Ancient Philosophy as a Way of Life

Stoicism, Epicureanism, Buddhism, and Skepticism at King Menander’s Court

Sāgala, around 150 BCE

> *“Empty are the words of the philosopher who offers no therapy for human suffering. For just as there is no use in medical expertise if it does not give therapy for bodily diseases, so too there is no use in philosophy if it does not expel the suffering of the soul.”*
>
> — Epicurus



Philosophical debate between Ptolemy and Hermes Trismegistus, with the personification Skepsis. Silver plate, eastern Mediterranean, 500–600 CE. J. Paul Getty Museum, 83.AM.342. Digital image courtesy of Getty’s Open Content Program.

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Why Play This Game?

What makes a good life? Is it success, happiness, friendship, doing the right thing, or something else? How should we respond when our plans fall apart, when we lose someone we love, or when we feel that we have failed? How much should we sacrifice for other people? And how can we tell whether the things we spend our lives pursuing are actually worth pursuing?

These aren't just abstract philosophical questions. They are questions you will confront in your own life.

For many ancient philosophers, philosophy was not simply an intellectual exercise. It was a way of life: an attempt to understand what really matters and to develop habits of thought and action that help us live well. Philosophers developed arguments about happiness, suffering, death, and human nature. But they also proposed practical exercises for changing how we respond to adversity, relate to others, and make important decisions.

In this game, you will explore four competing approaches to living: Stoicism, Epicureanism, Buddhism, and Skepticism. These traditions have profoundly influenced human history, shaping ideas about ethics, happiness, knowledge, and the good life. Their influence extends from ancient Greece and India through later philosophical and religious traditions to modern psychology and contemporary debates about how to live. You will try out their practices, apply their ideas to difficult situations, and test whether their teachings hold up under criticism and pressure.

The goal is not to discover which philosophy sounds most appealing, but to ask whether it offers a convincing and practical account of how to live.

The point is to take these competing philosophies seriously enough to discover what they might teach us and where they might fall short.

The Game at a Glance

You will take part in a role-playing game set at the court of King Menander, ruler of a culturally diverse kingdom in northwestern India around 150 BCE. This region was one of the few places in the ancient world where Greek and Indian philosophical traditions came into sustained contact, creating opportunities for intellectual exchange between very different ways of understanding the world and how to live. Despite his military victories, wealth, and political power, the king remains troubled by a fundamental question: How should he live?

Four delegations (Stoic, Epicurean, Buddhist, and Skeptic) have come to his court to defend their philosophies. All four factions will explain their teachings, lead brief philosophical exercises, and advise court members facing difficult personal decisions involving ambition, grief, family obligations, wrongdoing, illness, and public duty. The Skeptics will also test rival arguments and defend the possibility of living without committing to any comprehensive philosophical system.

Each student will play a character with particular commitments, concerns, and objectives. You will make arguments, question other characters, negotiate, and respond to difficult dilemmas. Your decisions may affect the outcome of the game.

The members of the royal court (between three and nine, depending on the size of your class) will each decide which of the four philosophical factions deserves their allegiance. Each faction seeks to win their support. There is no predetermined winner. The outcome depends on what the characters say and do and on which arguments and practices prove most convincing.

Historical Context

Chronology

5th century BCE	The Buddha teaches in northern India.
399 BCE	Socrates is executed in Athens.
327–325 BCE	Alexander campaigns in Bactria and northwestern India. Pyrrho of Elis is said to have traveled with his army.
c. 306 BCE	Epicurus founds the Garden in Athens.
c. 300 BCE	Zeno of Citium begins teaching at the Painted Stoa.
c. 268 BCE	Arcesilaus becomes head of Plato's Academy and turns it toward skepticism.
c. 268–232 BCE	Aśoka rules the Mauryan Empire and supports Buddhism. Some of his edicts are inscribed in Greek at Kandahar.
c. 250 BCE	Diodotus makes Bactria independent of the Seleucid kingdom.
c. 180 BCE	Greek kings cross the Hindu Kush into Gandhāra and the Punjab.
155 BCE	Carneades the Academic and Diogenes the Stoic travel to Rome as ambassadors of Athens.
c. 155–130 BCE	Menander rules. **The game takes place around 150 BCE.**
1st century BCE	Cicero and Lucretius write in Latin about the Greek schools.
1st–2nd century CE	Seneca, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius write on Stoicism. *The Questions of King Milinda* takes shape.
c. 200 CE	Sextus Empiricus writes the fullest surviving account of Pyrrhonian skepticism.

The last three entries are later than the game. Writers from those centuries are our main sources for what the schools taught, so you will read them, but your character has never heard of them.

From Alexander to the Indo-Greek Kingdoms



Engraved ceremonial disk from the palace treasury at Ai-Khanoum (before 145 BCE).

Nearly two centuries before this gathering, Alexander of Macedon conquered the Persian Empire and marched through Central Asia into northwestern India. After defeating an Indian king named Porus in 326 BCE, he wanted to march farther east, but his exhausted soldiers refused. Alexander

turned back, and after his death in 323 BCE, his generals divided his vast empire into rival kingdoms.

Greek-speaking soldiers, officials, merchants, and settlers remained in the east. They lived among much larger Iranian and Indian populations, preserving some Greek customs while adopting local practices. Greek rule did not arrive in an isolated region: Central Asia had long been connected to Iran and India through trade routes and Persian imperial administration. Greek rulers also maintained contact with Indian kingdoms. Around 305 BCE, Alexander's successor Seleucus reached an agreement with the Indian emperor Chandragupta Maurya, exchanging territory for war elephants. Later, Chandragupta's grandson Aśoka issued proclamations in Greek and Aramaic at Kandahar, in present-day Afghanistan.

By the middle of the third century BCE, Bactria, north of the Hindu Kush mountains, was breaking away from Seleucid rule under a dynasty founded by Diodotus. Its wealth came partly from irrigated farmland along the Oxus River and from trade routes linking Iran, India, and Central Asia. Its cities included Bactra and Ai-Khanoum, where archaeologists have discovered a Greek-style theater and gymnasium alongside temples built in local architectural traditions. The kingdom was prosperous, but its rulers faced rival dynasties and pressure from neighboring powers.

In the early second century BCE, Greek rulers expanded south across the Hindu Kush into Gandhāra and the Punjab, in parts of present-day Afghanistan, Pakistan, and northern India. Historians call these rulers the "Indo-Greeks," although they never formed a single, stable empire. Their territories shifted as kings fought for control of cities, fertile valleys, and trade routes. At Barikot, in the Swat Valley, archaeologists have uncovered substantial Indo-Greek fortifications, Greek-style pottery, and potsherds inscribed with Greek names. Such discoveries reveal communities in which different languages and cultural traditions existed side by side.

Menander and His Kingdom



Silver drachm of King Menander I: royal portrait and Athena Alkidemos.

Menander probably ruled from about 155 to 130 BCE, although the dates remain uncertain. He controlled an important kingdom in Gandhāra and the Punjab, and ancient writers remembered him as a successful conqueror. A later Buddhist text places his court at Sāgala, traditionally identified with modern Sialkot in Pakistan, although the location of his historical capital and the extent of his

territory remain debated. He also faced rival Greek rulers, while Parthian power was expanding to the west and peoples from the Central Asian steppes threatened established kingdoms.

Menander's surviving silver coins offer some of our clearest evidence for his rule. One side bears his portrait and a Greek inscription naming him "King Menander the Savior." The other shows the Greek goddess Athena, armed with a shield and thunderbolt, alongside the same royal title in an Indian language, Prakrit, written in Kharoṣṭhī script. These coins display both Greek traditions of kingship and an effort to communicate with Indian subjects. Menander governed a kingdom whose inhabitants followed different languages, religions, and customs. Greek culture remained influential, but it existed alongside deeply rooted Indian and Iranian traditions.



The Indo-Greek kingdom, c. 150 BCE. Borders approximate.

Philosophical Traditions in the Region

Philosophy was an important part of ancient Greek intellectual life. Beginning with thinkers such as Socrates and Plato, Greek philosophers asked fundamental questions about ethics and reality. Different philosophers developed competing answers to questions about reality and the good life, giving rise to schools that taught not only theories about the world but also ways of living.

By Menander's time, three influential schools were Stoicism, which emphasized virtue and reason, Epicureanism, which emphasized pleasure and tranquility, and Academic skepticism, which questioned whether philosophers could justify their claims to knowledge. These schools developed in Greek intellectual centers such as Athens, but their influence spread eastward through the Greek-speaking kingdoms established after Alexander the Great's conquests. Archaeological discoveries

show that Greek philosophical ideas reached Central Asia well before Menander's reign. At Ai-Khanoum, a Greek city in present-day Afghanistan, archaeologists discovered fragments of a philosophical dialogue discussing Plato's theory of Forms, along with inscriptions containing ethical maxims from Delphi. Greek-language inscriptions issued by the Indian emperor Aśoka provide further evidence of intellectual exchange between Greek and Indian cultures.

Buddhism, which began in northern India about three centuries before Menander, had also reached the northwest. Monks and nuns lived in monastic communities devoted to ethical discipline, meditation, and wisdom, and lay followers supported them. These communities were diverse and did not all hold the same doctrines. The setting thus makes a meeting of these philosophies plausible, though there is no evidence that this particular debate ever took place.



Sculpture of an elderly man, possibly a philosopher. Ai-Khanoum, second century BCE. Photograph: World Imaging (2006), Wikimedia Commons (public domain).

Philosophy as a Way of Life

Understanding and Practice

Ancient philosophical schools did more than develop theories about knowledge, nature, ethics, and politics. Many also cultivated distinctive ways of life. Their members studied together, debated philosophical questions, and practiced habits intended to transform how they thought and acted. Philosophy was not merely something to understand intellectually. It was something to live. The Stoics, Epicureans, and Buddhists each offered a path toward a better life, while the Skeptics emphasized the discipline of questioning beliefs and resisting unjustified certainty.

Athens remained a major center of philosophical activity. Plato's Academy and Aristotle's Lyceum continued alongside newer schools. Epicurus established his Garden as a community of friends devoted to philosophy and modest living. Zeno taught in a public colonnade called the Painted Stoa, from which Stoicism took its name. These schools attracted students from across the Greek-speaking world and sustained traditions of philosophical inquiry for generations. In India, the Buddhist *saṅgha* provided a different but comparable model: a community organized around ethical discipline, meditation, and the pursuit of wisdom.

For these thinkers, questions about how to live were closely connected to questions about reality. Does divine reason govern the universe, as the Stoics believed? Is everything ultimately composed of atoms, as Epicurus argued? Do we possess enduring selves, as the Buddhists questioned? Can we know the answers to such questions, as the Skeptics asked? These disagreements were not merely theoretical. What we believe about nature, death, the self, and the possibility of knowledge influences what we fear, what we desire, and how we behave.

The traditions also share a concern with freeing people from unnecessary suffering, although they disagree about what genuine freedom requires. A king can command armies and still be enslaved by ambition. A parent can love a child while living in constant terror of losing her. A physician can heal patients yet remain distressed by the certainty of death. Ancient philosophers sought to identify the beliefs and habits that produce such suffering and to develop ways of overcoming them. But they also insisted that philosophical therapy must be grounded in careful reasoning. A practice that makes us feel better does not necessarily establish that the beliefs supporting it are true.

The influence of these traditions extends far beyond antiquity. Stoicism shaped Roman moral thought and influenced later ideas about duty, natural law, and human equality. Epicurean naturalism and its criticism of superstition helped inspire Renaissance and Enlightenment thinkers, particularly after the rediscovery of Lucretius. Ancient skepticism influenced philosophers such as Montaigne and Hume and continues to inform debates about knowledge and intellectual humility. Buddhism developed into diverse traditions across Asia and, in modern times, has spread throughout the world. Today, Stoic exercises have also influenced approaches to psychological therapy, while Buddhist meditation has helped inspire contemporary mindfulness practices. Moreover, people today continue to identify as Stoics, Epicureans, Buddhists, and Skeptics, forming communities, debating philosophical ideas, and attempting to put these teachings into practice. These traditions remain important not only as historical philosophies but as living approaches to understanding the world and how to live.

Philosophical Exercises

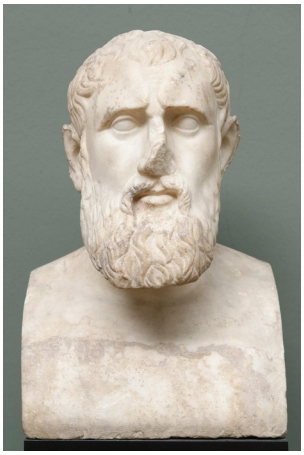
Understanding a philosophical teaching is not the same as being able to apply it when frightened, angry, grieving, or tempted. Ancient philosophers developed exercises intended to make their insights habitual. Through repeated practice, students could learn to examine their judgments, regulate their desires, and respond differently to life’s difficulties. Each faction will demonstrate one brief practice during the game. The exercises fall into several broad kinds:

- **Attention.** Stoics learn to notice their impressions before accepting them as true. Epicureans attend to ordinary pleasures and deliberately recall pleasant experiences. Buddhists observe their breathing, bodily sensations, emotions, and changing mental states.
- **Examining judgments.** Stoics distinguish events from the judgments they make about them, asking whether those judgments are reasonable and what a wise, just, or courageous response would require. They may also review their conduct at the end of each day.

- **Examining desires.** Epicureans distinguish natural and necessary needs from unnecessary or empty desires. They practice contentment with simple pleasures and question whether wealth, fame, and power genuinely contribute to happiness.
- **Questioning philosophical claims.** Skeptics identify hidden assumptions, develop objections to competing doctrines, and examine arguments on opposing sides. When the reasons are insufficient, they withhold judgment without assuming that a doctrine's failure establishes the truth of its opposite.
- **Reflecting on hardship and death.** Stoics anticipate possible misfortunes and prepare to respond virtuously. Epicureans examine whether death itself is something to fear. Buddhists contemplate impermanence and the suffering that arises from attachment.
- **Cultivating concern for others.** Stoics seek to extend their sense of responsibility beyond family and community to humanity as a whole. Epicureans cultivate friendship as an essential source of happiness. Buddhists practice loving-kindness and compassion, including toward strangers and enemies.
- **Shifting perspective.** The Stoic "view from above" places personal troubles within the larger order of nature. Epicureans memorize short philosophical teachings that challenge familiar fears and desires. Skeptics deliberately consider alternative perspectives to loosen the hold of unexamined convictions.

