Travel Guide

An Introduction to Eastern Philosophy

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Travel Guide for
The Circle of Happiness

Introduction

This Travel Guide for *The Circle of Happiness* introduces the philosophers that Mae encounters as animal characters in the story. It provides in-depth content about each philosopher's arguments, as well as information about the cultural context and time period during which these thinkers lived and taught.

This companion volume to the story is called a "travel guide" because it not only provides readers with additional information about Mae's trip through the ten circles in the story, but it also assists motivated students on their own journey to question and search for a personal philosophy of happiness. To that end, the characters from the story make an appearance in the Travel Guide, this time talking directly to readers instead of to Mae.

Included in each chapter of the Travel Guide is a summary of the corresponding chapter in the story, a discussion of the philosopher's life, the cultural context and philosophical arguments relating to the topic of happiness, and a list of questions for discussion, four of which are about the novel, with the fifth being about the content in the Travel Guide. Some chapters also contain additional information about specific cultural beliefs that underpin the philosophies presented. At the end of the book, there is information about why each character was chosen to portray a particular philosopher or philosophy and a list of suggested readings for further study.

Religion or Philosophy?

Many of the philosophers introduced in *The Circle of Happiness* might be seen as religious figures, just as several of the philosophical concepts discussed flow undeniably into or out of the sphere of religion. It would be inaccurate to claim that there is always a clear line between what is religion and what is philosophy; in many ways it is a matter of subjective emphasis. This holds true in both Western and Eastern contexts.

That said, it also would be inaccurate to say that the label of philosophy is arbitrary. Philosophical ideas are established through reasoned arguments that must be made either implicitly or explicitly. These arguments are open to challenge from counterarguments, and unlike religious ideas, they cannot be based predominately on faith, revelation, or appeal to the authority of religious texts. However, belief-based concepts are often tightly interwoven with philosophical arguments, and they therefore find connection. To understand one, it is often necessary to understand the other.

In the West, Asian religions are sometimes misrepresented as only their philosophical concepts. This tendency can result in an incomplete or erroneous view of how these religions are actually practiced. It is important to remember that religions are dynamic, and their philosophical vitality is but one part of a wider nexus that includes popular and devotional practices, rituals, festivals, cultural influences and development, and more.

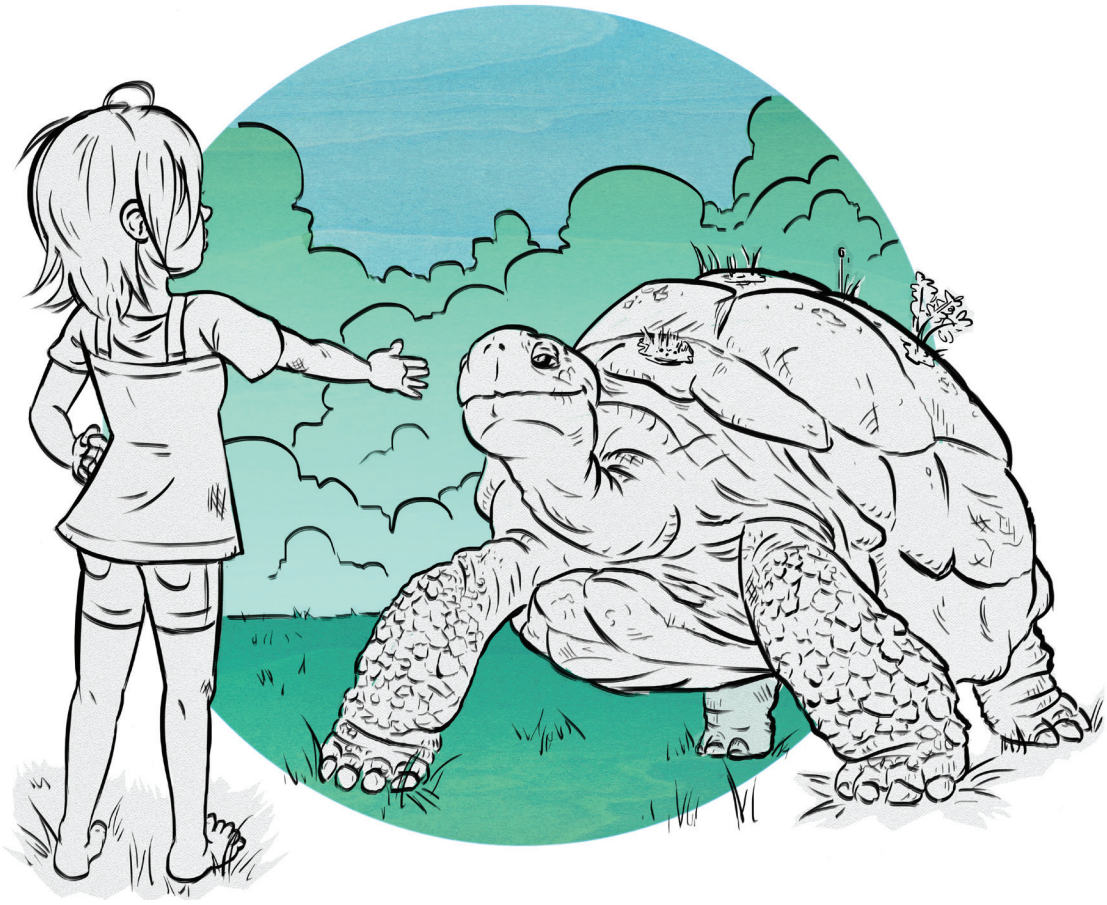
Similarly, it would be an incomplete or erroneous representation of the philosophies presented in *The Circle of Happiness* to omit any belief-based concepts that are interwoven into the philosophical arguments. In order to present the most accurate view possible, this Travel Guide includes ideas that arguably might be more faith-based in nature but that are necessary to discuss in order to understand the material.

