

# Pythagoras

c. 428 BC - 348 BC

from Little Journeys To The Homes Of Great Teachers

by Elbert Hubbard

Consult and deliberate before you act, that thou mayest not commit foolish actions. For 't is the part of a miserable man to speak and to act without reflection. But do that which will not afflict thee afterwards, nor oblige thee to repentance.

—*Pythagoras*

When Pythagoras was only four or five years old, his mother taught him to take his morning bath in the cold stream and dry his baby skin by running in the wind. As he ran she ran with him and together they sang a hymn to the rising sun that for them represented the god Apollo.

This mother taught him to be indifferent to cold, heat, hunger, to exult in endurance, and to take a joy in the glow of the body.

So the boy grew strong and handsome and proud; and perhaps it was in those early years, from the mother herself, that he gathered the idea, afterward developed, that Apollo had appeared to his mother, and so great was the beauty of the god that the woman was actually overcome, it being the first god at which she had ever had a good look.

The ambition of a great mother centers on her son. Pythagoras was filled with the thought that he was different, peculiar, set apart to teach the human race.

Having compassed all there was to learn in his native place, and, as he thought, being ill appreciated, he started for Egypt, the land of learning. The fallacy that knowledge was a secret to be gained by word of mouth and to be gotten from books existed then as now. The mother of Pythagoras wanted her son to comprehend the innermost secrets of the Egyptian mysteries. He would then know all. To this end she sold her jewels, in order that her son might have the advantages of an Egyptian education.

Women were not allowed to know the divine secrets—only just a few little ones. This woman wanted to know, and she said her son would learn and tell her.

The family had become fairly rich by this time, and influential. Letters were gotten from the great ones of Samos to the Secretary of State in Egypt. And so Pythagoras, aged twenty, “the youth with the beautiful hair,” went on his journey to Egypt and knocked boldly at the doors of the temples at Memphis, where knowledge was supposed to be in stock. Religion then monopolized all schools and continued to do so for quite some time after Pythagoras was dead.

He was turned away with the explanation that no foreigner could enter the sacred portals—that the initiates must be those born in the shadows of the temples and nurtured in the faith from infancy by holy virgins.

Pythagoras still insisted, and it was probably then that he found a sponsor who made for him the claim that he was a son of Apollo. And the holy men peeped out of their peepholes in holy admiration for any one who could concoct as big a lie as they themselves had ever invented.

The boy surely looked the part. Perhaps, at last, here was one who was what they pretended to be! Frauds believe in frauds, and rogues are more easily captured by roguery than are honest men.

His admittance to the university became a matter of international diplomacy. At last, being too hard-pressed, the wise ones who ran the mystery monopoly gave in, and Pythagoras was informed that at midnight of a certain night, he should present himself, naked, at the door of a certain temple and he would be admitted.

On the stroke of the hour, at the appointed time, Pythagoras, the youth with the beautiful hair, was there, clothed only in his beautiful hair. He knocked on the great, bronze doors, but the only answer was a faint, hollow echo.

Then he got a stone and pounded, but still no answer.

The wind sprang up fresh and cold. The young man was chilled to the bone, but still he pounded and then called aloud, demanding admittance. His answer now was the growling and barking of dogs within. Still he pounded! After an interval a hoarse voice called out through a little slide, ordering him to be gone or the dogs would be turned loose upon him.

He demanded admittance.

“Fool, do you not know that the law says these doors shall admit no one except at sunrise?”

“I only know that I was told to be here at midnight and I would be admitted.”

“All that may be true, but you were not told when you would be admitted—wait, it is the will of the gods.” So Pythagoras waited, numbed and nearly dead.

The dogs, which he had heard, had, in some way, gotten out and came tearing around the corner of the great stone building. He fought them with desperate strength. The effort seemed to warm his blood, and whereas before he was about to retreat to his lodgings he now remained.

The day broke in the east, and gangs of slaves went by to work. They jeered at him and pelted him with pebbles.

Suddenly across the desert sands he saw the faint pink rim of the rising sun. On the instant the big bronze doors against which he was leaning swung suddenly in. He fell with them, and coarse, rough hands seized his hair and pulled him into the hall.