Similar exercises can serve different philosophical purposes. Reflecting on death might prepare a Stoic to fulfill difficult duties, free an Epicurean from needless fear, or help a Buddhist loosen attachment. The exercises therefore cannot be fully understood apart from the philosophical commitments that give them meaning.

The Stoic Way



Zeno of Citium, founder of Stoicism (Roman copy of an earlier Greek portrait).

Zeno of Citium founded Stoicism in Athens around 300 BCE. He had studied with the Cynics, who urged people to free themselves from dependence on wealth, status, and convention. But Zeno thought a good life required more than simplicity: it needed a systematic understanding of nature, reasoning, and ethics. His successors Cleanthes and especially Chrysippus developed Stoicism into a sophisticated philosophy. The Stoics were not simply teaching people to endure misfortune. They

were asking what makes a human life genuinely good and how someone might live well even when fortune turns against them.

Their answer began with nature. The Stoics saw the universe as a single, causally ordered whole, governed by divine reason, or *logos*. God was not a distant ruler who occasionally intervened in events. Instead, divine reason was the rational principle organizing the natural world. Everything that happens belongs to an interconnected order of causes. Human beings are themselves parts of this order. Unlike other animals, we can reflect on our impressions, consider reasons, and deliberately choose how to act. Thus, to "live according to nature" is not simply to follow our impulses. It is to develop the capacities that make us distinctively human: reason and concern for other people.

This explains the Stoics' startling central claim: virtue is the only genuine good, and virtue is sufficient for happiness. Virtue means excellence of character and judgment, not merely obedience to rules. The Stoics traditionally identified four central virtues: wisdom, which discerns what really matters, justice, which treats others fairly, courage, which does what is right despite danger, and self-control, which keeps desires and impulses answerable to reason. These virtues belong together. A courageous action motivated by cruelty, for example, would not be genuinely virtuous.

Why make virtue the sole good? Consider wealth, power, health, or intelligence. Each can be used well or badly. Money can relieve suffering or finance oppression. Political power can protect the vulnerable or serve vanity. Even long life can be spent acting unjustly. What determines whether these things benefit us in the deepest sense is how we choose to use them. By contrast, wisdom and justice are not instruments that become bad when properly exercised. The Stoics therefore hold that a person's happiness—understood as *flourishing*, not a constant pleasant feeling—rests on the quality of their character rather than the accidents of fortune.

The Stoics called everything other than virtue and vice an "indifferent." This sounds as if health, friendship, and survival do not matter, but that is misleading. They distinguished *preferred indifferents*, such as health, security, and a good reputation, from *dispreferred indifferents*, such as illness and poverty. We ordinarily have excellent reasons to pursue the former and avoid the latter. A parent should protect a child; a physician should work to save a patient. Yet success is not guaranteed, and no outcome automatically makes someone good or bad. A physician who does everything reasonably possible may lose a patient; another who acts carelessly may have a patient survive. The Stoics ask us to judge their conduct, not merely their results.

This leads to a famous Stoic discipline: distinguishing what is *up to us* from what is *not up to us*. The later Stoic Epictetus emphasized that our considered judgments, intentions, and choices are ours in a way that reputation, health, victory, and other people's responses are not. We can influence many outcomes, sometimes greatly, without commanding them. Suppose a ruler wants his subjects to respect him. He can rule justly, listen to criticism, and keep promises. He cannot guarantee admiration. A Stoic would encourage him to shift his aim from "Everyone must respect

me" to "I will act in a way worthy of respect." The point is not to abandon difficult projects, but to make the quality of one's effort more important than securing a particular result.

Epictetus sometimes puts the thought more radically: what is not up to us is "nothing to us." He does not mean that we should neglect children, abandon patients, or refuse to resist injustice. He means that external outcomes are not genuine goods or evils that determine whether we live well. That claim offers a form of freedom: an enemy can imprison a just person, but cannot force that person to become unjust. Critics, however, will wonder whether such freedom comes at the cost of denying the real importance of terrible losses.

Stoics also train themselves to examine *impressions* before giving them *assent*—that is, before accepting them as true. Imagine that someone insults you publicly. Anger may arise immediately, along with the thought, "I have been dishonored; I must retaliate." A Stoic pauses: What actually happened? Was the criticism true? Would retaliation be just? The initial feeling may not be chosen, but the judgment that the insult is a catastrophe or demands revenge can be questioned. With practice, the Stoics believe, this changes our emotional habits. Their ideal is not a person without affection or joy, but someone no longer ruled by destructive fear, rage, envy, or greed.

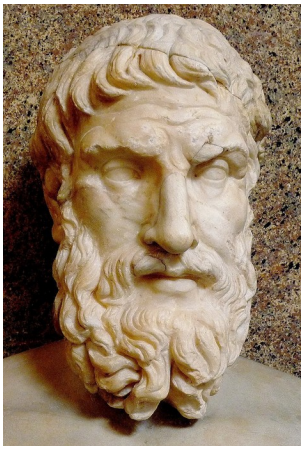
Several exercises help cultivate this discipline. *Negative visualization* means briefly contemplating the loss of something valued, such as a possession, a position, even a loved one. Its purpose is not to become gloomy or stop loving, but to remember that what we cherish is fragile and to appreciate it without treating its permanence as guaranteed. *Preparing for adversity* means anticipating setbacks before they occur and asking what wise, courageous conduct would require. *Evening self-examination*, described by the later Stoic Seneca, means reviewing one's actions: Where did I act well? Where did anger or vanity govern me? What could I do differently tomorrow? These are habits of attention and practical judgment, not magical techniques that instantly remove pain.

Stoicism also insists that human beings are naturally social. We begin by caring for ourselves and those close to us, but reason can enlarge our concern to neighbors, strangers, and ultimately humanity. Justice requires treating others as members of a shared moral community. A Stoic should not pursue calm by withdrawing from responsibility. A ruler should govern fairly; a commander should examine the justice of military orders; a physician should care conscientiously for patients. None can promise success, but each can act with integrity. Stoic acceptance concerns what happens beyond our control, not an excuse for failing to do what is right.

The Stoic approach has important implications for political and personal life. A ruler might be encouraged to recognize that another conquest cannot make life genuinely good. Someone struggling with inherited obligations might be urged to fulfill legitimate duties without surrendering independent judgment. A parent might be encouraged to love deeply while recognizing that a child's future can never be guaranteed. Yet these counsels raise serious difficulties. Can virtue really make a life happy amid torture, bereavement, or humiliation? Can the death of a beloved child be "indifferent" in any morally acceptable sense? And if the universe is governed by fate, how can our decisions be genuinely our own?

Questions for the Stoics: Is virtue really sufficient for happiness? Does the distinction between what is and is not up to us promote responsible action or resignation? Can one care deeply about people while insisting that their fate is not a genuine good or evil? Must Stoicism's ethical outlook depend on belief in a providential universe?

The Epicurean Way



Epicurus, founder of the Garden (ancient marble portrait).

Epicurus founded his philosophical community, the Garden, in Athens around 306 BCE. Unlike many philosophical schools of his time, the Garden welcomed women, enslaved people, and people of different social ranks. Its members studied philosophy together, shared meals, celebrated friendships, and sought to live peacefully. Epicurus believed philosophy should not be merely an intellectual exercise. Its purpose was to help people live happier lives by freeing them from unnecessary suffering. He compared philosophy to medicine: just as medicine treats diseases of the body, philosophy should cure the fears, desires, and mistaken beliefs that disturb the mind.

Epicurus's central ethical claim is that pleasure is the highest good and the ultimate aim of life. This position is called *hedonism*. Epicurus thought its foundation was obvious in human nature. From birth, living creatures seek pleasure and avoid pain. We do not need an argument to establish that pain is bad or pleasure is good. Rather, we experience these things directly. But Epicurus did not mean that we should chase every immediate enjoyment. He distinguished between fleeting pleasures and the more secure happiness that comes from freedom from bodily pain (*aponia*) and mental disturbance (*ataraxia*, or tranquility). The best life is not one of constant excitement, but one in which our needs are satisfied, our minds are peaceful, and we can enjoy the pleasures available to us.

Why not pursue every pleasure? Because pleasures have consequences. A lavish feast may bring immediate enjoyment but cause illness afterward. Political success may bring prestige but also anxiety, enemies, and danger. A person might endure the discomfort of exercise or medical treatment to avoid greater suffering later. Epicureans therefore emphasize *prudence*: the ability to consider the likely pleasures and pains of our choices. Sometimes wisdom requires accepting pain or declining an attractive pleasure. Moreover, a peaceful life still contains positive pleasures:

conversation, music, friendship, good food, and the enjoyment of learning. Epicurus did not reject these delights. He argued that we enjoy them most securely when our happiness does not depend on continually acquiring more.

One of the most important Epicurean practices is examining our desires. Epicurus distinguished three kinds:

- **Natural and necessary desires:** Basic needs such as food, shelter, and security. These are relatively easy to satisfy, and meeting them removes important sources of suffering.
- **Natural but unnecessary desires:** Enjoyments such as elaborate meals or luxurious comforts. These can enrich life, but happiness does not require them.
- **Empty desires:** Pursuits such as unlimited wealth, fame, power, or glory. These arise from mistaken beliefs about what makes life good and have no natural limit.

The distinction matters because some desires can be satisfied, while others continually recreate dissatisfaction**.** Hunger disappears after a sufficient meal, but the craving for greater prestige may continue indefinitely. Someone who believes happiness requires being the richest person in the kingdom has made tranquility extraordinarily difficult to achieve. Epicureans therefore practice recognizing when they have enough. They might deliberately eat a simple meal and notice that it satisfies their hunger, or reflect on whether an expensive luxury would really improve their lives. The purpose is not extreme self-denial. It is freedom from unnecessary dependence on fortune.

Friendship occupies a central place in the Epicurean way of life. Epicurus regarded friendship as one of the greatest sources of happiness and security. Friends offer practical assistance during hardship, companionship during good times, and confidence that we will not face life's difficulties alone. But Epicurean friendship involves more than calculating what others can provide. Genuine friends develop affection, trust, honesty, and concern for each other. They can take pleasure in another person's happiness and willingly endure hardships on a friend's behalf. Friendship also requires cultivation: sharing experiences, offering assistance, keeping promises, and sometimes correcting one another's mistakes. Indeed, later Epicureans practiced *frank criticism*, helping friends recognize destructive desires and harmful habits.

The Epicureans also valued virtues such as justice, courage, moderation, and honesty. However, they disagreed with the Stoics about why these qualities matter. For Stoics, virtue is the only genuine good. For Epicureans, virtues are essential because they make a pleasant and peaceful life possible. An unjust person may gain wealth through deception, but must then worry about exposure, punishment, and betrayal. Greed and dishonesty also destroy the trust on which friendship depends. Justice, by contrast, creates security through agreements not to harm one another. Epicurus held that justice arises from arrangements of mutual advantage rather than from an eternal moral law. A difficult question follows: if justice serves happiness, what should someone do when wrongdoing seems profitable and discovery unlikely?

Epicureanism also has important political implications. Epicurus generally discouraged the pursuit of public office, military glory, and political power. Such ambitions expose people to conflict, fear, competition, and responsibilities beyond their control. The Garden offered an alternative: a small community of friends living with modest needs. Nevertheless, Epicureanism does not require complete indifference to society. Peaceful communities, reliable laws, and protection from violence make happiness possible. Epicureans can have good reasons to support institutions that provide security. They must still confront a difficult problem: might public responsibility sometimes require sacrificing one's own tranquility for the welfare of others?

Epicurean ethics depends on a distinctive account of nature. Unlike the Stoics, who believed the universe was ordered by divine reason, Epicurus argued that everything consists fundamentally of atoms moving through empty space. Worlds arise through natural processes rather than divine planning. The soul, too, is material and perishes when the body dies. Epicurus did believe that gods exist, but he understood them as perfectly blessed beings who neither govern human affairs nor punish wrongdoing. A genuinely happy god would have no reason to become angry, jealous, or preoccupied with human conflicts. Studying nature therefore has a therapeutic purpose: understanding natural causes frees us from the fear that earthquakes, storms, illness, or other misfortunes express divine anger.

This understanding of nature also supports Epicurus's famous argument that death is nothing to us. In a letter to his disciple Menoeceus, Epicurus outlines his distinctive perspective on death:

> Only a fool says that he fears death because it causes pain ahead of time, not because it will cause pain when it comes. For something that causes no trouble when present causes only a groundless pain when merely expected. So death, the most terrifying of evils, is nothing to us, because as long as we exist death is not present, whereas when death is present we do not exist. It is nothing to those who live (since to them it does not exist) and it is nothing to those who have died (since they no longer exist).
>
> *Epicurus, Letter to Menoeceus §125, trans. Peter Saint-Andre (2011), CC0.*

We commonly imagine death as an experience of darkness, loneliness, or deprivation. But Epicurus argues that all experience requires sensation, and sensation ends when we die. As long as we exist, death has not arrived. But, once death arrives, we no longer exist to experience anything. Being dead cannot therefore be painful or frightening in the way that illness or injury can be. This does not mean that dying is always painless, or that the deaths of loved ones cause no grief. It means that death itself is not an experience we must dread.

Yet a powerful objection remains. Even if death is not experienced, might it harm us by depriving us of years of valuable life? Someone who dies young loses opportunities for friendship, pleasure, and discovery. Epicureans respond that happiness need not depend on an endlessly extended lifespan. Once we understand the limits of our needs and enjoy a tranquil life, we need not demand additional years to make that life complete. Whether this response succeeds is one of the most important philosophical questions facing Epicureanism.