A Note about Scholarship and Translations

When talking about people and cultures that existed long ago in times and places different from our own, the accuracy of any presentation rests upon the integrity of one's sources, as well as on one's awareness of any potential biases, including those that are inherent in previous scholarship. In the case of the West studying and interpreting the East, there has been much of the latter. With this in mind, I have been careful in this text to be as historically and topically specific as possible, keeping the discussion to areas of philosophy that may or may not be relevant to the practice of religions of the same name, then or now.

There is much we cannot know for certain about events and dynamics that transpired long ago; this is part of the wonderful challenge—as well as the unavoidable frustration—of historical research. What we can say for certain, however, is where we get our information. Careful scholarship leaves a trail so that the evidentiary basis for arguments and claims is traceable and transparent. This is especially important when primary source material is being used in translation. Translation is artful, and the same passage may be translated many ways. Primary source material itself, of course, is subject to a variety of interpretations—a complexity then magnified in the process of translation. While I have studied the Sanskrit and Pali languages, the information presented in this curriculum relies upon the translations of many others.

The translations of Buddhist philosophical texts are those of Edward Conze, Walpole Rahula, H. Saddhatissa, Yamamoto Shoshun, Nyogen Senzaki, and Paul Reps. For the Upanishadic texts, I relied upon the translations of Robert Ernest Hume, S. Radhakrishnan, and Juan Mascaró. R.K. Pruthi's translations informed the discussion of Jain philosophy; Bhupender Herra and Pradeep P. Gokhale's works provided the translations of the existing Lokayata sources. For tracking down Ajivika references in Buddhist and Jain texts, I relied on A.L. Basham's translations. Much of the Chinese source material was translated by Wing-Tsit Chan. Additional translations of the Confucian material come from the work of Edward Gilman Slingerland, W.E. Foothill, Bryan W. Van Norden, and Anne Behnke Kinney. The Taoist primary sources were translated by Stephen Mitchell, Robert G. Henricks, Martin Palmer, Gia-Fu Geng, and Jane English.



Chapter One: The Question of Happiness

Summary

Mae is having a fun time at the park with her relatives, but after several hours she is becoming bored, unhappy, and annoyed with her little brother Kevin. All she can think about is wanting to go home. Suddenly, a monkey appears and talks to her, asking, "What if you were happy *right here*?" Before she can answer, he draws a circle in the air and disappears through it. Mae thinks she sees animal tracks on the other side of the circle and, eager to escape her unhappy situation, decides to follow the monkey through it.

Philosophical Basis

Aimlessly, endlessly, he parts the grass, seeking.

This is the first line of commentary written by the Chinese Zen master Kuoan Shihyuan for the beautiful and profound Zen Buddhist philosophical work known as *The Ten Oxherding Pictures*. Just like the main character in the original set of ten pictures and verses, created in China during the Song dynasty (960-1279), our story opens with Mae searching through the grass for something interesting. She was happy at the park for a while, but now she is bored, listless, and seeking a distraction from her unhappy mood.

