to be avoided. We want to become sophisticated about the ways of the world and all its pitfalls. Sophistication and intense skepticism can not only protect us from the damaging pitfalls of life, it can also prevent us from moving toward wisdom not available through merely worldly sophistication including all the intellectually powerful methodologies and technologies that have emerged in the past 500 years. How does one not fall victim to such unhealthy skepticism and the gullibility and thoughtless habits it was designed to overcome? How do we become sophisticated and worldly and capable of excellence in judgment and yet leave open our capacity for a kind of untainted innocence, the capacity for deep wonder and awe, a sense of the sacred? As well as one initiated into the mystery of Being, Parmeneides clearly was a person powerfully aware of the world who would not have been prey to such gullibility but who also realized that the danger in over using the intellect is to cut us off from its very source, the spiritual ground from which all human intelligence, creativity, and movement toward liberation emerges. Wisdom is seeing through what obstructs us from *aletheia*. It is not getting stuck in the deep desire for control or the pursuit of mere surface pleasures and satisfactions or the aversion to loss, decay, and death. It is a higher form of sophistication that avoids the mere cleverness of worldliness.

Kingsley tells us that something basic to us is hidden. It is something we long for, yet we do not do what it takes to move toward it. What it requires is that we risk our meaning, risk ourselves. We substitute many things that we desire for this deeper yearning we have. We disguise it in the pursuit and temporary satisfactions desires, that are never fulfilling, never make us the people that we somehow deeply feel we need to be. "In the modern world... sophistication is the highest virtue—the search for endless variety, for ways to keep scattering our longing in entertainments and distractions, in different things to say and do." (p.123-124) As the young Augustine said: "God save me...but not just yet." One must "die" to these deeply ingrained motivations, move toward and not attempt to escape from the very things we have such aversion to: loss, decay, and death. To attempt to outrun these, rather than embrace our condition of vulnerability, cuts us off from our deepest wisdom and spiritual core. This is the kind of wisdom that we see arise in the mystical traditions of the world religions, for example: Sufism in Islam, Christian mystics such as Meister Eckhart, or the state of *mushin* or no mind in Zen Buddhism.

Myths at their best are spiritual maps, not primitive irrational fictions (see Carl Jung [Carl Jung](http://www.jcf.org/) and Joseph Campbell <http://www.jcf.org/>). Myths provide a powerful psychological orientation toward the sacred, toward what we dread and yet are pulled toward: our own most fundamental reality, our impermanence and yet a sense that there is something more to us than merely a brief and profane existence. We can aspire to the divine, to the

sacred that is not in profane time, that we are not the mere sum of our parts. The *spiritual* in humans is that which aspires to break the bounds of what prevents us from becoming what we can be. Parmenides was a spiritual healer, a spiritual guide who could recognize the readiness for and could facilitate and hasten the journey to the dissolution of the illusions we cling to which limit our spiritual freedom. He had specific practices and techniques he had been taught and mastered for this. It was not intellectual talk about insight and wisdom. It was a journey by which one experienced these things. The technique was the practice of incubation or stillness in which the birth of the *Kouros*, the reborn or new person, could take place. It is a kind of death before one dies, so that one can live fully before actual death. To live in this way is to live timelessly in time. And such non sense in language can only point to an experience, and a way of being in the world, cannot capture it. So Parmenides poem is a revelation in language of an experience that cannot be conveyed except poetically and mythologically. This self-overcoming is also a condition for the wisdom that must lie behind any law. The deepest source of justice is this *experience* of freedom.

Parmenides was a healer who destroys the illusions that prevent turning inward to one's spiritual core. One travels the road to death while still alive. To go to the gates of Hades is to go to the connection between and the source of two worlds, the worlds of light and dark, day and night. It is the place of darkness inside each of us from which wisdom or seeing can emerge. "To die before you die, to no longer live on the surface of yourself... in order to journey to the "depths of ignorance in search of wisdom."(p. 65) "The underworld isn't a place of darkness and death. It only seems like that from a distance. In reality it's the supreme place of *paradox* where all opposites meet...The source of light is at home in the darkness."(p.68) Wisdom can only be found in what is hidden in our depths. The path to that depth is *stillness*. One become a *kouros*, a person of spiritual maturity as opposed to the *failure to mature*: "that's when we grow old and empty because we've missed the opportunities life always brings for making conscious contact with the timeless."(p.74) "To heal is to know the limits of healing and also what lies beyond. Ultimately, there's is no real [spiritual] healing without the ability to face death itself." (p.91). What we fear most is facing silence, having no choice but to give up every truth, "every opinion and theory that we cling to." (p 155)