Epicurean practice seeks to make these insights habitual. Practitioners examine their desires, calculate the likely pleasures and pains of different choices, and remind themselves of the limits of what they need. They deliberately appreciate ordinary pleasures rather than constantly seeking new ones. They cultivate friendships, reflect on the pleasures they have experienced, and recall happy memories during difficult times. Epicurus himself reportedly found comfort during his final illness by remembering philosophical conversations with friends. These exercises are meant to change not merely what people believe, but how they respond emotionally to hardship and uncertainty.

Epicureans also memorized short teachings that could be recalled during moments of fear. One famous summary, known as the *Fourfold Remedy*, teaches that the gods need not be feared, death need not trouble us, what is genuinely good is relatively easy to obtain, and suffering can be endured or managed. The point is not that every pain is trivial or that life is free of tragedy. Rather, Epicurus believes much of our unhappiness comes from false beliefs that amplify unavoidable suffering. Philosophy helps us distinguish real needs from imagined necessities and recover the ability to enjoy life as it is.

Questions for the Epicureans: Is pleasure really the only genuine good? Can death harm someone by depriving them of a valuable future? Can friendship be valued for its own sake if pleasure is the ultimate goal? Is justice merely an agreement for mutual advantage? Does the pursuit of tranquility justify withdrawing from political responsibilities when other people need our help?

The Buddhist Way



Standing Buddha from Gandhāra (1st–3rd century CE; later than Menander).

Buddhism began in northern India with the teachings of Siddhattha Gotama (in Sanskrit, Siddhārtha Gautama), the Buddha, probably during the fifth century BCE. According to tradition, he grew up surrounded by comfort but became deeply troubled by the realities of aging, illness, and death. He abandoned his privileged life to seek a solution to human suffering. After experimenting with severe ascetic practices, he rejected both self-indulgence and extreme self-denial. His alternative was the Middle Way: a disciplined path of ethical conduct, meditation, and wisdom. Like the Greek philosophical schools, Buddhism asks how human beings can live well. But its answer begins with a radical examination of suffering and the mistaken assumptions underlying our ordinary experience.

The central Buddhist teaching is organized around the Four Noble Truths:

1. Life involves suffering, dissatisfaction, and insecurity.
2. Suffering has causes, especially craving and ignorance.
3. These causes can be eliminated, bringing suffering to an end.
4. The Noble Eightfold Path leads to this cessation.

The structure resembles a medical diagnosis: identify the problem, discover its causes, establish that a cure is possible, and prescribe a treatment. Buddhism is therefore not simply pessimistic. Its emphasis on suffering serves an ultimately hopeful purpose: suffering has causes, and human beings can transform the conditions that produce it.

The first truth concerns dukkha, usually translated as "suffering." It includes obvious experiences such as illness, grief, and physical pain, but also subtler forms of dissatisfaction. Even pleasant experiences are unstable. A delicious meal ends, a friendship changes, and good health eventually declines. Happiness becomes precarious when we demand that such experiences continue indefinitely. Buddhism does not deny that pleasure is real. Rather, it questions whether anything impermanent can provide the lasting security we seek. Even success can create anxiety as we struggle to preserve what we have gained.

The second truth identifies craving as a central cause of suffering. Craving differs from ordinary wishing or caring because it involves an insistence that reality satisfy our demands. Buddhist teachings distinguish craving for pleasant experiences, craving for continued existence or a particular identity, and craving for nonexistence or escape from unwanted conditions. These tendencies are closely connected with greed, hatred or aversion, and ignorance—the three unwholesome roots. We grasp at what attracts us, resist what threatens us, and misunderstand the nature of what we pursue. Consequently, even when our desires are satisfied, new desires and fears arise.

Why do we crave so persistently? Buddhists argue that we misunderstand how reality works. One of their central teachings is impermanence: all conditioned things arise, change, and pass away. Another is dependent origination: things occur because of causes and conditions, rather than existing independently. A plant depends on soil, water, sunlight, and countless other factors. Similarly, our moods, beliefs, relationships, and identities depend on changing circumstances. Nothing remains entirely under our control. Suffering intensifies when we demand permanence and independence from a world that provides neither.

This leads to Buddhism's most philosophically challenging teaching: no-self, or anattā. We ordinarily imagine ourselves as enduring individuals who possess experiences, make decisions, and remain fundamentally the same through change. Buddhists challenge this assumption. The Buddha analyzed persons into five changing groups of processes, traditionally called the five aggregates: bodily form, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness. Our bodies change, feelings come and go, thoughts arise and disappear, and awareness depends on changing conditions. Where, within these processes, is the permanent, independent self that supposedly owns and controls them?

The argument is not merely that people change over time. Buddhists also observe that we cannot completely command our bodies, emotions, or thoughts. If these things constituted an independent self, why would they so often behave contrary to our wishes? The point is not necessarily that persons do not exist in any meaningful sense. We can still identify people, make promises, and hold one another responsible. Rather, Buddhism challenges the idea of an unchanging self existing independently of the physical and psychological processes that constitute a person.

The no-self teaching also has an ethical purpose. When we identify strongly with an enduring "me" and regard things as "mine," we become possessive, defensive, and fearful. Criticism threatens our identity, other people's successes threaten our importance, and possessions become extensions of ourselves. Recognizing that the self is a changing, dependent process may weaken these reactions. It can also enlarge compassion. If our own well-being depends on countless others, and if other people experience suffering much as we do, there is less reason to regard our interests as uniquely important.

Traditional Buddhism connects these teachings with kamma (in Sanskrit, karma) and rebirth. Kamma refers primarily to intentional actions and their consequences. Actions motivated by greed, hatred, or delusion reinforce harmful tendencies, while generosity, kindness, and wisdom cultivate more beneficial ones. The traditional teaching also holds that beings undergo repeated birth and death until liberation. But if there is no permanent self, what continues from one life to another? Buddhists appeal to causal continuity: later experiences arise from earlier conditions without requiring an unchanging soul that travels between bodies. Whether this adequately explains personal identity and responsibility remains controversial.

The third Noble Truth promises that suffering can cease through the elimination of craving and ignorance. This liberation is called nibbāna (in Sanskrit, nirvāṇa). It is often described through the image of a fire going out when its fuel is exhausted. What disappears is not necessarily ordinary sensation or the capacity to care, but the greed, hatred, and delusion that perpetuate suffering. A liberated person may still experience bodily pain, but no longer responds to it through craving, resentment, and mistaken identification. Liberation is therefore more profound than temporary relaxation. Nibbāna involves a transformation of how reality is understood and experienced.

The fourth Noble Truth describes the Noble Eightfold Path: right view, intention, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and concentration. These eight elements are commonly grouped into wisdom, ethical conduct, and mental cultivation. They reinforce one another. Wise understanding helps people recognize harmful desires; ethical conduct reduces remorse and conflict; meditation cultivates the attention needed to understand experience clearly. Buddhism thus requires more than accepting philosophical arguments. Understanding must become part of one's habitual way of perceiving and responding to the world.

Ethical conduct begins with practices such as refraining from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, and intoxication that encourages heedlessness. Buddhists also cultivate generosity, patience, and compassion. These practices protect others while weakening one's own greed and hostility. A

person who repeatedly acts dishonestly, for example, strengthens the habits of deception and self-protection that Buddhism seeks to overcome. Ethical discipline is therefore not merely obedience to rules. Rather, it is part of transforming character.

Meditation is equally important. In mindfulness practice, a person observes bodily sensations, feelings, thoughts, and mental states as they arise and pass away. The breath provides a useful starting point. Attention wanders, thoughts appear, and sensations change, often without deliberate choice. Instead of immediately identifying with every thought or reacting to every feeling, the practitioner learns to observe these events more carefully. A thought such as “I am a failure” can be recognized as a changing mental event rather than an unquestionable description of reality.

Mindfulness is intended to produce insight, not merely calm. Practitioners investigate impermanence, dissatisfaction, and no-self through direct observation. Concentration practices also develop sustained attention and, in traditional Buddhist teaching, can lead to deep states of meditative absorption known as jhānas. These states cultivate mental stability and well-being, supporting the deeper investigation of experience. Understanding Buddhist doctrines intellectually is important, but meditation is meant to change how those doctrines are actually experienced.

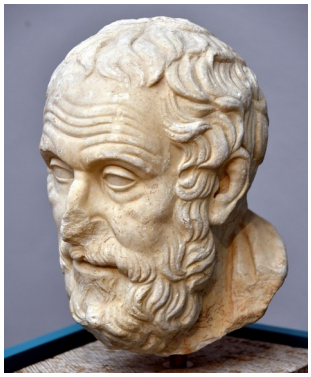
Buddhists also cultivate loving-kindness, compassion, appreciative joy, and equanimity. Loving-kindness meditation involves deliberately wishing well-being for oneself and others, including strangers and difficult people. Such practices challenge the tendency to divide humanity into those whose happiness matters and those whose suffering can be ignored. Nonattachment does not mean indifference. Ideally, it allows someone to love generously without demanding possession, permanence, or control over the beloved.

Buddhism nevertheless faces demanding philosophical questions. Does observing that experiences change establish that there is no enduring self? If persons are only changing processes, how can responsibility persist over time or across rebirths? Can meditation provide reliable knowledge of reality, or might unusual experiences be misinterpreted? And can someone abandon attachment while remaining deeply committed to family, friendship, and public responsibilities?

The Buddhist way of life combines an ambitious philosophical diagnosis with sustained practical training. Its distinctive claim is that suffering is not merely something unfortunate that happens to us. Much of it arises from our habitual ways of interpreting ourselves and the world. By cultivating wisdom, ethical conduct, and meditation, Buddhists seek to transform those habits and develop a life characterized by freedom, compassion, and understanding.

Questions for the Buddhists: Does impermanence make ordinary happiness fundamentally unsatisfactory? Is the no-self doctrine convincing, and how does it affect moral responsibility? Can nonattachment preserve deep love and commitment? Does meditation provide evidence for Buddhist philosophical claims? Must one accept kamma and rebirth to benefit from the Buddhist path?

The Skeptical Way



Carneades (Roman copy, 2nd century CE, of a portrait from around 150 BCE).

Ancient skepticism is more than the claim that nothing can be known. Indeed, skeptics need not affirm even that claim. The Greek word from which "skeptic" derives means an inquirer or investigator. Ancient skeptics questioned whether human beings possess the knowledge they confidently claim to have. They examined arguments, exposed weaknesses in accepted beliefs, and resisted the temptation to reach conclusions before the evidence justified them. Skepticism was not simply a philosophical theory. It was a discipline of inquiry that might transform how people think, act, and respond to uncertainty.

Ancient skepticism developed along two related but distinct paths: Academic skepticism and Pyrrhonian skepticism. Both challenged the confidence of philosophers who claimed to have discovered the truth about reality, morality, or happiness. Both explored the possibility of suspending judgment, or withholding assent. But they differed in their methods, historical development, and understanding of what a skeptical life might involve.

Academic skepticism developed within Plato's Academy in Athens. Around 268 BCE, Arcesilaus became its leader and redirected the school toward the questioning methods associated with Socrates. In Plato's dialogues, Socrates repeatedly examines people who claim to understand justice, courage, or virtue, only to reveal contradictions or weaknesses in their accounts. Arcesilaus adopted a similar approach. Rather than defend a comprehensive philosophical system, he challenged the arguments offered by other schools, especially the Stoics. His successors continued this tradition, most notably Carneades, who lived during the second century BCE and became famous for his intellectual brilliance.

The Academics' most important target was the Stoic theory of knowledge. The Stoics believed that certain impressions are so clear and accurately formed that a properly trained mind can recognize them as trustworthy. Such impressions could provide a secure foundation for knowledge. The skeptics challenged this confidence. Consider how convincing dreams can be while we experience them, or how one person can mistake an identical twin for another. If false impressions can seem just as compelling as true ones, how can we reliably distinguish them? The skeptic does not need to prove that all impressions are false. It is enough to challenge the Stoic claim that some impressions possess an unmistakable mark of truth.

This illustrates an important skeptical practice: arguing from an opponent's own assumptions. Suppose someone claims that wisdom requires never accepting anything that might be false. The skeptic might then argue that, because even convincing appearances can mislead us, wisdom requires withholding judgment. The resulting difficulty arises from the opponent's commitments, not from an alternative theory the skeptic has asserted. This method allows skeptics to challenge philosophical doctrines without claiming to possess a superior account of reality.

Carneades developed this approach with extraordinary sophistication. He examined competing theories of the good life, including the Stoic claim that virtue alone is sufficient for happiness and the Epicurean claim that pleasure is the highest good. He asked difficult questions about their assumptions and consequences. If health and survival are not genuine goods, why should a Stoic ordinarily prefer them? If pleasure is the highest good, why should an Epicurean accept serious suffering for the sake of justice? The purpose of such objections was not necessarily to establish that the rival doctrines were false. It was to show that their defenders had not adequately justified them.

But skepticism confronts an obvious difficulty. If we cannot attain certainty, how can we decide what to do? Should we refuse to act until every philosophical question has been settled? Carneades responded by distinguishing certainty from what appears persuasive or credible. An impression might provide reasonable grounds for action without guaranteeing truth. Some impressions are more convincing than others, especially when they have survived careful examination and agree with other relevant evidence. A physician may reasonably choose a treatment after considering the available evidence, even while recognizing that the diagnosis could be mistaken.

There is scholarly disagreement about whether Carneades personally endorsed this approach or developed it chiefly to answer the Stoics on their own terms. Either way, it demonstrates that skepticism need not mean paralysis. Someone can act on the best available considerations while remaining open to correction. The skeptic's distinctive attitude is not indifference to evidence but resistance to claiming more certainty than the evidence warrants.

The second tradition, Pyrrhonian skepticism, takes its name from Pyrrho of Elis, who lived in the fourth and early third centuries BCE. Ancient accounts report that Pyrrho accompanied Alexander the Great's expedition eastward, possibly encountering Indian philosophical practitioners. Whether these encounters influenced his views remains uncertain. Pyrrho became associated with an unusual tranquility and a refusal to make confident claims about the nature of things. His example suggested that freedom from rigid opinions might itself make life better.