The doors swung to and closed with a clang. Pythagoras was in dense darkness, lying on the stone floor.

A voice, seemingly coming from afar, demanded, “Do you still wish to go on?”

And his answer was, “I desire to go on.”

A black-robed figure, wearing a mask, then appeared with a flickering light, and Pythagoras was led into a stone cell.

His head was shaved, and he was given a coarse robe and then left alone. Toward the end of the day he was given a piece of black bread and a bowl of water. This he was told was to fortify him for the ordeal to come.

What that ordeal was we can only guess, save that it consisted partially in running over hot sands where he sank to his waist. At a point where he seemed about to perish a voice called loudly, “Do you yet desire to go on?”

And his answer was, “I desire to go on.”

Returning to the inmost temple he was told to enter a certain door and wait therein. He was then blindfolded and when he opened the door to enter, he walked off into space and fell into a pool of ice-cold water.

While floundering there the voice again called, “Do you yet desire to go on?”

And his answer was, “I desire to go on.”

At another time he was tied upon the back of a donkey and the donkey was led along a rocky precipice, where lights danced and flickered a thousand feet below.

“Do you yet want to go on?” called the voice.

And Pythagoras answered, “I desire to go on.”

The priests here pushed the donkey off the precipice, which proved to be only about two feet high, the gulf below being an illusion arranged with the aid of lights that shone through apertures in the wall.

These pleasing little diversions Pythagoras afterward introduced into the college which he founded, so to teach the merry freshmen that nothing, at the last, was as bad as it seemed, and that most dangers are simply illusions.

The Egyptians grew to have such regard for Pythagoras that he was given every opportunity to know the inmost secrets of the mysteries. He said he encompassed them all, save those alone which were incomprehensible.

This was probably true.

The years spent in Egypt were not wasted—he learned astronomy, mathematics, and psychology, a thing then not named, but pretty well understood—the management of men.

It was twenty years before Pythagoras returned to Samos. His mother was dead, so she passed away in ignorance of the secrets of the gods—which perhaps was just as well.

Samos now treated Pythagoras with great honor.

Crowds flocked to his lectures, presents were given him, royalty paid him profound obeisance.

But Samos soon tired of Pythagoras. He was too austere, too severe. And when he began to rebuke the officials for their sloth and indifference, he was invited to go elsewhere and teach his science of life. And so he journeyed into Southern Italy, and at Crotona built his Temple to the Muses and founded the Pythagorean School. He was the wisest as well as the most learned man of his time.







## The Apology (excerpt)

by Xenophon

c. 431 BC- c. 350 BC

translation by H. G. Dakyns

“I admit it,” Socrates replied, “in the case of education, for they know that I have made the matter a study; and with regard to health a man prefers to obey his doctor rather than his parents; in the public assembly the citizens of Athens, I presume, obey those whose arguments exhibit the soundest wisdom rather than their own relations. And is it not the case that, in your choice of generals, you set your fathers and brothers, and, bless me! your own selves aside, by comparison with those whom you believe to be the wisest authorities on military matters?”

“No doubt, Socrates,” replied Meletus, “because it is expedient and customary so to do.”

“Well then,” rejoined Socrates, “does it not strike even you, Meletus, as wonderful when in all ordinary concerns the best people should obtain, I do not say only an equal share, but an exclusive preference; but in my case, simply because I am selected by certain people as an adept in respect of the greatest treasure men possess—education, I am on that account to be prosecuted by you, sir, on the capital charge?”

Much more than this, it stands to reason, was urged, whether by himself or by the friends who advocated his cause. But my object has not been to mention everything that arose out of the suit. It suffices me to have shown on the one hand that Socrates, beyond everything, desired not to display impiety to heaven, and injustice to men; and on the other, that escape from death was not a thing, in his opinion, to be clamoured for importunately—on the contrary, he believed that the time was already come for him to die. That such was the conclusion to which he had come was made still more evident later when the case had been decided against him. In the first place, when called upon to suggest a counter-penalty, he would neither do so himself nor suffer his friends to do so for him, but went so far as to say that to propose a counter-penalty was like a confession of guilt. And afterwards, when his companions wished to steal him out of prison, he would not follow their lead, but would seem to have treated the idea as a jest, by asking, “whether they happened to know of some place outside Attica where death was forbidden to set foot?”