This is a good place to begin our exploration of Asian philosophers and philosophies because philosophy itself is defined by the act of seeking, and like Mae, philosophers are often propelled by their dissatisfaction with typical answers.

During a time period from about the sixth century BCE* to the third century BCE, many people living in India, China, Greece, and the Middle East were also becoming dissatisfied with the typical answers. Individuals from across these disconnected cultures found themselves living in shifting social and political environments. The changes they were experiencing made them question old answers and seek new ways to understand subjects such as the self and the world. They were especially concerned with the problem of suffering. Why does it happen? How can we liberate ourselves from it? What is the secret to lasting happiness? These curious individuals went on to shape their cultures—and the cultures of others—in dramatic ways that are still evident today. In fact, so many pivotal thinkers were living and philosophizing during this time period that it is now known by the name the Axial Age.

The "Axial Age" is a term that was coined by the modern German philosopher Karl Jaspers. He noticed that during that time period, many philosophers in different places across Asia and Europe were engaged in intense and extraordinary questioning of established institutions and beliefs. Jaspers described the age as *axial* because the philosophies that emerged then represented a new revolution—a turning of the wheel, as on an axle—of thought. The result was a great shifting of ideas about reality, ethics, the individual, and society. Plato, Aristotle, the Buddha, Zoroaster, Confucius, and many other philosophers all lived during this intellectually vibrant and exciting period. In many cases, these philosophers engaged in lively debates with one another, and several of the Axial Age philosophies developed into major world religions or reinvigorated earlier religious ideas.

Mae's search for something to make her happy, like philosophy itself, necessarily involves risk. We cannot find answers if we are not courageous enough to ask the question and jump into the unknown. Mae's search for happiness is the same search that philosophers, including those living during the Axial Age in India and China, have embarked upon for thousands of years.

The Fundamental Questions: How do we find happiness? What causes unhappiness? Is there a way to avoid it and be happy all the time?

* BCE (Before the Common Era) and CE (Common Era) are alternative names for BC (Before Christ) and AD (*Anno Domini*). BCE and CE are often used in academic writing today.

Discussion Questions

1. When the monkey holds out his hand to Mae as though he wants to show her something, she discovers that he's not holding anything. Why do you suppose the monkey did that? Do you think he had a reason, and if so, what might it have been?
2. The monkey asks Mae, "What if you were happy *right here*?" If something could have made Mae happy in the park, what do you think it would have been? Why would that have made her happy?
3. Do you think that it is possible to be happy all the time? Why or why not?
4. Would you have followed the monkey through the circle the way Mae did? Why or why not?
5. How is doing philosophy like jumping through the circle?

Chapter Two: The Buddha's Answer

Summary

Mae finds herself in a hot and muggy jungle and instantly regrets her decision to jump through the circle, which has disappeared behind her. She follows a path to find the monkey and hopes that he can tell her how to get home. When she finds him, he tells her a story that he says will help her; it is about stopping one's mind from moving. Mae uses the lesson of the story to try to still her mind, and another circle appears.

Philosophical Basis

The first philosopher Mae encounters in our story is Monkey. Monkey represents the Axial Age thinker who was eventually called "the Buddha" but who was born with the name Siddhartha Gautama. Siddhartha lived in northern India during the sixth or fifth century BCE, which is about the same time that Socrates was living in Greece (perhaps 100 years before, depending on which dates scholars use). Although Siddhartha is recognized as a philosopher whose teachings later inspired many different schools of thought, unlike Socrates he did not consider himself a philosopher. Nor, however, did he think of himself as a religious leader or a savior of any kind, although the Buddhist religion did eventually arise from his teachings. Instead, Siddhartha thought of himself as a healer.

This is an eleventh-century black stone statue of Buddha preaching the first sermon at Sarnath in a deer forest where he had experienced enlightenment some weeks earlier.

Siddhartha was born a prince to a wealthy family during a time of social unrest, when different groups were vying for influence and power. About a thousand years before his birth, people who called themselves Aryas (meaning "noble" in Sanskrit, the language of ancient India) migrated to the Indian subcontinent, bringing with them an early form of Sanskrit, their sacrifice-based religion, and the horse and chariot. They encountered and mixed with the people already living in India, who had their own languages and cultures. This was a contentious period, filled with warfare among different groups of Aryas as this once-nomadic people settled into a more stationary life. As this process of change occurred, their rituals became more elaborate, and the role of the priests (*Brahmins* in Sanskrit) became more important. Eventually there emerged a feeling among the ruling class that the Brahmins had become too powerful, and people began to wonder about the value of ritual sacrifice altogether.