The more systematic Pyrrhonian tradition developed considerably later, beginning with Aenesidemus in the first century BCE. Our fullest surviving account comes from Sextus Empiricus, who wrote centuries after Pyrrho and after Menander's lifetime. These later writings should not be treated as descriptions of a fully developed school already operating in the second century BCE. Nevertheless, they illuminate an influential ancient skeptical approach to philosophy as a way of life.

The Pyrrhonian method consists in setting opposing arguments or appearances against one another. Consider whether an event is good or bad by nature. One person regards political power as the greatest achievement; another considers it a source of suffering. Different societies praise different customs, and the same circumstances can appear desirable to one person and intolerable to another. When the arguments on opposing sides seem equally convincing, the skeptic suspends judgment rather than arbitrarily choosing a position. This does not establish that both positions are false or that the truth is unknowable. It means that the inquiry has not yet yielded adequate grounds for deciding.

Later Pyrrhonists developed several techniques for producing this kind of examination. They compared conflicting appearances, asked whether an argument rested on an unsupported assumption, and investigated whether a proposed justification ultimately depended on circular reasoning or an endless chain of further justifications. These techniques were not supposed to prove that every claim is mistaken. Their purpose was to expose the limits of the arguments offered and prevent premature conviction.

For Pyrrhonists, this practice could have an unexpected psychological benefit: tranquility. People often become distressed because they believe certain things are inherently good or bad and must therefore be obtained or avoided at all costs. Someone convinced that reputation is indispensable to happiness may suffer terribly from criticism. Someone who regards political defeat as an absolute evil may live in constant fear. By suspending judgment about such supposed goods and evils, skeptics may loosen their attachment to them. According to the later Pyrrhonian account, tranquility can follow suspension of judgment, sometimes as an unintended consequence rather than something secured through deliberate striving.

Yet skeptics do not claim that ordinary pain or discomfort disappears. Hunger still motivates eating, and illness can still cause suffering. The proposed benefit concerns the additional distress generated by dogmatic judgments about what these experiences mean. Nor should skeptics dogmatically insist that suspension always produces tranquility; that would risk turning their practical discovery into another unexamined doctrine.

How, then, does someone live without settled philosophical beliefs? The later Pyrrhonists described four practical guides: the appearances presented by the senses, the demands of human nature, the customs and laws of one’s community, and the skills acquired through experience. A hungry person eats, a physician treats patients, and a citizen can follow established procedures without claiming certain knowledge of ultimate reality or the nature of justice. How many ordinary beliefs the skeptic may retain remains controversial. The central distinction is between living according to how things appear and claiming to know their ultimate nature.

Skepticism therefore involves several practical disciplines. A skeptic learns to listen carefully to opposing arguments, identify hidden assumptions, distinguish convincing evidence from certainty, and acknowledge unresolved questions. Skeptics may deliberately construct the strongest objections to positions they find attractive. They must also resist becoming mere contrarians. Showing that an

argument for a doctrine fails does not establish that the opposite doctrine is true. Nor does skepticism require pretending that every disagreement is equally balanced. When evidence favors one conclusion, a skeptic should recognize its force without exaggerating what has been established.

Skepticism faces serious ethical challenges. Can someone suspend judgment about justice while remaining committed to fair treatment? Can one act courageously without believing that courage is genuinely good? Could following local customs lead a skeptic to cooperate with injustice? And if tranquility becomes the skeptic's goal, has skepticism simply adopted another controversial theory of the good life?

These difficulties reveal what makes skepticism a distinctive philosophical practice. Stoics offer a theory of virtue, Epicureans a theory of pleasure, and Buddhists a path toward liberation from suffering. Skeptics ask whether the arguments establishing these conclusions are sufficiently strong. Their way of life emphasizes intellectual humility, continuing inquiry, and freedom from unwarranted conviction. Its promise is that we may live more wisely by recognizing the limits of what we know. Its challenge is to show that such humility can guide a meaningful life without dissolving into indecision.

Questions for the skeptics: Can suspension of judgment promote tranquility without becoming another dogmatic commitment? How can someone act responsibly while withholding judgment about right and wrong? Does skepticism encourage intellectual humility or undermine genuine conviction? If a skeptic encounters compelling evidence for a philosophical doctrine, should that skeptic accept it? What distinguishes reasoned skepticism from simply refusing to take a position?

History and the Readings

This encounter is fictional. Menander was real, and so were the Greek and Indian communities of his kingdom. The Hellenistic schools were real intellectual movements, and there is evidence that Greek philosophy reached the eastern Hellenistic world. But there is no evidence that Buddhist, Stoic, Epicurean, and Skeptic delegations competed at his court. The game uses this setting to explore genuine philosophical disagreements.

Pedagogical Goals

By the end of the game, you should be able to:

- Explain and compare four ancient approaches to happiness, suffering, and the good life.
- Apply philosophical ideas to difficult decisions involving relationships, ambition, responsibility, and loss.
- Evaluate philosophical arguments using primary sources, serious objections, and evidence.
- Understand how philosophy can be practiced in everyday life, while distinguishing the usefulness of a practice from the truth of the philosophy behind it.

Gameplay



Greek procession leading a pig to sacrifice, from an Attic vase (c. 510–500 BCE).

The game unfolds in two class meetings: a preparation session and a session at Menander's court. The outline below explains what happens, but it is not a minute-by-minute script. The Game Master must monitor the clock, rigorously enforce time limits, and announce transitions promptly. Cut off overlong presentations or exchanges to protect time for the dilemmas, final judgments, faction ratings, and announcement of results.

Factions

The game has four philosophical factions and one group of undecided court members.

Stoics. They defend the claim that virtue is the only genuine good and is sufficient for happiness.

Epicureans. They defend the claim that pleasure, understood chiefly as freedom from bodily pain and mental disturbance, is the highest good.

Buddhists. They defend the claim that suffering arises from craving and ignorance and can be ended through ethical conduct, meditation, and wisdom.

Skeptics. They test the other schools' arguments and defend a way of life built on inquiry, suspension of judgment, and acting on what appears credible.

The court. King Menander and members of his household and government are "indeterminates." They begin uncommitted, question the philosophers, bring them personal dilemmas, and finally give their allegiance to one school. Only court members vote.

Preparing for the Game

In its full version, the game has nine court members and twenty-one philosophers. Smaller classes use fewer roles, and your instructor will tell you which characters are in play; the Roles section lists them all. Read your role sheet and assigned sources in advance. Keep private information on your role sheet confidential unless you choose to disclose it in character.

All four philosophical factions. Each prepares a brief explanation of its philosophy and a short exercise for the court. You may use or adapt a suggested exercise in your handout, or develop a new one grounded in your school's teachings and sources, including additional research. Decide together who will present, guide the practice, answer questions, and discuss patronage. Everyone should contribute.

The Skeptics explain and defend their approach and lead their single required practice, the Skeptical Examination: one cogent philosophical objection to a central claim of each other school. Their distinctive emphasis is testing rival arguments and showing how to act without claiming certainty. All four factions may question and advise the court. Do not assume opposing arguments always balance.

Court members. Read your character's background and prepare questions for the philosophers. During play, the Game Master gives each of you one dilemma card; you need not prepare its answer in advance. Philon and Mālatī also rehearse the opening ceremony supplied with their roles.

Game Phases

Session 1: Preparation

Your instructor may introduce the four schools through lectures, discussions, or other activities. Factions prepare a philosophically grounded exercise and decide who will present. The court prepares questions for each school.

Session 2: The Court of Menander

1. Opening ceremony. Philon and Mālatī open the court with the supplied prayer, tear one paper pig, and call for a bow to the king. Menander welcomes the delegations and promises freedom to criticize. A nod, seated bow, or observation is acceptable. If someone objects, allow a brief response and continue.

2. Philosophical presentations and exercises. Each of the four factions explains and defends its approach to living and demonstrates one chosen exercise. Each faction decides which members speak and lead, and all may question rival arguments. The court may ask questions. Keep presentations concise so discussion can follow.

3. Deliberation on the court's dilemmas. The Game Master gives each court member one dilemma card. In smaller courts, all members read their dilemmas aloud; in larger courts, selected members do so. Factions recommend concrete actions and explain their reasoning using the readings. Court members and rival factions may challenge the answers; any faction member may question or advise. In a court of seven or nine, there is time to hear only four or five dilemmas publicly. The other court members seek advice during the negotiation.

4. Negotiation. Players may meet privately or in small groups to test arguments, seek allies, and negotiate. Court members may approach one another directly. No one can bind another character or trade favors for allegiance. Consider whether the discussion changes your advice or commitments.

5. Final judgments. Every court member marks an allegiance ballot. In a court of three to five, each member then names the school chosen, gives a reason, and says what he or she will do about the dilemma. In a court of seven or nine, members vote first; those who chose the same school then confer briefly and select one representative to explain their reasons. Menander awards royal patronage. Each philosophical faction submits one collective rating of the court's Philosophical Deliberation. The Game Master tallies allegiances, averages the four ratings, and announces the results.

Rules for Participation

Stay in character, make arguments grounded in the assigned readings, and listen to other players. Faction members defend their school's central commitments but may reconsider how those commitments apply to a particular case. Court members may change their minds. Challenge claims, not classmates. The Game Master may redirect a discussion, limit speeches, or adjust the pace to preserve time for meaningful interaction and final decisions.

Voting and Endgame Conditions

Only court members cast allegiance votes; faction members do not vote. Menander has one vote, like every other court member; he separately decides royal patronage. Every court member must select one of the four factions: Stoicism, Epicureanism, Buddhism, or Skepticism. Court members cannot abstain or select no faction. A voter with reservations chooses the faction whose reasons seem strongest. A vote for Skepticism is not a way of declining to decide. It should rest on a reasoned suspension of judgment, and the voter should be able to name the competing considerations that remain unresolved.

Primary objective for all four factions. The faction receiving more allegiance votes than any rival wins an outright victory; an absolute majority is not required. If two or more factions tie for the highest vote total, each tied faction earns a partial victory. For example, with five court members, a 2–1–1–1 split gives the faction with two votes an outright victory, while a 2–2–1 split gives both leaders partial victories. Every court member, including Menander, has one vote.

Secondary objective: royal patronage. Each of the four factions seeks to convince Menander to award it one year of royal patronage. Menander may choose Stoicism, Epicureanism, Buddhism, or Skepticism. His patronage decision is separate from his personal allegiance vote and from the court's overall result.

Court objective: Philosophical Deliberation. King Menander's court takes pride in being a center of intellectual and philosophical excellence. All court members share the goal of demonstrating that the court is a place where difficult questions are examined thoughtfully, competing arguments are taken seriously, and decisions are guided by reason rather than prejudice or personal preference. The court members win together if they demonstrate these qualities throughout the game. At the end, each of the four philosophical factions gives the court one whole-number rating from 1 to 5, assessing how carefully its members understood the philosophies, evaluated arguments, raised thoughtful questions, and justified their decisions. Factions must judge the quality of the court's deliberations, not whether its members agreed with them. After the factions submit their ratings, the Game Master will announce the court's average rating.

Debriefing

After the game, usually at the start of the next class, you will step out of your role. You will be free to say what you really think of the philosophy you defended or chose, to compare your court's verdict with what later tradition says about Menander, and to consider which of these ideas and practices, if any, are worth keeping.

Roles

The full cast appears below. Which characters are in play depends on the size of your class. Characters marked “historical” are based on real people, though none is known to have attended a gathering like this one; all others are fictional.

The Court

Menander. King of the Indo-Greek kingdom. Historical.
Agathocleia. Queen and wife of Menander. A historical queen; the marriage is conjecture.
Demetrios. Royal heir, son of Menander and Agathocleia.
Philon. Commander of the royal army.
Mālatī. Physician to the royal household.
Dionysios. Treasurer of the royal household.
Kalyāṇī. Frontier envoy and interpreter.
Dāmodara. Royal magistrate for civic disputes.
Helena. Royal tutor and keeper of records.

Stoics

Antipater of Tarsus. Stoic teacher. Historical: head of the Stoic school in Athens.
Diodora. Merchant and Stoic practitioner.
Nikanor. Former civic official and Stoic practitioner.
Leon. Envoy and Stoic practitioner.
Thaleia. Teacher and interpreter in Sāgala.

Epicureans

Apollodorus. Epicurean teacher. Historical: head of the Garden in Athens.
Kleia. Artisan and Epicurean practitioner.
Myrto. Member of an Epicurean community.
Philonides of Laodicea. Epicurean scholar with court experience. Historical.
Eirene. Former shrine attendant and Epicurean inquirer.

Buddhists

Nāgasena. Buddhist monk and teacher. Known from *The Questions of King Milinda*.
Sumanā. Buddhist nun.
Nandā. Buddhist lay follower.
Vijaya. Buddhist householder and former official.
Rakkhita. Former soldier and Buddhist lay follower.
Kusumā. Lay benefactor and steward of community gifts.

Skeptics

Carneades. Academic skeptic. Historical: head of Plato’s Academy in Athens.
Damaris. Practical skeptic and traveler.
Clitomachus. Carthaginian student of Carneades. Historical.
Menodora. Physician and skeptical inquirer.
Philista. Market mediator and skeptical inquirer.

Primary Sources

Supplementary reading for the delegations to King Menander's court

Use this reader only if it helps you prepare your role. You are not expected to read every item. Begin with the texts named on your role sheet; you can also consult another school's sources when developing an objection.

What is included. Part I presents selected passages from freely reusable English translations and modern classroom renderings; some works appear in substantial extracts, not in full. Part II supplies clickable links to the remaining passages and longer works identified in the role sheets, so all four factions can locate their sources without purchasing a book.

How to read historically. Epictetus, Seneca, Cicero, Sextus Empiricus, and several translations are later than Menander. They can illuminate a school's arguments but should not be represented as actual speeches delivered at Sāgala around 150 BCE. The Questions of King Milinda is also a later literary account, not a verbatim court transcript.

