

Knowing Beyond Knowing

*The Heart of Hermetic
Tradition*

Peter Kingsley

AT THE CENTER OF HERMETIC tradition lies the need for a certain type of knowledge: *gnosis*, or knowledge of the divine. This is something entirely different from formal types of knowledge, which separate and distance us from what we think we know. Yet according to the Hermetic teachings, this knowledge is not a "bonus" or extra that we can set our minds on if we want. Far from it: without that particular knowledge we are not men and women in any true sense. This knowledge has to do with the core of our existence, and that is why it is intensely intimate. That is also why the process of discovering it is so intensely disturbing, because it forces us to confront the silent core of our being. This knowledge can never be defined in terms of formal knowledge. It is not possible to define the new in terms of the old, or something so intimate in the normal objective way. The Hermetic and Pythagorean traditions both relied heavily on teaching through hints: not because they wanted to mystify, but because that is the best that can be done. Those who are serious learn to follow the hints. Others overlook them; hence the problems that have arisen in understanding these traditions.

The Hermetic teachings—teachings ascribed to the divine prophet Hermes Trismegistus—were written down in Egypt by Greek-speaking people around two thousand years ago. Western scholarship has managed to dismiss them as second-rate philosophy, devoid of real value, filled with inconsistencies and contradictions. Even those who are more sympathetic erect grand schemes of Hermetic "doctrine"—missing out the human dimension. In fact the Hermetic writings are inconsistent, and do contradict themselves. Sometimes the world is viewed as good, as penetrated by the presence of God and living proof of God's existence. At other times it is seen as fundamentally flawed or defective: as a place to turn away from and let go of in return for a fuller, more authentic existence.

If we look closely we see that the contradictions are meaningful. When new people were first introduced to a circle whose teachings were embodied in the Hermetic texts, they were encouraged to look for the divine in the world they were used to. But as their inner strength and experience grew

they were drawn to focus on the divine reality itself, and let go of attachments to a world increasingly seen as imperfect. In just the same way, at one stage teachings might be given out about the universe or about astrology which at a later stage would be dismissed as no longer relevant to the individual's needs: as holding him or her back, trapping him in the love of knowledge for the sake of knowledge when the time had come to be moving on—moving on to a knowing beyond the one we know of.

This process is clear from Hermetic writings. There is one place, for instance, where a pupil reminds his teacher of the way he had once promised to pass on to him the last remaining teaching "when you are ready to become a stranger to the world."¹ The pupil goes on to declare: "Now I am ready, because I have become a man by strengthening myself against the illusion of the world." The basic ideas of readiness and appropriateness are here—the esoteric principle that whatever is taught has to be adapted to the level of understanding of the person concerned. And it must be remembered that, in the ancient Greek mysteries, transmission of knowledge was a very preliminary stage: only the second of five levels, immediately after the initial stage of purification. It was a stage that was supposed to lead on as soon as possible to the third level—the level of immediate perception, where "there is nothing left to learn."²

THERE ARE MANY other sides to the question of contradiction. Speaking theoretically one could say it is the only way of pointing to the divine, which is beyond the limitations of human logic and reason. But that is just the theory. In practice, contradiction could also be used to confuse, provoke, and force one back on oneself as a preliminary to being launched into a totally new dimension of knowing. It acted like the riddles or enigmas used in ancient

Pythagoreanism as a device for holding the pupil's attention: particular sayings given to a pupil to force him to focus his whole awareness on a problem rather than listening passively. The energy generated by working on the riddle transformed the pupil. This process was an initiation in its own right. The cost of finding the answer was a heavy one: the loss of one's old beliefs, the painful upheaval and transformation of one's own being.³

The way that this process works in the Hermetic tradition is clear from the passage already mentioned. The scene opens on the disciple complaining that, in the earlier stages of the teaching, his teacher had never said anything clear about the highest truth but had just talked in riddles. Now, he insists, is the time for the great revelation.

