Buddhist Faction Handout

Delegation to King Menander's court • Sāgala, c. 150 BCE

Understand suffering and its causes; cultivate ethical conduct, attention, compassion, and wisdom.

Your objectives

Primary — Win the court. Receive more allegiance votes than any rival faction for an outright victory; an absolute majority is not required. If two or more factions tie for the most votes, each tied faction earns a partial victory.

Secondary — Royal patronage. Persuade Menander to award the Buddhist delegation one year of royal patronage.

Your responsibilities

- Explain and defend your school's central teachings. Decide together how to divide the presentation, questions, advice, and patronage case; everyone should contribute.
- Lead a short exercise: use or adapt a suggested practice, or invent one rooted in your school's philosophy. Explain its purpose.
- When the court receives its dilemmas, offer concrete advice grounded in your school's teachings and the primary sources. Respond to skeptical and rival objections.

What your school believes

You represent a Buddhist community in northwestern India. The Buddha taught that ordinary life is marked by dukkha: pain, dissatisfaction, and the insecurity of trying to rely on things that change. Liberation calls for understanding these conditions and transforming how we live, not merely collecting comforting ideas.

The Four Noble Truths. Dukkha includes suffering and the instability of pleasure. Craving (taṇhā), sustained by ignorance, helps generate it. The cessation of craving is possible; the Noble Eightfold Path develops the ethical conduct, meditative discipline, and wisdom needed for liberation. This does not mean that every enjoyment is a mistake.

Impermanence and not-self. Experiences arise through conditions and pass away. The body, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness—the five aggregates—do not reveal a permanent, independently controlling self. This is not a claim that actions lack consequences or that persons are morally irrelevant.

Kamma, rebirth, and nibbāna. Kamma means intentional action with consequences. Classical Buddhist teaching includes rebirth, but not the migration of an unchanging soul. Nibbāna is freedom from greed, hatred, and delusion. An awakened person may still experience bodily pain, but craving no longer creates the same further entanglement in suffering.

Compassion and social obligations. The path encourages non-harming, generosity, loving-kindness, and compassion. Monastics renounce household life, while lay followers can practice without doing so. Your delegation must explain how weakening clinging differs from caring less, and how a ruler may act decisively while refusing cruelty.

Your hardest question. Can not-self make sense of responsibility over time? Can one love particular people deeply without clinging? What supports claims about karma and rebirth?

Two suggested philosophical practices

These exercises are options, not requirements. Use one, adapt it, or develop another rooted in Buddhist teachings, using the sources or further research. Plan for about two minutes; allow silent or observational participation without personal disclosure. Explain its philosophical point without treating an experience as proof of Buddhist doctrines.

Option 1 Mindfulness and insight

Purpose. Observe experience changing. Explore why Buddhists question treating our sensations, feelings, and thoughts as a permanent self under complete control.

1. Settle and notice breathing. Say: “Sit comfortably. Let your eyes remain open or close them if you prefer. Breathe normally. Notice where you feel the breath most easily: at your nose, chest, or belly.” Give everyone a few breaths to settle. They may attend to sounds instead.

2. Notice change in the body. Say: “Follow one breath as it begins, changes, and ends. Now notice another sensation, such as pressure where your feet touch the floor or warmth in your hands. Does it shift, fade, or seem steady?” Pause. Ask participants to observe what happens, without forcing a change.

3. Notice the feeling tone. Explain: “Feeling tone means whether an experience feels pleasant, unpleasant, or neither. It does not mean your whole mood.” Ask: “How does the sensation feel? Is there an urge to keep it, push it away, or ignore it?” Pause. Invite everyone to notice the urge without immediately following it.

4. Notice a thought. Say: “When a thought appears, silently label it ‘thinking.’ Notice whether it changes or passes. Did you choose its arrival? Can you command it to remain exactly the same?” If no thought is obvious, participants can continue noticing the breath. There is no need to make the mind blank.

5. Return when attention wanders. Say: “If you get caught up in a thought, notice that and return gently to the breath or a sound. Wandering is something to observe, not a failure.” Allow another quiet pause, then invite everyone to notice the room again.

Explain the point. These observations explore impermanence and the limits of control. Buddhists use such inquiry to question identifying changing experiences as a permanent self. A brief exercise does not prove not-self, and the teaching does not mean that choices or responsibilities disappear.

Discuss briefly. What changed without your choosing it? What were you still able to influence? What does this suggest—and not establish—about the self?

Sources: MN 10, the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta; MN 118; SN 22.59. MN = Majjhima Nikāya; SN = Saṃyutta Nikāya.

Preparation for debate and negotiation

Explain how mindfulness and insight or loving-kindness fits the Four Noble Truths. Defend not-self without denying responsibility, and nonattachment without abandoning love. Answer skeptical questions about rebirth, and distinguish the potential benefits of a brief practice from proof of Buddhist metaphysics.

A useful exercise does not by itself establish that its underlying worldview is true.

Option 2 Extend loving kindness beyond the court

Purpose. Practice wishing others well, including people beyond your own circle. Loving-kindness is an intention of goodwill; it does not require affection or approval of someone's actions.

1. Begin with someone easy to care about. Invite everyone to sit comfortably and bring to mind a familiar person they wish well. They may use a fictional person and keep their eyes open. Say: "For now, set aside what you want from this person and attend to their wish to be safe and well."

2. Offer simple wishes. Read the phrases below slowly, leaving a quiet pause after each. Invite participants to repeat them silently:

"May you be safe.
May you be well.
May you be free from suffering."

Say: "You do not need to produce a warm feeling. Simply try the intention expressed by the words."

3. Include someone outside your circle. Say: "Now bring to mind someone in the city whom you do not know well: perhaps a merchant, guard, or passerby. They too wish to avoid suffering." Repeat the same three phrases slowly, with pauses.

4. Extend goodwill across the frontier. Say: "Now consider people living across a hostile frontier: families, workers, and soldiers. Even where interests conflict, they can suffer as we do." Repeat the wishes. Invite participants to notice any resistance without criticizing themselves. They may remain with an earlier person if they prefer.

5. Connect goodwill to conduct. Invite everyone to notice the room again. Ask: "What action could express this goodwill? How might it change your treatment of a frightened stranger or an injured enemy?" Invite one or two concrete examples, while allowing silent reflection.

Explain the point. Wishing someone well need not mean trusting them, approving their conduct, or abandoning the people you protect. The practice asks whether you can oppose harmful actions without cultivating hatred or cruelty.

Discuss briefly. Can concern extend to enemies without weakening responsibilities to family and community? Where might the responsibilities conflict?

Source: Sutta Nipāta 1.8, the Karaṇīya Mettā Sutta. The phrases above are simple prompts for this classroom exercise.

After the final judgments

Give ONE collective rating (1–5) of the court's Philosophical Deliberation. Evaluate whether court members understood competing positions and gave thoughtful reasons. Do not reward or penalize them for agreeing or disagreeing with your faction. The Game Master will announce the court's average rating.

Sources and historical cautions

The early Buddhist discourses were transmitted orally and compiled over time. SN = Saṃyutta Nikāya. The later Milindapañha associates Nāgasena with Menander, but is not a contemporary court transcript.