Reuse. Printed passages below use translations in the U.S. public domain (or explicitly dedicated to the public domain), along with classroom renderings of ancient texts. Modern Buddhist translations linked in Part II are free to read, but their terms of redistribution can vary; those are linked rather than copied. Older translations generally retain their original wording. Bracketed reading prompts are editorial, not part of the ancient texts.

Part I: Selected Primary-Source Passages

A. Stoicism

The following passages illustrate central Stoic teachings about virtue, nature, control, relationships, and philosophical practice. Some come from early Stoicism; others come from Roman philosophers who lived centuries after the game's setting. The later passages help explain how Stoic ideas could be applied to everyday life.

Cleanthes, Hymn to Zeus — The rational order of nature

Reading prompt: Why do the Stoics believe that living according to nature is the key to happiness? Does their philosophy depend on a universe governed by divine reason?

> Zeus, highest among the gods, known by many names,
> you guide the whole world through a common law.
> It is right for mortals to speak to you,
> for we are your offspring;
> of all the creatures living on the earth,
> we have a share in the power to answer you.

[. . .]
Yet people who long for what is good
fail to hear the law that guides the world.
Some struggle endlessly for fame;
some chase wealth without restraint;
others pursue the pleasures of the body.
They hurry down their separate paths
and find the opposite of what they seek.

Zeus, giver of all, lord of the thunderbolt,
save us from the ignorance that harms us.
Clear it from our minds, and let us understand
the wisdom by which you govern with justice.
Then we can honor you as we should,
singing the common law that orders all things.

Modern free-verse classroom rendering of selected lines (1–6 and 24–39). See E. H. Blakeney's 1921 public-domain translation at Wikisource.

Diogenes Laertius, Lives of Eminent Philosophers 7.86–89 — Living according to nature

Reading prompt: Why might reason and virtue be more important to a good life than pleasure, wealth, or power?

The Stoics say that when reason is added to the nature of rational creatures, living according to reason becomes the life appropriate to them. Reason is meant to guide and organize our impulses.

For this reason Zeno was the first to describe the goal of life as living in agreement with nature. This is the same as living virtuously, since nature leads us toward virtue. Chrysippus explained that to live virtuously is to live according to an understanding of what happens in nature. Our individual natures are parts of the nature of the entire universe.

Thus the goal is to live in agreement both with human nature and with universal nature, doing nothing contrary to the common law that governs everything. This law is right reason, which pervades the universe and is identified with Zeus.

Virtue is a harmonious disposition of the soul, worth choosing for its own sake rather than for the hope of reward or the fear of punishment. Happiness consists in such harmony.

Selected classroom rendering of passages reporting early Stoic doctrine. Public-domain translation by R. D. Hicks (1925) available at LacusCurtius.

Cicero, On Ends 3.22 and 3.50–52 — Virtue, preferred things, and the archer

Reading prompt: If health, survival, and political success are not genuine goods, why should a wise person try to obtain them?

[3.22] Consider someone aiming a spear or arrow at a target. The archer must do everything possible to aim correctly. Yet the archer's ultimate aim, in the Stoic sense, lies in performing this task properly. Actually striking the target is something to be chosen, but it does not determine whether the archer has acted well. So too in life: we should seek appropriate outcomes, but the goodness of our conduct lies in the wisdom of our choices.

[3.50–52] The Stoics do not maintain that all things outside virtue are equally worthy of choice. If that were so, practical wisdom would have no work to do. Although virtue alone is good and vice alone is evil, some other things possess value and others lack it.

Health, bodily well-being, and adequate resources generally provide reasons for choosing them; illness, pain, and poverty generally provide reasons for avoiding them. The Stoics therefore distinguish preferred and dispreferred things. Yet neither kind belongs to the highest rank. These things have value, but they are not themselves what makes a person good.

Selected classroom rendering. Cicero presents Stoic teachings through the character Cato. Public-domain translation by H. Rackham available at LacusCurtius.

Epictetus, Handbook 1 — What is up to us

Reading prompt: How can the Stoics care about health and other people if these things are not in their power?

Of things some are in our power, and others are not. In our power are opinion (judgment), movement towards a thing (impulse), desire, aversion (avoidance, turning from a thing); and in a word, whatever are our own acts: not in our power are the body, property, reputation, offices (magisterial power), and in a word, whatever are not our own acts.

And the things in our power are by nature free, not subject to restraint nor hindrance: but the things not in our power are weak, slavish, subject to restraint, in the power of others.

Remember then that if you think the things which are by nature slavish to be free, and the things which are in the power of others to be your own, you will be hindered, you will lament, you will be disturbed, you will blame both gods and men: but if you think that only which is your own to be your own, and if you think that what is another's, as it really is, belongs to another, no man will ever compel you, no man will hinder you, you will never blame any man, you will accuse no man, you will do nothing involuntarily (against your will), no man will harm you, you will have no enemy, for you will not suffer any harm.

George Long, trans., public domain · Read complete source online

Epictetus, Handbook 2, 3, and 5 — Desire, love, and judgment

Reading prompt: What is the difference between experiencing something painful and judging that something terrible has happened?

Selected opening passages from three chapters. Chapter numbers in brackets are editorial.

[2] Remember that desire contains in it the profession (hope) of obtaining that which you desire; and the profession (hope) in aversion (turning from a thing) is that you will not fall into that which you attempt to avoid: and he who fails in his desire is unfortunate; and he who falls into that which he would avoid, is unhappy.

[3] In every thing which pleases the soul, or supplies a want, or is loved, remember to add this to the (description, notion); what is the nature of each thing, beginning from the smallest? If you love an earthen vessel, say it is an earthen vessel which you love; for when it has been broken, you will not be disturbed. If you are kissing your child or wife, say that it is a human being whom you are kissing, for when the wife or child dies, you will not be disturbed.

[5] Men are disturbed not by the things which happen, but by the opinions about the things: for example, death is nothing terrible, for if it were, it would have seemed so to Socrates; for the opinion about death, that it is terrible, is the terrible thing.

George Long, trans., public domain · Read complete source online

Epictetus, Handbook 11 and 17 — Loss and social roles

Reading prompt: Does playing a role well require accepting the role without question?

[11] Never say about any thing, I have lost it, but say I have restored it. Is your child dead? It has been restored. Is your wife dead? She has been restored. Has your estate been taken from you? Has not then this also been restored? But he who has taken it from me is a bad man. But what is it to you, by whose hands the giver demanded it back? So long as he may allow you, take care of it as a thing which belongs to another, as travellers do with their inn.

[17] Remember that thou art an actor in a play, of such a kind as the teacher (author) may choose; if short, of a short one; if long, of a long one: if he wishes you to act the part of a poor man, see that you act the part naturally; if the part of a lame man, of a magistrate, of a private person, (do the same). For this is your duty, to act well the part that is given to you; but to select the part, belongs to another.

George Long, trans., public domain · Read complete source online

Epictetus, Handbook 30 and 43 — Duties and difficult relationships

Reading prompt: What should someone do when another person behaves unjustly? Does Stoic acceptance require tolerating mistreatment?

[30] Duties arise from our relationships. Consider what it means to be a father, a child, a brother, a neighbor, or a citizen. Each relationship gives us reasons to act in certain ways. Suppose your brother treats you unjustly. Attend to your own conduct rather than making your character depend on his. Ask what is required of you if your own faculty of choice is to remain in harmony with nature. By examining your relationships, you will discover the duties appropriate to them.

[43] Every situation has two handles: one by which it can be carried and another by which it cannot. If your brother wrongs you, do not grasp the situation only by the handle of his wrongdoing, for that makes it difficult to bear. Grasp it instead by the fact that he is your brother, someone who grew up with you. In this way you take hold of the situation by a handle that you can carry.

Selected classroom renderings of the Greek. George Long’s public-domain translation is available at Project Gutenberg.

Seneca, On Anger 3.36 — Examining one’s conduct

Reading prompt: How might reviewing one’s behavior each evening help develop Stoic virtues?

Selected sentences from section 3.36; intervening sentences omitted between paragraphs.

All our senses should be educated into strength: they are naturally able to endure much, provided that the spirit forbears to spoil them. The spirit ought to be brought up for examination daily. It was the custom of Sextius when the day was over, and he had betaken himself to rest, to inquire of his spirit: “What bad habit of yours have you cured to-day? what vice have you checked? in what

respect are you better?” Anger will cease, and become more gentle, if it knows that every day it will have to appear before the judgment seat.

I make use of this privilege, and daily plead my cause before myself: when the lamp is taken out of my sight, and my wife, who knows my habit, has ceased to talk, I pass the whole day in review before myself, and repeat all that I have said and done: I conceal nothing from myself, and omit nothing.

Aubrey Stewart, trans. (1889), public domain · Read complete source online

Seneca, Moral Letters 63.1 and 63.4 — The death of a friend

Reading prompt: Is Seneca describing an attainable response to grief? Does his position show that Stoics can value friendship deeply?

Two excerpts from sections 1 and 4. Read the full letter for Seneca’s qualifications.

I am grieved to hear that your friend Flaccus is dead, but I would not have you sorrow more than is fitting. That you should not mourn at all I shall hardly dare to insist; and yet I know that it is the better way. But what man will ever be so blessed with that ideal steadfastness of soul, unless he has already risen far above the reach of Fortune? Even such a man will be stung by an event like this, but it will be only a sting.

Let us see to it that the recollection of those whom we have lost becomes a pleasant memory to us. No man reverts with pleasure to any subject which he will not be able to reflect upon without pain. So too it cannot but be that the names of those whom we have loved and lost come back to us with a sort of sting; but there is a pleasure even in this sting.

Richard M. Gummere, trans. (1917), public domain · Read complete source online

Seneca, Moral Letters 95.51–53 — Humanity as one community

Reading prompt: Why should Stoics care about strangers, foreigners, or people who cannot benefit them personally?

We should not merely tell people to avoid harming others. How small an achievement it would be not to injure someone whom we ought to help! Should we instruct people to extend a hand to someone shipwrecked, show the way to a traveler who is lost, or share food with someone who is hungry? Certainly—but we must also explain the principle underlying these actions.

Remember this: everything you see, embracing both divine and human beings, forms a unity. We are members of one great body. Nature made us relatives, bringing us into being from the same source and for a common purpose. She gave us mutual affection and an inclination toward friendship. She established justice and fairness, and according to her law it is worse to inflict an injury than to suffer one. Let our hands therefore be ready to help whoever needs assistance.

Selected classroom rendering of sections 51–53, after Richard M. Gummere’s public-domain translation. Read complete source online.

Marcus Aurelius, Meditations 2.1 and 6.54 — Preparing to live among others

Reading prompt: How does a Stoic prepare to encounter unkind or selfish people? Can one maintain goodwill toward those who act badly?

[2.1] Begin each morning by reminding yourself that you may encounter people who are meddlesome, ungrateful, arrogant, dishonest, envious, or unfriendly. They behave this way because they are confused about what is good and bad. But I have learned to distinguish what is good from what is shameful. I know that those who act badly are still my fellow human beings, sharing in reason as I do. We have been made to work together, like hands and feet or the rows of upper and lower teeth. To turn against one another is contrary to nature.

[6.54] What does not benefit the hive cannot benefit the bee.

Selected classroom renderings, checked against George Long's public-domain translation (1862). Read complete source online.

The passages raise questions that run throughout the Stoic tradition: Is virtue really sufficient for happiness? Can health, friendship, and political success matter without being genuine goods? Does acceptance of fate encourage passivity? How should we treat people who wrong us? And can Stoic detachment coexist with love, grief, and responsibility to others?

B. Epicureanism

The following passages explore the Epicurean understanding of pleasure, death, friendship, justice, and tranquility. Most come directly from Epicurus, who founded his philosophical community in Athens around 306 BCE. A final selection comes from the Roman poet Lucretius, who lived roughly two centuries after Epicurus and presented Epicurean philosophy in his poem *On the Nature of Things*.

Epicurus, Letter to Menoeceus — Philosophy and the gods

Reading prompt: If the gods do not intervene in human affairs, why might Epicureans still honor them? What would this teaching imply about religious ceremonies?

No one should hesitate to pursue philosophy because they are young, or grow tired of it because they are old. No age is too early or too late to care for the health of the soul. To say that it is not yet time to study philosophy, or that the time has passed, is like saying that the time for happiness has not yet arrived or has already ended. Young and old alike should therefore pursue wisdom, since happiness is something we all need.

First, understand the nature of the gods. A god is an immortal and blessed being. Whatever we believe about the gods must be consistent with their blessedness and immortality. The gods exist, but they are not as most people imagine them. The common belief that gods become angry, punish wrongdoing, or reward those they favor attributes human weaknesses to divine beings. A perfectly happy being would not be troubled by anger or distracted by the affairs of mortals.

Selected classroom rendering of §§122–123. Robert Drew Hicks's public-domain translation is available at The Internet Classics Archive.

Epicurus, Letter to Menoeceus — Death and fear

Reading prompt: Why does Epicurus believe death cannot harm us? Could death still be bad because it deprives us of future pleasures?

Selected passages corresponding to §§124–125; not the entire letter.

Accustom yourself to believe that death is nothing to us, for good and evil imply awareness, and death is the privation of all awareness; therefore a right understanding that death is nothing to us makes the mortality of life enjoyable, not by adding to life an unlimited time, but by taking away the yearning after immortality.

Foolish, therefore, is the person who says that he fears death, not because it will pain when it comes, but because it pains in the prospect. Whatever causes no annoyance when it is present, causes only a groundless pain in the expectation. Death, therefore, the most awful of evils, is nothing to us, seeing that, when we are, death is not come, and, when death is come, we are not. It is nothing, then, either to the living or to the dead, for with the living it is not and the dead exist no longer.

Robert Drew Hicks, trans., public domain · Read complete source online

Epicurus, Letter to Menoeceus — Desires and pleasure

Reading prompt: Why might a wise person refuse a pleasure or willingly endure pain? What distinguishes natural desires from empty ones?