Against this backdrop of social upheaval, Siddhartha was born. Siddhartha's father wanted his son to succeed him as king, so to make sure that Siddhartha never thought about taking a different path in life, he spoiled the boy, distracting him with every kind of luxury and shielding him from all stress, hardship, and suffering. The king reasoned that if Siddhartha had everything he wanted inside the palace walls, he would never want to go beyond them. But Siddhartha, according to the story, did eventually wonder what was outside those walls, so one day he

told his father that he was going to go out and look around. His father hurried to make the outside world appear perfect, hoping that Siddhartha would go out, be satisfied, and come back home to be king.

It didn't work out that way. Instead, while he was out in the city, Siddhartha saw something he had never seen before: he saw someone old, worn down in body and mind by time and a life of hard work. His father had kept everyone in Siddhartha's life young, strong, and beautiful; Siddhartha did not know about old age! The knowledge that we grow old and that our bodies will not always be robust and strong startled and scared him. A while later, he caught sight of something else he had never seen before: he saw someone suffering with a terrible disease. Before that moment, he had never known that people got sick! He was deeply troubled when he learned this. Then he encountered the most upsetting sight of all: a person who had died. Siddhartha had not known that death existed.

Knowledge of age, sickness, and death rattled the prince to his core. When he returned home, he could not stop thinking about all the suffering he had seen. All the luxuries in his life, he realized, could not stop changes brought about by time. How could he go back to his pleasure-filled existence knowing that his fate was to suffer? Wasn't there a way to escape suffering altogether? If suffering is the disease, he wondered, what is the cure?

Philosophers from many times and places have considered the question "What is a good life?" This was the question that Siddhartha was most concerned with as he thought about the problem of suffering. For him, the ideal world was one in which there was no suffering at all. So he rejected his future as the king and set out on a quest for answers. He wanted to find a way to heal people of their suffering, but in order to do that, he first had to figure out the origin of suffering. Why do we suffer in the first place?

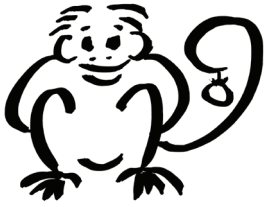
After many years of thinking and learning, Siddhartha developed a deep conviction about why we suffer. In the legends told about him later, the exact moment of awakening, when he realized why we suffer and how to escape it, is the moment he became the Buddha (the word *Buddha* in Sanskrit means "the one who woke up").

What did the Buddha realize was the origin of suffering? He believed that our desires—those things and ideas that we grasp onto, are attached to, and want to hold onto—cause us to suffer. Here is what he said, which is recorded in the Buddhist text the *Sutta Nipata*:

> There are many kinds of suffering in this world, and all of them grow from the same source: grasping. When a man knows no better, he gives way to this grasping, and, slowed and dulled, he goes through one misery after another. So do not create it for yourselves. Use your knowledge to see how suffering begins and is developed in attachment.

The word for desire or grasping in Sanskrit is *tanha*, which literally means thirst. When we thirst for something, when we crave something—something so important that if we do not get it, the feeling is painful—there are only three possible outcomes of that desire: (1) we get what we want, (2) we do not get what we want, (3) we get what we want but then change our minds and want something else. No matter which of these three outcomes occurs, the Buddha said, the end result is always suffering. It is inescapable.

How can that be? Well, maybe we should bring in Monkey to help explain.



Saat! I'm very happy to help because you're right! Desiring anything always leads to suffering. Why? Because desire means your *mind is moving*.

I'll show you. Let's use a simple example—something ordinary that you might want, like a nice bowl of ice cream.

Yum. Imagine you got your ice cream. You're happy, right! But how long does that happiness last? The whole bowl? Maybe a little while after? Or is your mind on the move halfway through the bowl, thinking about what you want next? Now you're back to where you started, wanting something again!

There goes your mind, flapping away to the future, wanting something you don't have in the present, and your happiness has melted faster than your ice cream.

Maybe what you want next is more ice cream! Is there any more in the freezer? There's not? Someone else ate the rest of it? Now your mind is agitated, flapping from one upset emotion to the next, wanting all sorts of things that it can't have.