But the revelation doesn't come. Instead, the teacher talks more enigmatically than ever. The disciple begins complaining even more desperately; but in face of all the protests and angry frustration, the teacher repeats that "this affair is not taught." When the disciple says he is so disoriented that he can't even find himself, the teacher laconically replies: "If only that were really the case!" The teacher then goes on to throw him into such confusion that the disciple ends up making the statement: "Now you've really driven me crazy. I thought that through you I would become wise, but all that's happened is that my awareness has become completely blocked up." It is when the disciple admits his helplessness that the teacher explains: No, you have got it all wrong. At the level of the senses, yes, you're powerless. But what you have to do, he says, is draw to you what you need from a totally different dimension—a dimension beyond words, and a dimension of utter silence.

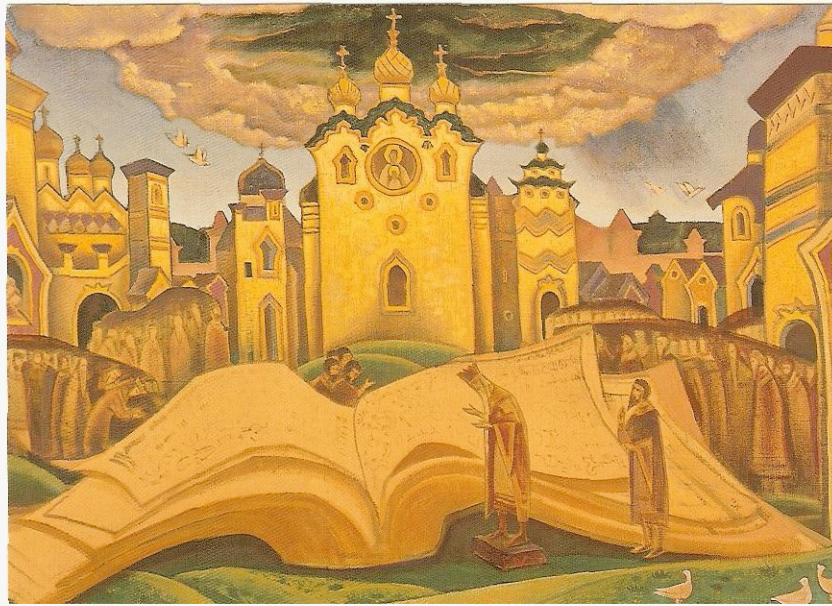
The disciple desperately wants to understand: to find consistency, theoretical understanding. But his intellect is frustrat-

ed, flattened, evoked only to be pushed to the edge of extinction—until the understanding starts to come from an entirely different level. That other level is what the pupil was after all along. Unless we have some desire for it, or a deep dissatisfaction with things as they are, the dynamic of the teaching process is bound to remain completely alien.

From a mystical point of view, the Hermetic account of confusion and frustration—and the telling detail about one's

The famous “rebirth” of Hermeticism during the Italian Renaissance was a revival of intellectual schemes and inspiring ideas, rather than of its heart.

The Hermetic texts often give important indications about the teaching process: about the responsibilities of the teacher, and the responsibilities of the pupil. The indications show that the relationship to the teacher was very different from a relationship to some all-knowing authority figure.



perception becoming totally “blocked up”—is perfectly correct. These are essential stages in shifting from one dimension of awareness to another. One has to confront a brick wall before one can get beyond it. This has been referred to as the “spiritual constipation” that inevitably precedes a jump forward in awareness.⁴

THE HEART OF THE Hermetic tradition was the relationship with the teacher.

One of these texts was only found during the 1940s in southern Egypt, among the Gnostic texts discovered near Nag Hammadi.⁵ It is very precise.

My child, it's your business to understand; it's my job to be successful at speaking the words that spring from the source which flows inside me.

In other words it's not only a matter of the disciple grasping the truth of what he is

told. The teacher also needs to catch something, and keep catching it. He doesn't have some fixed knowledge, but needs to discover it freshly at every moment. The disciple's job is to learn to share this process, to develop the same awareness. As another Hermetic text explains:

My child, he who listens must perceive the same as he who speaks, share his awareness; he must breathe together with him, share the same spirit; his hearing must be sharper than the voice of he who speaks.