When the trial drew to an end, we are told, the master said: “Sirs, those who instructed the witnesses that they ought to perjure themselves and bear false witness against me, alike with those who listened to their instruction, must be conscious to themselves of a deep impiety and injustice. But for myself, what reason have I at the present time to hold my head less high than I did before sentence was passed against me, if I have not been convicted of having done any of those things whereof my accusers accused me? It has not been proved against me that I have sacrificed to novel divinities in place of Zeus

and Hera and the gods who form their company. I have not taken oath by any other gods, nor named their name.

“And then the young—how could I corrupt them by habituating them to manliness and frugality? since not even my accusers themselves allege against me that I have committed any of those deeds of which death is the penalty, such as robbery of temples, breaking into houses, selling freemen into slavery, or betrayal of the state; so that I must still ask myself in wonderment how it has been proved to you that I have done a deed worthy of death. Nor yet again, because I die innocently is that a reason why I should lower my crest, for that is a blot not upon me but upon those who condemned me.

“For me, I find a certain consolation in the case of Palamedes, whose end was not unlike my own; who still even to-day furnishes a far nobler theme of song than Odysseus who unjustly slew him; and I know that testimony will be borne to me also by time future and time past that I never wronged another at any time or ever made a worse man of him, but ever tried to benefit those who practiced discussion with me, teaching them gratuitously every good thing in my power.”

And when he perceived those who followed by his side in tears, “What is this?” he asked. “Why do you weep now? Do you not know that for many a long day, ever since I was born, sentence of death was passed upon me by nature? If so be I perish prematurely while the tide of life’s blessings flows free and fast, certainly I and my well-wishers should feel pained; but if it be that I am bringing my life to a close on the eve of troubles, for my part I think you ought all of you to take heart of grace and rejoice in my good fortune.”

Now there was a certain Apollodorus, who was an enthusiastic lover of the master, but for the rest a simple-minded man. He exclaimed very innocently, “But the hardest thing of all to bear, Socrates, is to see you put to death unjustly.”

Whereupon Socrates, it is said, gently stroked the young man’s head: “Would you have been better pleased, my dear one, to see me put to death for some just reason rather than unjustly?” and as he spoke he smiled tenderly.

It is also said that, seeing Anytus pass by, Socrates remarked: “How proudly the great man steps; he thinks, no doubt, he has performed some great and noble deed in putting me to death, and all because, seeing him deemed worthy of the highest honours of the state, I told him it ill became him to bring up his son in a tan-yard. What a scamp the fellow is! he appears not to know that of us two whichever has achieved what is best and noblest for all future time is the real victor in this suit. Well! well!” he added, “Homer has ascribed to some at the point of death a power of forecasting things to be, and I too am minded to utter a prophecy. Once, for a brief space, I associated with the son of Anytus, and he seemed to me not lacking in strength of soul; and what I say is, he will not



adhere long to the slavish employment which his father has prepared for him, but, in the absence of any earnest friend and guardian, he is like to be led into some base passion and go to great lengths in depravity.”

The prophecy proved true. The young man fell a victim to the pleasures of wine; night and day he never ceased drinking, and at last became a mere good-for-nothing, worthless alike to his city, his friends, and himself. As to Anytus, even though the grave has closed upon him, his evil reputation still survives him, due alike to his son’s base bringing-up and his own want of human feeling.

Socrates did, it is true, by his self-laudation draw down upon him the jealousy of the court and caused his judges all the more to record their votes against him. Yet even so, I look upon the lot of destiny which he obtained as providential, chancing as he did upon the easiest amidst the many shapes of death, and escaping as he did the one grievous portion of existence. And what a glorious chance, moreover, he had to display the full strength of his soul, for when once he had decided that death was better for him than life, just as in the old days he had never harshly opposed himself to the good things of life morosely, so even in face of death he showed no touch of weakness, but with gaiety welcomed death’s embrace, and discharged life’s debt.