Separate selected passages from the same letter; omissions between paragraphs.

We must remember that the future is neither wholly ours nor wholly not ours, so that neither must we count upon it as quite certain to come nor despair of it as quite certain not to come.

We must also reflect that of desires some are natural, others are groundless; and that of the natural some are necessary as well as natural, and some natural only. And of the necessary desires some are necessary if we are to be happy, some if the body is to be rid of uneasiness, some if we are even to live.

Pleasure is our first and kindred good. It is the starting-point of every choice and of every aversion, and to it we come back, inasmuch as we make feeling the rule by which to judge of every good thing. And since pleasure is our first and native good, for that reason we do not choose every pleasure whatever, but often pass over many pleasures when a greater annoyance ensues from them.

Robert Drew Hicks, trans., public domain · Read complete source online

Epicurus, Letter to Menoeceus — Simple living, prudence, and virtue

Reading prompt: Does Epicurus recommend a life of self-denial or a life of enjoyment? Why does he think virtue is necessary for happiness?

We regard self-sufficiency as a great good. This does not mean that we must always live with very little. Rather, it means that when we have little, we can still be content. Those who need luxury least are often best able to enjoy it. Natural needs are relatively easy to satisfy, while empty desires are difficult to fulfill.

Simple food can provide as much pleasure as an elaborate meal once hunger has been satisfied. Bread and water are deeply pleasant to someone who needs them. Becoming accustomed to modest

food helps us maintain our health, appreciate occasional luxuries, and face changes of fortune without fear.

When we say that pleasure is the goal of life, we do not mean endless feasting, drinking, or sensual indulgence. We mean freedom from bodily pain and disturbance of mind. A pleasant life arises from careful reasoning about what to choose and avoid, and from freeing ourselves from mistaken beliefs that produce anxiety.

Of all the virtues, practical wisdom is especially important, because it teaches us how to live pleasantly. We cannot live pleasantly without living wisely, honorably, and justly; nor can we live wisely, honorably, and justly without living pleasantly. Virtue and the pleasant life cannot be separated.

Selected classroom rendering of §§130–132. Robert Drew Hicks's public-domain translation is available at The Internet Classics Archive.

Epicurus, Principal Doctrines — Death, pleasure, politics, justice, and friendship

Reading prompts: Why does Epicurus regard justice as useful rather than intrinsically good? Is political power an effective way to secure happiness? Can a friendship be valuable for its own sake?

Numbered selections from the forty Principal Doctrines. The unmarked passages preserve the Hicks translation supplied in the original handout; passages marked "classroom rendering" have been newly added.

2. Death is nothing to us; for the body, when it has been resolved into its elements, has no feeling, and that which has no feeling is nothing to us.
3. The magnitude of pleasure reaches its limit in the removal of all pain. When pleasure is present, so long as it is uninterrupted, there is no pain either of body or of mind or of both together.
4. [Classroom rendering] Severe bodily pain is ordinarily brief, while long-lasting pain is often less intense. Even amid prolonged illness, bodily suffering need not entirely exclude pleasure.
5. It is impossible to live a pleasant life without living wisely and well and justly, and it is impossible to live wisely and well and justly without living pleasantly.
7. [Classroom rendering] Some people seek fame and high reputation because they think these will protect them from others. If fame genuinely makes them secure, they obtain something naturally valuable. But if it leaves them insecure, they have failed to obtain the security they originally sought.
11. If we had never been molested by alarms at celestial and atmospheric phenomena, nor by the misgiving that death somehow affects us, nor by neglect of the proper limits of pains and desires, we should have had no need to study natural science.
14. [Classroom rendering] Once we have achieved reasonable security against other people, the most genuine security comes from a quiet life, apart from the crowd, supported by sufficient resources.
15. Nature's wealth at once has its bounds and is easy to procure; but the wealth of vain fancies recedes to an infinite distance.

17. The just person enjoys the greatest peace of mind, while the unjust is full of the utmost disquietude.
19. Unlimited time and limited time afford an equal amount of pleasure, if we measure the limits of that pleasure by reason.
20. [Classroom rendering] The body seems to demand an unlimited quantity of pleasure and time. But the mind can understand the limits of pleasure, overcome its fears about the future, and make life complete without needing unlimited time.
27. Of all the means which are procured by wisdom to ensure happiness throughout the whole of life, by far the most important is the acquisition of friends.
28. The same conviction which inspires confidence that nothing we have to fear is eternal or even of long duration, also enables us to see that even in our limited conditions of life nothing enhances our security so much as friendship.
31. Natural justice is a symbol or expression of usefulness, to prevent one person from harming or being harmed by another.
33. There never was an absolute justice, but only an agreement made in reciprocal association in whatever localities now and again from time to time, providing against the infliction or suffering of harm.
34. Injustice is not in itself an evil, but only in its consequence, viz. the terror which is excited by apprehension that those appointed to punish such offenses will discover the injustice.
35. It is impossible for the person who secretly violates any article of the social compact to feel confident that he will remain undiscovered, even if he has already escaped ten thousand times; for right on to the end of his life he is never sure he will not be detected.
36. [Classroom rendering] Justice is fundamentally the same everywhere insofar as it consists in arrangements that benefit people living together. But what is useful may differ across places and circumstances.
37. [Classroom rendering] A law is just when experience shows that it benefits people's relationships with one another. If a law brings no such benefit, it is not genuinely just. If circumstances change, a law that was once just may cease to be so.
38. [Classroom rendering] If a law is found to have no benefit for mutual association, despite unchanged circumstances, it was never genuinely just. But when changing conditions make a formerly beneficial law harmful, that law was just when it was useful and ceases to be just when it no longer is.

Robert Drew Hicks, trans., public domain, except where classroom renderings are indicated · Read complete source online

Epicurus, Vatican Saying 17 — Gratitude in old age

Reading prompt: Why might someone with fewer years remaining be happier than someone who possesses youth, power, and opportunity?

It is not the young man who is most happy, but the old man who has lived beautifully; for despite being at his very peak the young man stumbles around as if he were of many minds, whereas the old man has settled into old age as if in a harbor, secure in his gratitude for the good things he was once unsure of.

Peter Saint-Andre, trans. (2010), CC0 / public domain · Read complete source online

Epicurus, Vatican Sayings — Friendship, gratitude, and examining desires

Reading prompt: Do these sayings support the charge that Epicurean friendship is selfish? How might they become practical exercises for living more pleasantly?

23. Every friendship is valuable in itself, even when it begins because the friends benefit one another.
28. A person should neither rush carelessly into friendship nor avoid it altogether. Friendship sometimes requires taking risks and accepting hardship.
34. What matters most is not always the assistance friends actually provide, but the confidence that we can depend on them.
35. Do not spoil your enjoyment of what you possess by constantly desiring what is absent. Remember that many things you now have were once things you hoped to obtain.
41. We should laugh, pursue philosophy, care for our households, and enjoy the things that belong to us, continually sharing the insights of philosophy.
55. When misfortune strikes, we should seek comfort in gratitude for past goods and recognize that what has happened cannot be undone.
58. We should free ourselves from the imprisonment of excessive involvement in public affairs.
66. We should show sympathy toward friends not merely through lamentation, but through thoughtful concern and care.
67. A free person is unlikely to acquire immense wealth without becoming dependent on crowds or powerful people. Yet such a person already possesses sufficient resources for a good life. If great wealth happens to come, it can be shared generously with others.
71. Examine every desire by asking two questions: What will happen to me if this desire is satisfied? And what will happen if it is not?

Selected classroom renderings. Compare Peter Saint-Andre's CC0/public-domain translation at Vatican Sayings. The collection includes sayings attributed to Epicurus and other early Epicureans.

Epicurus, Letter to Idomeneus — Friendship and pleasure in the face of death

Reading prompt: Can someone undergoing severe physical suffering still experience happiness? What does this letter suggest about the importance of memory and friendship?

Near the end of his life, Epicurus reportedly wrote the following letter to his friend Idomeneus:

I write to you on a happy day, which is also the last day of my life. My illness has brought terrible suffering in my bladder and stomach, and the pain could hardly be more intense. Yet against these sufferings I set the joy I experience when remembering our philosophical conversations.

I ask you, in keeping with your longstanding devotion to me and to philosophy, to look after the children of Metrodorus.

Classroom rendering of the letter preserved by Diogenes Laertius, Lives of Eminent Philosophers 10.22. Read a public-domain translation in Diogenes Laertius, Book 10.

Lucretius, On the Nature of Things, Book 3 — Fear of death and political ambition

Reading prompt: Why might the fear of death encourage people to pursue wealth, conquest, and fame rather than withdraw from worldly competition?

Greed and the blind hunger for honor
drive people beyond the limits of the law.
They labor through the nights and days,
sometimes turning to crime,
to climb toward the heights of power.
The fear of death keeps these wounds open.

We imagine poverty and disgrace
standing like threats at death's own door.
To escape them, people gather fortunes—
even with the blood of their fellow citizens.

[. . .]
We see Sisyphus here, in our own lives:
the person who seeks the signs of public office,
only to be turned away by the people,
defeated and disappointed yet again.

To chase power, an empty prize,
and spend a lifetime struggling for it—
that is to push a stone uphill,
only to watch it roll back from the summit
and rush down to the plain below.

Classroom rendering of selections from Book III (3.59–71 and 3.995–1002). Read a complete translation at The Internet Classics Archive.

C. Buddhism

The following readings introduce the central teachings and practices of early Buddhism: suffering and its cessation, impermanence, no-self, meditation, ethical conduct, and compassion. The final passages address the responsibilities of rulers and the challenges of governing a diverse society.

The Buddhist discourses were transmitted orally for generations before being written down. The *Questions of King Milinda* is a later literary work that depicts an encounter between a Greek king and a Buddhist monk. Aśoka's edicts, by contrast, are historical inscriptions issued by an Indian emperor in the third century BCE.

Saṃyutta Nikāya 56.11 — The Four Noble Truths and the Middle Way

Reading prompt: What does Buddhism identify as the fundamental problem of human life? Why does it reject both indulgence and extreme self-denial?

The Buddha addressed five ascetics:

There are two extremes that should be avoided by someone seeking liberation. One is devotion to sensual pleasure, which does not lead to the highest good. The other is devotion to painful self-

mortification, which is likewise unprofitable. Avoiding both extremes, the awakened one has discovered the Middle Way, which leads to understanding, peace, and liberation.

This Middle Way is the Noble Eightfold Path: right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.

Now this is the noble truth of suffering: birth is suffering, aging is suffering, illness is suffering, and death is suffering. Association with what is unpleasant is suffering; separation from what is pleasant is suffering; not obtaining what one desires is suffering.

This is the noble truth of the origin of suffering: craving, which leads to renewed existence and seeks satisfaction here and there. It includes craving for sensual pleasures, craving for continued existence, and craving for nonexistence.

This is the noble truth of the cessation of suffering: the fading away and complete abandonment of craving, letting it go and becoming free from attachment.

This is the noble truth of the path leading to the cessation of suffering: the Noble Eightfold Path.

Selected classroom rendering of the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, traditionally regarded as the Buddha's first teaching. Read complete source online.

Saṃyutta Nikāya 22.59 — The argument for no-self

Reading prompt: If our bodies and minds are constantly changing and not fully under our control, does it follow that there is no enduring self?

The Buddha addressed the monks:

The body is not self. For if the body were self, it would not be subject to affliction, and one could command it: Let my body be this way; let my body not be that way. But because the body is not self, it is subject to affliction, and we cannot command it as we wish.

Likewise, feelings are not self. Perceptions are not self. Mental formations are not self. Consciousness is not self.

What do you think, monks? Is the body permanent or impermanent?

Impermanent, venerable sir.

And what is impermanent—is it satisfactory or unsatisfactory?

Unsatisfactory, venerable sir.

Then is it appropriate to regard something impermanent, unsatisfactory, and subject to change as: This is mine; this is what I am; this is my self?

No, venerable sir.

The same examination applies to feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness. Seeing these things clearly, the wise disciple becomes disenchanted with clinging to them and moves toward liberation.

Selected classroom rendering of the Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta. Read complete source online.

Saṃyutta Nikāya 36.6 — The two arrows

Reading prompt: What is the difference between unavoidable pain and the suffering we create through our reactions? Does this distinction imply that grief is irrational?

The Buddha said:

An untrained person experiences pleasant, painful, and neutral feelings. A well-trained disciple experiences these feelings too. What, then, distinguishes them?

When an untrained person experiences bodily pain, that person may grieve, lament, become distressed, and resist the experience. Thus two kinds of suffering occur: bodily suffering and mental suffering.

Imagine a person struck by an arrow, and then struck by a second arrow. Such a person experiences the pain of two arrows. So it is with someone who adds mental anguish to bodily pain.

But the trained disciple, when touched by bodily pain, does not add this second arrow of distress. That person experiences bodily pain without being overcome by mental suffering.

Such a person does not respond to painful feeling with aversion, nor seek refuge from it through compulsive attachment to pleasure. Instead, the person understands how feelings arise, change, and pass away.

Selected classroom rendering of the Sallatha Sutta. Read complete source online.

Majjhima Nikāya 10 — The practice of mindfulness

Reading prompt: How might observing thoughts and feelings change our relationship to them? What makes mindfulness a philosophical practice rather than simply a method of relaxation?

The Buddha described four foundations of mindfulness: contemplation of the body, feelings, states of mind, and mental phenomena.

A monk goes to a quiet place, sits upright, and establishes mindfulness. Breathing in, the monk knows that breathing in is occurring; breathing out, the monk knows that breathing out is occurring. When breathing is long, the monk recognizes it as long. When breathing is short, the monk recognizes it as short.

The practitioner also observes feelings. When experiencing a pleasant feeling, one recognizes: A pleasant feeling is present. When experiencing an unpleasant feeling, one recognizes: An unpleasant feeling is present.