Or maybe there *is* more ice cream in the freezer, and you *can* have another scoop. You can have all the ice cream you want! Now your mind is happy, and your belly is getting more and more full of ice cream because you have *ten more scoops*. Still not enough? Okay, what about eating a hundred more scoops? What about eating ice cream all day? All year? Does that sound good? No? Why not? You wanted ice cream, didn't you? But now you want anything *but* ice cream—what you want has changed. Now you want something else, and again you're back to where you started, your mind chasing after something you want but don't have.

In every case, desire causes your mind to keep moving from one craving to the next. You get what you want, but then you want something else; you don't get what you want, but that makes you upset; you get what you want, but then you don't want it anymore. The outcome for all three is the same: unhappiness!

Thank you, Monkey. That was helpful.

The Buddha believed that desire leads to suffering. This includes not only our desire for superficial or trivial things, like ice cream, but also—and more significantly—our attachments to important things like our feelings and opinions, our expectations, and even the people, animals, and places we love. Not getting ice cream is survivable and doesn't really qualify as suffering, but we do suffer, for example, when a beloved pet dies, or when we're feeling bullied, or when we lose a competition that we had put our heart into. Even when we do get what we want, the happiness is fleeting. There is always the next thing to want. No matter how hard we try to hold onto that moment of happiness, we fail. Why? Our minds are always moving to something we want in the future or to some pain or lost moment of happiness in the past. Even when life is exactly as we want it to be, things have the unfortunate habit of changing.

The Buddha taught that everything changes; everything is impermanent. What is impermanent, he said, leads to suffering, and there is nothing we can do about impermanence. But if everything is impermanent, how can we find permanent joy in life? Is that even possible?

The Buddha said yes, it is possible. The answer—the cure for suffering—he said, is to stop the cycle of desire. If we can stop the chain reaction of desire leading to unhappiness leading to more desires leading to more unhappiness, then we can find permanent joyful happiness. To stop this chain reaction, we have to stop grasping. We have to stop being attached and holding onto our desires. By becoming unattached to our desires, we can stop our minds from moving and instead accept things as they are *right now*. Our attachments, he said, are a creation of our minds—they do not exist in the present. Letting go of our desire means we have to train our minds to stay right here.

The mind, however, does not generally like to stay right here. It likes to hop around from past to future and back again, preferring to be anywhere *but* here. The story that Monkey tells Mae in our novel illustrates that point well. It is the story about two monkeys arguing over a flag (in the original story, from *The Gateless Gate* by Mumon Ekai, it is two monks arguing), and it comes from the Zen Buddhist philosophical tradition. This school of thought that first developed in China and later in Japan asserted that the tendency of the mind to scamper all over the place is like a monkey. They called it "monkey-mind." This is based on something the Buddha said, which was recorded in the Buddhist text the *Dhammapada*:

> The craving of the man addicted to careless living grows like a Maluva creeper. He jumps hither and thither, like a monkey in the forest looking for fruit.

Like Monkey, our monkey-mind cannot sit still and wants to be anywhere, or anytime, or anyplace, other than right here, right now. The Buddha believed that stopping our attachments and desires requires changing how we think. Instead of letting our minds hop to what we want in the future, or what used to be or should have been in the past (all of which leads to suffering), we can only be free from desire if we train our minds to stay in the present. According to the Buddha, as written in the *Dhammapada*:

> Hard to restrain, unstable is this mind; it flits wherever it lists. Good it is to control the mind. A controlled mind brings happiness.

The way we learn to control the mind is through meditation. Meditation, at its core, is the practice of keeping our minds still. Therefore, the first step in overcoming desire is to tame our monkey-mind. However, taming our minds to stay right here and now is not easy. One of the first things meditation does is help us notice how often our thoughts drift to some other place or time. In particular, our minds often gravitate toward and dwell upon difficulties, such as that mistake we made on yesterday's quiz or how later we have to do our chores. But none of those things are happening right now. Our bodies cannot time travel, but our minds certainly can. Even if what we are thinking about is something positive that we are looking forward to or something nice that we remember, what is lost in all this moving of the mind is our enjoyment of the here and now. What is lost is happiness in the present.

There is a Buddhist story that illustrates this point perfectly. Two monks were traveling and came upon a woman trying to get across a river. Monks, according to the rules, are not permitted to have any physical contact with women. But the first monk, seeing the woman in distress and feeling compassion for her situation, picked her up and carried her across the rushing water, depositing her on the other side. The two monks continued walking. After a little while the second monk, bothered by how his companion had broken the rules, spoke up. "You weren't supposed to do that!" he said. The first monk looked at his friend and replied, "I put the woman down on the other side of the river. Why are you still carrying her?"