Then there is another statement, made close to the start of the Hermetic text known as the *Asclepius*. It gives the key to understanding not just what knowledge was for the writers of the Hermetic texts, but also how those texts themselves were composed.

Now be completely present, give me your whole attention, with all the understanding that you are capable of, with all the subtlety you can muster. For the teaching about divinity requires a divine concentration of con-



Each instruction here is a whole teaching in itself. The idea of "breathing together" with the teacher (*sympneein*) recurs in the same form in Persian Sufism, where the intimacy of the relationship between teacher and disciple is described as "being of the same breath" (*ham-dam*). The coincidence is no surprise: we can trace the paths by which the Hermetic tradition of Egypt passed through the Islamic world into Persian Sufism.⁶

sciousness if it's to be understood. It's just like a torrential river, plunging headlong down from the heights so violently that with its rapidity and speed it outstrips the attention not only of whoever is listening but also of whoever is speaking.

Knowledge moves so fast that you have to be as fast as it is if you want to keep pace. There is no standing still. You have to keep moving, leaving what you knew behind; otherwise it will hold you back.

The truth flows so rapidly that anything you think you know is not the truth, because knowing is too slow. And that applies especially to the teacher.

Real knowledge demands a tremendously subtle alertness. We have to be poised and empty, listening and watching. It keeps streaming down. It's invisible, not because it's "somewhere else," as we have been led to believe, but because its rapid flow is what actually creates everything we see. The only way we can perceive it is through a total focus, through being "completely present" as the text demands. And even then it's not for us. It's flowing, ever-moving—like the Hermetic tradition itself.

The image of the violent torrent also says something else. We think of spiritual life as beauty and peace and escape from violence. But truth is violent too. In fact, it is the only violence there is. The only power that exists is the power of that torrent, because it creates the world of the senses. The very power we use to put one foot in front of the other comes from behind the senses. What we call violence is what happens when we hold on to fixed ideas and the violent power of reality is blocked. Ultimately there is nothing "otherworldly" about this. It's intensely practical.

The role of the teacher is to help the disciple speed up. But until this has been done the disciple is not able to understand what the teacher is. That is why the pupil has to be driven almost crazy so that he can begin to see him as he really is. As the teacher tries to explain:

I am now not what I was; I have been born in consciousness. This affair is not taught, and it can't be taught through this fabricated body of ours which gives us the sense of sight. My original form is no longer of any concern to me. Now I am colorless; I can no longer be touched; I can no longer be measured. I am different from all that. Now, child, you see me with your eyes. But as you

look at my body and appearance you don't perceive what I am, because I can't be seen with those eyes.

The Hermetic teacher could be merciless and cruel: aspects we might prefer to forget. Yet most Hermetic texts end with songs of devotion and praise, while the voice that speaks through the teacher in the *Asclepius* is the voice of Love. This was a tradition that concerned itself with transformation, and for transformation a price has to be paid. In this case the price was to give up being children, and become true men and women. □

NOTES

1. The text is *Corpus Hermeticum* 13. The translations are my own.
2. For the quotation (from Clement of Alexandria) and full documentation see Peter Kingsley, *Ancient Philosophy, Mystery and Magic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 230–231, 367–368.
3. On riddles, hints, and initiation in ancient Pythagoreanism see *ibid.*, chapters 4 and 23–24.
4. Irina Tweedie, *Daughter of Fire* (Grass Valley, Calif.: Blue Dolphin Press, 1986), pp. 389, 457; the background here is one of Persian and Indian Sufism. For direct connections between Hermetic tradition and Sufism see Kingsley, pp. 371–391.
5. The Hermetic texts quoted in this final section are: *Nag Hammadi Codices* vi.55.19–22; *Corpus Hermeticum* 10.17; *Asclepius* 3; *Corpus Hermeticum* 13.3.
6. For *ham-dam* see Michaela Özelsel, *Forty Days* (Brattleboro, Vt.: Threshold, 1996), p. 127. For the links between Hermetic tradition and Persian Sufism see above, note 4.