To go the way of our longing (see Augustine's *Confessions* Chap 11) is to go deeper than the appearances we live in (Plato's Cave in *The Republic*). It is a path to utter simplicity that is able to draw us into another awareness, an awareness of the source of all opposites and duality (*Yin Yang* in Chinese philosophy) that Anaximander (another Anatolian philosopher from Miletus) calls the *Apeiron* and Lao Tzu calls the *Dao*. This is unity and simplicity as experienced, rather than merely thought. Simplicity and unity are what all science and religion strive for. So it would appear to be something fundamental to what we strive for in our horizons of meaning and understanding. This pursuit is itself something that emerges from the very source, the very possibility of meaningfulness that can only be brought near in experience and what we might call a hermeneutical awareness of our finite situatedness and *linguisticity* (see *Eros of Wisdom*). Finitude necessarily is always from this or that horizon of awareness and significance. But our reflections are powerful ways of liberating ourselves from the prisons of our truths, our horizons or perspectives that ultimately can direct us toward a way of being in the world. Philosophy at its best is an undoing, a clearing away of what obstructs this wisdom, this seeing through our truths into something that can only be experienced that we sometimes call *the sacred*.

TERMS/NAMES

Apollo: ([Apollo](http://www.theoi.com/Olympios/Apollon.html)) (<http://www.theoi.com/Olympios/Apollon.html>) Greek god of light and the sun; truth and prophecy; archery; medicine and healing; music, poetry, and the arts; and more. Son of Zeus and Leto, and has a twin sister, the chaste huntress Artemis. Medicine and healing were associated with Apollo, whether through the god himself or mediated through his son Asclepius, yet Apollo was also seen as a god who could bring ill-health and deadly plague as well as one who had the ability to cure. As the leader of the Muses (*Apollon Musagetes*) and director of their choir, Apollo functioned as the patron god of music and poetry. Hermes created the lyre for him, and the instrument became a common attribute of Apollo. Sometimes seen as the god of reason contrasted with his half brother [Dionysus](#) the god of ecstasy, frenzy, license, and epiphany [Dionysus with the god Apollo](#)

Apollo Pholeuterios (from the inscriptions at Velia): Apollo who hides away in a lair, the incubator god of suspended animation. (Kingsley, (p. 85))

Oulis: Apollonian healer, another name for Apollo,

Ouliades: Apollonian healer, son of Apollo/"skywalker"

Iatros: healer, another name for Apollo, son of Apollo/"skywalker"

Iatromantis: A healer through prophecy (108), son of Apollo/"skywalker", mouthpiece of the divine

Pholarchos: Lord of the lair, priest who guides and oversees a holy or healing quest, i.e., suspended animation, incubation, son of Apollo/"skywalker" (p. 78-)

Pholeia: state of suspended animation or incubation in which one surrenders to one's condition, as if you are dead (p.80)

Taken by Apollo, Apollos' ecstasy: (p.112) a state of total freedom arising from deep silence and stillness, a state of awareness between the everyday and an altered consciousness in which time and space, belief and unbelief, truth and untruth have no status, are suspended. A super lucid condition or clarity of awareness.

(*Samadhi/Prajna* in Sanscrit)

Physikos: Healer who heals in the context of fundamental understanding

Hesychia: Stillness

Kouros (p71-75) one who live timelessly in time and has the purity and innocence of a child, has become paradoxically human and divine, most important god is Apollo

Orpheus: mythical poet who descended into Hades and returned (as Parmeneides does). [Orpheus](#)

Orphic tradition: [Orphism \(religion\)](#)

Pythagorus of Samos who moved to Elea. [Pythagoras](#)

Pythagoreans: Coined the term *philosophia* "love of wisdom". Parmeneides is associated with [Pythagoreanism](#).

Initiator: Teacher or spiritual parent, father, or hero. "The teacher is a point of access to something beyond the teacher. And behind one teacher there's a whole line of teachers." (p. 156-57)

Ameinias: Parmeneides' teacher and spiritual hero (p. 160-62, 173-)

See also:

Martin Heidegger, *Parmenides*, trans Schuwer & Rojcewicz Indian Univ Press, 1992-1998.

Martin J. Henn, *Parmenides of Elea: A Verse Translation with Interpretative Essays and Commentary to the Text*, Praeger, 2003

Maps of Ancient Phocaea and its Colonies

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phocaea#History>

http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/5/52/Phocaea_Map.JPG

<http://www.ancient-greece.org/images/maps/ancient-greece101.swf>

http://plato-dialogues.org/tools/gk_wrlld.htm

http://plato-dialogues.org/tools/east_med.htm

http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/d3/Anatolia_composite_NASA.png

<http://www.bing.com/images/search?q=world+atlas&FORM=IGRE1#focal=8074d3e414acf04f2be5cca8c84f772a&furl=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.mapsofworld.com%2Fimages2008%2Fworld-atlas.jpg>