

I'm teaching Pythagoras in Ancient Philosophy. Recently, I posted "Pythagoras is on my mind" as my Facebook status and it generating twenty comments almost all of them from non-academics. Wow. Who knew Pythagoras was of such incredible interest to a broad range of people. Pythagoras should be of enormous interest to yogis and yoginis. In many ways, he was teaching and living the principles of a yogic life.

Most people associate Pythagoras with the Pythagorean theorem they learned in school. Pythagoras himself may or may not have discovered the theorem, but he did think that number provided the primary structure of the soul and the cosmos.

Pythagoras lived around 570-495 bce. He was born on the island of Samos. He is said to have travelled widely. Some accounts even suggest that he travelled to India. Eventually, he settled in Croton, Italy and established a school there.

Pythagoras taught many of the same ethical principles that undergird the Yoga Sutras. He believed there was a profound unity between the individual soul and the universe. He expressed this relationship in terms of number and harmony. He believed the soul was immortal and was "trapped in prakriti." The point of philosophic study was to purify the soul and see its true nature, its true identity with ultimate reality. He too wanted the seer to dwell in its own true splendor (YS I.3). Pythagoras advocated vegetarianism and harmonious living with others (ahimsa). The members of his school shared proper in common (aparigraha). He advocated a rigorous form of self-study (Svadhya). At night, each student reviewed all the actions of the day and assessed whether they acted appropriately in all contexts. This practice cultivated both memory (Smirti) and discernment (viveka).

When students came to study at his school, they had to undergo a length initiation process. The students had to prepare themselves or herself to receive the teaching (adhikara). Beyond that, there were clear differences between mild, moderate, and intense students. The school divided into clear levels according to the level of discipline of the student.

Pythagoras had a mathematical or strongly intellectual dimension to his thought but also a deeply religious or spiritual one. The mathematical dimensions of his work remind me very much of the alignment that we often associate with Iyengar Yoga. Often, there is so much emphasis on alignment that people do not recognize how deeply spiritual Iyengar yoga is. The point of aligning the body, ultimately, is to align the soul, to use the geometry of the body to know the geometry of the soul.