Likewise, when the mind is affected by desire, one recognizes that desire is present. When the mind is affected by hatred or confusion, one recognizes these conditions. When they are absent, one recognizes their absence.

In this way, the practitioner observes the arising and passing away of bodily and mental experiences. Mindfulness is established to the extent necessary for understanding, without clinging to anything in the world.

Selected classroom rendering of the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta. Read complete source online.

Dhammapada 1.3–6 — Hatred, resentment, and mortality

Reading prompt: Why does the Buddha regard resentment as a source of suffering? Is abandoning hatred compatible with resisting injustice?

3. When someone repeatedly thinks, “They insulted me, struck me, defeated me, and took what was mine,” resentment remains alive.
4. When someone does not continue dwelling on such thoughts, resentment can come to an end.
5. Hatred is never ended through hatred. It comes to an end through the absence of hatred. This is an ancient principle.
6. Many fail to recognize that all of us are subject to death. Those who understand this are better able to abandon their quarrels.

Selected classroom rendering of Dhammapada verses 3–6. F. Max Müller’s public-domain translation (1881) is available at The Dhammapada, Chapter 1.

Aṅguttara Nikāya 6.63 — Intention and kamma

Reading prompt: If there is no permanent self, how can people be responsible for their actions? Does kamma require belief in rebirth?

The Buddha taught:

It is intention that I call kamma. Having formed an intention, one acts through body, speech, or mind.

Kamma has consequences. Some actions bear fruit in the present life, others later in that life, and still others in a future existence.

The causes of kamma, its different forms, and its results should be understood. The cessation of kamma and the path leading to that cessation should also be understood.

The path to the cessation of kamma is the Noble Eightfold Path.

Selected classroom rendering of the Nibbedhika Sutta. In traditional Buddhist teaching, kamma includes consequences extending beyond the present lifetime. Read complete source online.

Sutta Nipāta 1.8 — The Mettā Sutta (loving-kindness)

Reading prompt: How does loving-kindness differ from ordinary affection? Could someone cultivate goodwill toward an enemy while still opposing that person’s actions?

Complete short sutta (ten stanzas); the 1881 language is old-fashioned.

1. Whatever is to be done by one who is skilful in seeking (what is) good, having attained that tranquil state (of Nibbāna): — Let him be able and upright and conscientious and of soft speech, gentle, not proud,
2. And contented and easily supported and having few cares, unburdened and with his senses calmed and wise, not arrogant, without (showing) greediness (when going his round) in families.
3. And let him not do anything mean for which others who are wise might reprove (him); may all beings be happy and secure, may they be happy-minded.
4. Whatever living beings there are, either feeble or strong, all either long or great, middle-sized, short, small or large,

5. Either seen or which are not seen, and which live far (or) near, either born or seeking birth, may all creatures be happy-minded.
6. Let no one deceive another, let him not despise (another) in any place, let him not out of anger or resentment wish harm to another.
7. As a mother at the risk of her life watches over her own child, her only child, so also let every one cultivate a boundless (friendly) mind towards all beings.
8. And let him cultivate goodwill towards all the world, a boundless (friendly) mind, above and below and across, unobstructed, without hatred, without enmity.
9. Standing, walking or sitting or lying, as long as he be awake, let him devote himself to this mind; this (way of) living they say is the best in this world.
10. He who, not having embraced (philosophical) views, is virtuous, endowed with (perfect) vision, after subduing greediness for sensual pleasures, will never again go to a mother's womb.

V. Fausbøll, trans., Sacred Books of the East 10 (1881), public domain · Read complete source online

Questions of King Milinda — The chariot analogy

Reading prompt: Is a person anything over and above the physical and mental processes that constitute that person? Can someone be responsible for actions without possessing a permanent self?

In this dialogue, the monk Nāgasena has asked the king whether the chariot consists in any one of its parts. The king has answered no to each suggestion.

"But is there anything outside them that is the chariot?" And still he answered no.

"Then thus, ask as I may, I can discover no chariot. Chariot is a mere empty sound. What then is the chariot you say you came in? It is a falsehood that your Majesty has spoken, an untruth! There is no such thing as a chariot!"

And Milinda the king replied to Nāgasena, and said: "I have spoken no untruth, reverend Sir. It is on account of its having all these things—the pole, and the axle, the wheels, and the framework, the ropes, the yoke, the spokes, and the goad—that it comes under the generally understood term, the designation in common use, of 'chariot.'"

"Very good! Your Majesty has rightly grasped the meaning of 'chariot.' And just even so it is on account of all those things you questioned me about—the thirty-two kinds of organic matter in a human body, and the five constituent elements of being—that I come under the generally understood term, the designation in common use, of 'Nāgasena.'"

T. W. Rhys Davids, trans., Questions of King Milinda, Book II, ch. 1 (1890), public domain · Read complete source online

Dīgha Nikāya 26 — A ruler's responsibilities and the causes of crime

Reading prompt: Does Buddhist teaching favor withdrawal from political life, or can it provide guidance for rulers? What does a ruler owe to subjects living in poverty?

The Buddha told a story about a king who inherited a prosperous kingdom. His advisers explained how a righteous monarch should govern: he should protect his people, maintain justice, and provide for those who had no means of supporting themselves.

The king provided protection and security, but neglected the poor. As a result, poverty spread throughout the kingdom.

A man was then caught stealing and brought before the king.

The king asked why he had stolen.

The man replied that he had no means of surviving.

The king gave him money to support himself and his family and to establish a livelihood.

But when others heard that a thief had received money, theft increased. The king then decided to punish thieves severely.

Instead of ending crime, the punishments contributed to greater violence. People began arming themselves, killing others, and committing further wrongs.

Thus, the Buddha explained, when rulers fail to provide for those in poverty, theft becomes widespread. Theft leads to violence, violence leads to killing, and further forms of wrongdoing follow.

Selected classroom rendering of the Cakkavatti Sutta, particularly its account of social decline. The discourse describes an idealized ancient kingdom, not a documented historical episode. Read complete source online.

Aśoka, Major Rock Edict XIII — Remorse after conquest

Reading prompt: What should a ruler do after recognizing that military conquest has caused great suffering? Can remorse be a source of political wisdom?

Opening passage of Edict XIII; the full edict continues with the suffering of civilians and the ideal of moral conquest.

Kalinga was (or "the Kalingas were") conquered by His Sacred and Gracious Majesty the King when he had been consecrated eight years. One hundred and fifty thousand persons were thence carried away captive, one hundred thousand were there slain, and many times that number died.

Directly after the Kalingas had been annexed began His Sacred Majesty's zealous protection of the Law of Piety, his love of that Law, and his inculcation of that Law. Thence arises the remorse of His Sacred Majesty for having conquered the Kalingas, because the conquest of a country previously unconquered involves the slaughter, death, and carrying away captive of the people. That is a matter of profound sorrow and regret to His Sacred Majesty.

Vincent A. Smith, trans., Aśoka, the Buddhist Emperor of India (early 20th c.), public domain · Read complete source online

Aśoka, Major Rock Edict XII — Religious tolerance and public speech

Reading prompt: How should a ruler govern people who follow different religious and philosophical traditions? Is tolerance compatible with criticizing another person's beliefs?

The king honors people belonging to different religious communities, whether they have renounced ordinary life or continue to live as householders. He honors them through gifts and other expressions of respect.

Yet the king does not consider gifts and ceremonies as important as growth in the essential qualities taught by these communities.

One foundation of such growth is restraint in speech. People should not praise their own community while condemning another without sufficient reason. Criticism should have a proper basis, and people should also recognize what deserves respect in other traditions.

By acting in this way, someone benefits both their own community and others. But one who glorifies their own tradition merely by disparaging another may actually do serious harm to their own.

Therefore, concord and mutual understanding should be encouraged. People should listen to and learn about the teachings followed by others. The king desires that all religious communities grow in understanding and good conduct.

Selected classroom rendering of Major Rock Edict XII, after Vincent A. Smith's public-domain translation. Read complete source online.

D. Skepticism

Ancient skepticism developed in two related traditions: Academic skepticism, associated with Plato's Academy, and Pyrrhonian skepticism, associated with Pyrrho and his later followers. Academic skeptics, especially Arcesilaus and Carneades, were active before and during Menander's lifetime. Their arguments frequently challenged the Stoics' claims to knowledge. The more systematic Pyrrhonian teachings preserved by Sextus Empiricus come from several centuries later.

The readings illustrate skeptical practices: examining competing arguments, questioning claims to certainty, distinguishing persuasive appearances from knowledge, and suspending judgment when the available reasons do not justify a conclusion.

Diogenes Laertius, Lives 4.28 and 4.32–33 — Arcesilaus and the practice of arguing both sides

Reading prompt: What is the philosophical value of developing objections to views one does not necessarily reject? Can someone be a serious philosopher without defending a positive doctrine?

Arcesilaus, who came from Pitane, became the leader of Plato's Academy. He was said to have introduced a new practice of suspending judgment because of the contradictions found in opposing arguments.

He argued on both sides of disputed questions and used questioning and examination to challenge philosophical positions. In this way he transformed the practice of the Academy, drawing it closer to the argumentative methods associated with Socrates.

Arcesilaus was particularly skilled at responding to objections and bringing discussions back to the matter under examination. He could adapt his arguments to different circumstances and was extraordinarily persuasive.

He was also known for his generosity toward his friends and students. When one of his acquaintances was ill and impoverished, Arcesilaus secretly left money beneath his pillow.

Selected classroom rendering of later biographical testimony. Arcesilaus left no surviving philosophical writings. R. D. Hicks's public-domain translation is available at Diogenes Laertius, Life of Arcesilaus.

Cicero, Academica 2.83–86 — Can we distinguish true impressions from false ones?

Reading prompt: The Stoics claim that some impressions have a special mark guaranteeing their truth. How does the skeptical argument challenge this claim?

The dispute about knowledge depends on several propositions.

First, some impressions are false. Second, a false impression cannot provide knowledge. Third, if two impressions are indistinguishable, they cannot be treated differently with respect to whether they provide knowledge. Fourth, for any true impression, it may be possible to encounter a false impression that appears exactly the same.

Consider two brothers who look remarkably alike. Someone might encounter one brother and mistakenly believe that he is seeing the other. What characteristic of the impression guarantees that this mistake has not occurred?

Or consider a sculptor who makes several apparently identical statues, or a person who stamps the same seal repeatedly into wax. If two things cannot be distinguished by the observer, how can the observer be certain which one is being perceived?

It does not matter whether the objects are actually identical in every respect. The question is whether an observer can recognize a difference that guarantees the truth of the impression.

The skeptic does not need to show that every impression is false. It is enough to challenge the claim that some impressions carry an unmistakable mark of truth.

Selected classroom rendering of Cicero's presentation of Academic arguments against Stoic epistemology. Cicero wrote in the first century BCE, drawing on earlier Academic debates. Read a freely available translation.

Cicero, Academica 2.99–104 — Carneades on acting without certainty

Reading prompt: If knowledge is uncertain, how can someone make decisions about war, medicine, or government? Is a reasonable judgment the same thing as a claim to knowledge?

Carneades distinguished two ways of classifying impressions. In one classification, impressions either provide certain knowledge or fail to do so. In another, they are either persuasive or unpersuasive.

He argued that although no impression possesses a guaranteed mark of truth, many impressions are nevertheless persuasive. It would be contrary to ordinary life to deny that some appearances provide better grounds for action than others.

Consider someone preparing to board a ship. The traveler cannot know with certainty that the voyage will be successful. But if the crew is reliable, the helmsman competent, and the weather favorable, the journey appears reasonably safe.

The traveler can therefore decide to sail without claiming certain knowledge of the outcome.

Likewise, a wise person can use persuasive appearances as guides to action, provided that nothing important has emerged to undermine them.

Clitomachus, a follower of Carneades, explained that the wise person may withhold assent in the strict philosophical sense while still approving certain appearances for practical purposes. Such a person can answer questions, make choices, and carry out ordinary activities without claiming to possess infallible knowledge.

Selected classroom rendering of passages in which Cicero reports the views of Carneades and Clitomachus. Read a freely available translation.

Diogenes Laertius, Lives 4.67 — Clitomachus

Reading prompt: Why might someone devote an entire philosophical career to examining and explaining arguments rather than establishing a philosophical system?

Biographical testimony, not a surviving treatise by Clitomachus. No school in the game is obliged to accept its accuracy uncritically.

Clitomachus was a Carthaginian, his real name being Hasdrubal, and he taught philosophy at Carthage in his native tongue. He had reached his fortieth year when he went to Athens and became a pupil of Carneades. And Carneades, recognizing his industry, caused him to be educated and took part in training him. And to such lengths did his diligence go that he composed more than four hundred treatises.

He succeeded Carneades in the headship of the school, and by his writings did much to elucidate his opinions. He was eminently well acquainted with the three sects—the Academy, the Peripatetic, and the Stoics.

R. D. Hicks, trans. (1925), public domain in the United States · Read complete source online

Cicero, On the Nature of the Gods 3.92–95 — Questioning divine providence

Reading prompt: How might a skeptic challenge the Stoic belief that the universe is governed by divine reason? Does questioning a religious doctrine require denying it?

In Cicero’s dialogue, Cotta, an Academic skeptic and Roman priest, challenges a Stoic account of divine providence.

You say that divine power governs the universe and that nothing lies beyond its control. But if the gods possess such power, why do they permit great cities to be destroyed and innocent people to suffer?

Perhaps the gods do not concern themselves with individual human beings. But if they pay no attention to individuals, why should we believe that they send dreams, listen to prayers, or respond to vows?

Perhaps divine providence governs the world as a whole. But how are we to understand this claim when the world contains so much apparent disorder and injustice?

These difficulties should make us cautious about claiming that we understand the nature of divine government.

Cotta concludes by explaining that his purpose is not to prove the Stoic account false, but to show how difficult the subject is and how uncertain its explanations remain.

When his Stoic opponent asks for another opportunity to defend the doctrine, Cotta welcomes the proposal. He says that he wishes to be refuted and that he has offered arguments for discussion rather than pronouncing a final judgment.