Of course the monk meant that his companion was still carrying the memory of what had happened at the river, dwelling on something in the past, which was making him unhappy. Our minds tend to carry a lot of things. Meditation and mindfulness, said the Buddha, can help us release some of that burden so that we can be happy in the present, no matter what the present holds.

Cultivating the skill of keeping our minds in the present is not the only thing the Buddha thought was necessary for a happy life, but the ability to be mindful and present is at the heart of what he taught. He laid these ideas out more specifically in a doctrine called the Eightfold Path. The Eightfold Path offers eight principles of living that the Buddha believed will eventually lead people toward freedom from suffering.

The foundation of the path is three ethical principles based on compassion: right speech (do not lie or say things that will hurt others), right action (do not steal or behave in a way that is destructive or harmful to others), and right livelihood (do not profit from a profession that harms others). Compassion was central to the Buddha's philosophy because all beings suffer. After all, compassion for those who were suffering was the reason that Prince Siddhartha set out on his quest to begin with. Likewise, the Buddha taught that we all should have compassion for every being on Earth because they suffer just as we do.

The second part of the path concerns our monkey-mind. These three steps are about mental discipline: right effort (developing our ability to be compassionate and present), right mindfulness (being aware of where our monkey-mind is taking us and learning to keep it still), and right concentration (the result of right mindfulness).

The last part of the Eightfold Path, which can only be reached after traveling through the first six steps and training our minds to let go of desires and attachments, is wisdom. The two remaining steps are right thought (being unattached to desires and being compassionate toward all beings) and right understanding (seeing things as they truly are instead of how we wish them to be).

The Eightfold Path is often called the Middle Way because the Buddha taught that getting beyond our desires requires balance—we do not want to be attached to those things that make us feel good (seeking happiness

through fulfilling our desires) any more than we want to be attached to things that make us feel righteous (seeking happiness through denying our needs). He believed that people should live in the middle. For example, he would say that a child should not want every toy on the toystore shelf or think that having those toys will result in lasting happiness, but neither should a child give up every toy forever in the effort to be unattached. Craving non-attachment is a craving, too!

The Buddha laid out his beliefs in a formulation that he called The Four Noble Truths:

1. Life is suffering. That is not all it is, but every living being suffers.
2. The cause of suffering is desire (cravings, attachments).
3. It is possible to stop suffering by stopping desires.
4. The way to do this is to walk the steps of the Eightfold Path.

The Buddha's Answer: Desire causes suffering. Stopping the cycle of desire leads to joy.

Discussion Questions

1. Mae is quickly unhappy in the jungle, and she angrily thinks, "I had no one to blame but myself. No, that's not true. I blamed the monkey." Was the monkey really to blame, or was Mae entirely responsible for her situation? Or were both of them responsible? Explain your answer.
2. As Mae is traveling through the jungle, looking for the monkey, she thinks about the park and says, "I would gladly be happy *there* instead of here." Do you think that this is true, or would she just have been less unhappy there? How much of her happiness depends on her perspective of things?
3. Mae asks Monkey to help her get back to the park, but instead of offering any direct advice, he tells her a story that she must learn from. What are the benefits to Mae of having to figure out the meaning of the story on her own, and what might be the drawbacks? Would it have been better if Monkey had just told her what he wanted her to know? Explain your answer.
4. Mae contemplates her situation, thinking, "when I was at the park, I wasn't very happy. My mind was at home. It wanted something interesting to do. I *got* something interesting to do. I got what I wanted. That's what happiness is, right?" Consider, though, that what Mae wanted was extremely vague and broadly worded: she wanted to do something interesting. Suppose that Mae had been far more precise in her idea of what she wanted—that she had been specific about what kind of environment she wanted to be in, and that there be no bugs in it, and that she be doing something that she knows she enjoys. Could getting what she wanted in that situation have made her statement—that happiness is getting what you want—true? Is getting what you want to make you happy simply a matter of how specific you are about your wishes? Explain your answer.
5. Do you think the Buddha's argument that desires and attachments cause suffering is correct? It is possible to stop having desires and attachments? What kinds of things might be easier to stop being attached to? What kinds of things would be harder?

Activity: Choose a regular moment during the day to notice how many thoughts go through your head every second. How many of those thoughts are about the present? You can also check out the resources on meditation at the back of this guide and give it a try.