Selected classroom rendering. The passage is a later Roman literary presentation of Academic skeptical argument, not a surviving speech by Carneades. Read a freely available translation.

Diogenes Laertius, Lives 9.61–63 — Pyrrho and the philosophers of India

Reading prompt: What can this account tell us about possible exchanges between Greek and Indian philosophy? Should we accept the biographer's description of Pyrrho's way of life?

Pyrrho of Elis was originally a painter. Later he studied philosophy with Anaxarchus, whom he accompanied on his travels. These journeys reportedly brought him into contact with Indian philosophers and Persian religious teachers.

According to the ancient account, these encounters helped inspire Pyrrho's distinctive philosophical outlook. He came to question whether things are inherently just or unjust, honorable or dishonorable, and emphasized the importance of custom and convention in human affairs.

Some writers claimed that Pyrrho took his philosophy to extraordinary lengths, showing little concern for ordinary dangers and needing his friends to protect him from harm.

Other ancient authorities challenged this picture, maintaining that although Pyrrho suspended judgment about philosophical questions, he remained capable of acting prudently in everyday life.

One story reports that an Indian philosopher criticized Anaxarchus for spending his time attending royal courts while claiming to teach others how to live well. Pyrrho supposedly took this criticism seriously.

Selected classroom rendering of Diogenes Laertius's later testimony. The historical reliability of these reports is uncertain, and they do not establish what, if anything, Pyrrho learned from particular Indian traditions. Read complete source online.

Sextus Empiricus, Outlines 1.8–12 — Skeptical method

Reading prompt: What does it mean to suspend judgment rather than deny a doctrine? Why might examining competing arguments lead to tranquility?

Selected portions of Outlines 1.8, 1.10 and 1.12 (not a continuous passage). This account is later Pyrrhonian skepticism, not identical to Carneades's Academic skepticism.

The capacity of the Sceptical School is to place the phenomenal in opposition to the intellectual "in any way whatever," and thus through the equilibrium of the reasons and things (equal strength of opposing arguments) opposed to each other, to reach, first the state of suspension of judgment, and afterwards that of imperturbability (tranquility).

By "reasons opposed to each other," we do not by any means understand that they deny or affirm anything, but simply that they offset each other. By equilibrium, we mean equality in regard to

trustworthiness and untrustworthiness, so that of the reasons that are placed in opposition to each other, one should not excel another in trustworthiness. Suspension of judgment is a holding back of opinion, in consequence of which we neither deny nor affirm anything. Tranquility is repose and peace of mind.

Scepticism arose in the beginning from the hope of attaining tranquility; for men of the greatest talent were perplexed by the contradiction of things, and being at a loss what to believe, began to question what things are true, and what false, hoping to attain tranquility as a result of the decision.

Mary Mills Patrick, trans. (1899), public domain · Read complete source online

Sextus Empiricus, Outlines 1.19–24 — How skeptics live

Reading prompt: Can a skeptic fulfill political and personal responsibilities without believing that established customs or rules are ultimately justified?

Selections from 1.19, 1.23–24. It is important that suspension of ultimate judgment does not mean practical inaction.

Those who say that the Sceptics deny phenomena appear to me to be in ignorance of our teachings. For as we said before, we do not deny the sensations which we think we have, and which lead us to assent involuntarily to them, and these are the phenomena.

But this observance of what pertains to the daily life, appears to be of four different kinds. Sometimes it is directed by the guidance of nature, sometimes by the necessity of the feelings, sometimes by the tradition of laws and of customs, and sometimes by the teaching of the arts.

It is directed by the guidance of nature, for by nature we are capable of sensation and thought; by the necessity of the feelings, for hunger leads us to food, and thirst to drink; by the traditions of laws and customs, for according to them we consider piety a good in daily life, and impiety an evil; by the teaching of the arts, for we are not inactive in the arts we undertake. We say all these things, however, without expressing a decided opinion.

Mary Mills Patrick, trans. (1899), public domain · Read complete source online

Sextus Empiricus, Outlines 1.25–30 — Tranquility and its limits

Reading prompt: Does skepticism offer a convincing path to tranquility? What kinds of suffering would remain even if we suspended judgment about good and evil?

Selections from §§25–26 and 29–30; omissions are intentional. See the full public-domain translation for §§145–163 (customs) and 196.

We say, then, that the aim of the Sceptic is tranquility in those things which pertain to the opinion, and moderation in the things that life imposes.

For as soon as he began to philosophize he wished to discriminate between ideas, and to understand which are true and which are false, in order to attain tranquility. He met, however, with contradictions of equal weight, and, being unable to judge, he withheld his opinion; and while his judgment was in suspension tranquility followed, as if by chance, in regard to matters of opinion.

Nevertheless, we do not consider the Sceptic wholly undisturbed, but he is disturbed by some things that are inevitable. We confess that sometimes he is cold and thirsty, and that he suffers in such ways.

Mary Mills Patrick, trans. (1899), public domain · Read complete source online

Sextus Empiricus, Outlines 1.164–169 — Five ways of challenging philosophical claims

Reading prompt: How might skeptics use these arguments to challenge Stoicism, Epicureanism, or Buddhism? Do the arguments themselves establish that knowledge is impossible?

Later Pyrrhonian skeptics described five methods, or modes, that could lead an investigator to suspend judgment.

1. Disagreement. When people advance competing arguments that seem equally convincing, we cannot simply assume that one side has discovered the truth. Further examination is needed.
2. Infinite regress. When someone offers a reason for believing a claim, we can ask what justifies that reason. If every justification requires another justification, the argument may continue without reaching an independently established starting point.
3. Relativity. Things appear differently depending on the observer and the surrounding circumstances. We can describe how something appears in particular conditions without establishing what it is independently of those conditions.
4. Hypothesis. Philosophers sometimes begin with assumptions that they do not attempt to prove. But why should their assumptions be accepted rather than contrary assumptions offered by another school?
5. Circular reasoning. Sometimes a philosopher uses one claim to justify another, while ultimately relying on the second claim to establish the first. Neither receives independent support.

These methods are intended to expose unresolved difficulties in philosophical arguments. The skeptic does not need to declare that every doctrine is false. Instead, the skeptic continues to ask whether the available reasons genuinely establish what their defenders claim.

Selected classroom rendering of the five modes described in Outlines 1.164–169. These were formulated after Menander's lifetime. Mary Mills Patrick's public-domain translation is available at Project Gutenberg.

Part II: Complete Sources and Role-Specific Reading Paths

Every passage cited on a faction role sheet is listed here. "Printed above" means Part I contains at least one excerpt; otherwise the full source can be read at the link. The long discourses and books are intentionally not reproduced in their entirety. Follow the precise reference given on your role sheet rather than reading the whole work.

STOIC ROLES

Antipater: Cicero, On Ends 3 (especially 3.22); Epictetus, Handbook 1 and 5.

Diodora: Epictetus, Handbook 1–2 and 5; Cicero, On Ends 3.22; practice references also include Seneca, On the Happy Life 16.

Nikanor: Epictetus, Handbook 3 and 11; Seneca, Letter 63 and On Anger 3.36.

Leon: Cicero, On Duties 1; Epictetus, Handbook 17.

Thaleia: Cicero, On Duties 1 and On Ends 3; Epictetus, Handbook 1 and 5.

Epictetus, Handbook (Enchiridion), chs. 1–3, 5, 11, 17 and other referenced chapters Read online · George Long, 19th c.; selected text printed above

Cicero, On Ends (De Finibus), Book III, including §3.22 Read online · C. D. Yonge (1853), public-domain digitization at Library of Congress

The archer passage (3.22) appears in Part I as a classroom rendering; consult the online volume for the full argument.

Cicero, On Duties (De Officiis), Books I and II.8 Read online · Walter Miller (1913), Project Gutenberg public domain

Seneca, Letter 63 Read online · Richard M. Gummere, public domain; extract printed above

Seneca, On Anger 3.36 Read online · Aubrey Stewart (1889), public domain; extract printed above

Seneca, On the Happy Life 16 Read online · Aubrey Stewart (1889), public domain

EPICUREAN ROLES

Apollodorus: Letter to Menoeceus §§123–132; Principal Doctrines 3, 11, 19–20.

Kleia: Letter to Menoeceus §§124–132; Principal Doctrines 7, 15, 27; practice texts.

Myrto: Principal Doctrines 27–28; Vatican Sayings 55 and 66; the final letter to Idomeneus in Diogenes Laertius 10.22.

Philonides: Principal Doctrines 5, 17, 31–38; Letter to Menoeceus §§129–132.

Eirene: Letter to Menoeceus §§123–125; Principal Doctrines 2 and 11.

Epicurus, Letter to Menoeceus (entire) Read online · Robert Drew Hicks, public domain; death and desires extracts above

Epicurus, Principal Doctrines 1–40 Read online · Robert Drew Hicks, public domain; substantial numbered selections above

Epicurus, Vatican Sayings 17, 55, 66 Read online · Peter Saint-Andre, explicitly CC0; Saying 17 printed above

Verify the English wording at the specific numbers; some translations number or arrange the sayings differently.

Epicurus, final letter to Idomeneus (Diogenes Laertius 10.22) Read online · R. D. Hicks, 1925 public-domain translation

Lucretius, On the Nature of Things, Book III Read online · 1916 public-domain verse translation by William Ellery Leonard; modern classroom adaptation above

BUDDHIST ROLES

Nāgasena: SN 56.11; SN 22.59; Milindapañha chariot dialogue; AN 3.65.

Sumanā: MN 10; MN 118; SN 22.59; Sutta Nipāta 1.8; SN 36.6; Vinaya, Mahāvagga 8.26.

Nandā: Therīgāthā 51–53 (Ubbirī); Sutta Nipāta 1.8; MN 86.

Vijaya: AN 6.63; DN 5; DN 26; Aśoka, Major Rock Edict XIII.

Rakkhita: AN 6.63; Sutta Nipāta 1.8; Aśoka, Major Rock Edict XIII.

Kusumā: Sutta Nipāta 1.8; AN 6.63; DN 5.

The following Pāli-discourse links provide free access to English translations. Bhikkhu Sujato's translations on SuttaCentral are published CC0, though the translator requests that they not be used for AI training or AI-derived systems; none of that translation's prose is reprinted here. Some earlier editions at other sites are under separate free-distribution terms.

SN 56.11 — Setting in Motion the Wheel of Dhamma Read online · four noble truths

SN 22.59 — Not-Self Characteristic Read online · five aggregates and not-self

AN 3.65 — To the Kālāmas Read online · grounds for accepting teachings

MN 10 — Foundations of Mindfulness Read online · four foundations of mindfulness; a long discourse

MN 118 — Mindfulness of Breathing Read online · breath meditation

SN 36.6 — The Dart / Two Arrows Read online · bodily pain and the mind's response

MN 86 — Aṅgulimāla Read online · change, responsibility, and forgiveness

AN 6.63 — Penetrative Read online · intention and kamma

DN 5 — Kūṭadanta Read online · sacrifice, government and welfare; long discourse

DN 26 — The Wheel-Turning Monarch Read online · righteous kingship; long discourse

Sutta Nipāta 1.8 — Mettā Read online · loving-kindness; complete PD translation printed above

Therīgāthā — Ubbirī Read online · lamentation and grief; identify verses 51–53

Vinaya, Mahāvagga 8.26 — The sick monk Read online · care for a sick monk; navigate to section 8.26

The Questions of King Milinda — chariot dialogue Read online · T. W. Rhys Davids (1890); extract printed above

Therīgāthā — Psalms of the Sisters Read online · C. A. F. Rhys Davids (1909), public-domain edition

Sutta Nipāta — Mettā Sutta Read online · V. Fausbøll (1881), PD complete sutta printed above

Aśoka, Major Rock Edict XIII Read online · Vincent A. Smith PD translation; beginning printed above

SKEPTICAL ROLES

Carneades: Cicero, Academica 2.7–9, 2.99–104; On Duties 2.8.

Damaris: Sextus Empiricus, Outlines 1.8–12, 1.21–30, 1.145–163 and 1.196.

Clitomachus: Cicero, Academica 2.98–104 and 2.139; Diogenes Laertius 4.67.

Menodora: Sextus Empiricus, Outlines 1.19–24 and 1.25–30.

Philista: Cicero, Academica 2.99–104; On Duties 2.8; Sextus Empiricus, Outlines 1.21–24.

Sextus Empiricus, Outlines of Pyrrhonism, Book I Read online · Mary Mills Patrick (1899), public domain; extracts printed above

Consult the complete translation for §§145–163 (varying customs) and §196 (suspension).

Cicero, Academica, Book II Read online · C. D. Yonge 1853 public-domain volume, Library of Congress

Passages 2.83–86 and 2.99–104 appear in Part I as classroom renderings. The remaining passages (2.7–9, 2.98, and 2.139) can be read in the linked volume.

Cicero, On Duties 2.8 Read online · Walter Miller 1913, public domain

Diogenes Laertius, Lives 4.67 (Clitomachus) Read online · R. D. Hicks (1925), public domain; full short biographical passage printed above

Source and Editing Notes

The original Greek, Latin, and Pāli works are ancient. English translations are separately authored works. Public-domain/CC0 translations used or adapted in Part I are credited after the selections. The modern free-verse classroom renderings of Cleanthes and Lucretius were prepared with AI assistance and checked against the ancient texts and public-domain translations. For works still under copyright, the reader supplies links rather than copies.

The excerpts are selective and are meant for role preparation, not as substitutes for critical editions. In places where a source is represented only by a link (especially Cicero's longer philosophical works and many Pāli discourses), this is stated explicitly. Older English can sometimes make a philosophical claim harder to interpret; compare a modern edition through your institution when available.

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Greek sacrificial procession. Photograph: ArchaiOptix. License: CC BY-SA 4.0. Wikimedia Commons file.

Bust of an elderly man, possibly a philosopher, Ai-Khanoum. Photograph: World Imaging (2006). Public domain. Wikimedia Commons file.

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