Philosophy

by Julie Bray

"We are such stuff as dreams are made on and our little life is rounded with a sleep."
(Shakespeare)

Does this sentence make you think? What does it make you think about? Shakespeare was a dreamer, and some say he was a philosopher too. In this sentence he tells us that our lives are short but we can think up big and important ideas in that short time.

The two Greek words – "philo", which means love and "sophia", which means wisdom are the beginnings of the word we use today; Philosophy, the love of wisdom.

Most people have a philosophy on life. Everybody has an idea of what is right and what is wrong, and why things are the way they are, and who they are and who to trust. A lot of people believe somebody else's philosophy. That person may be a religious or political leader, or anybody you look up to. Some people have their own philosophy on life which might be a mixture of theories. Others are philosophers; people who want to know the truth about life for themselves and spend their time studying, thinking and asking questions.

One of the earliest Eastern philosophies was Taoism, which came from China. We are all aware of the yin and yang halves of the universe – nothing can exist without its opposite. Another great eastern philosophy is Buddhism, which is a religion and also a system of beliefs which help us to understand ourselves and others better. One branch of western philosophy, Existentialism, is very similar to Buddhist ideas. Both ask questions about what really exists in life, and help us to decide what is important.

The first western philosophers lived in Greece. They encouraged people to find their own answers to questions about life instead of believing the Gods did everything. Socrates was the most famous of these. He is one of the most famous philosophers in the world, yet he said 'one thing I know and that is that I know nothing.' This is why he never wrote or lectured. He only discussed. He did not believe he could tell anybody anything, that it was better to encourage individual thinking.

Today philosophers are still encouraging people to think. Schools in some countries teach philosophy to children. Reading books written by old philosophers can be difficult because the language is from the past. So stories are used to help schoolchildren make their own decisions about what is right and wrong and think about the best way to solve problems.

Why do we need philosophy? There are plenty of people who think that killing animals is cruel, but eating animals is fine. If you are one of these people, you should ask yourself why. Why is killing animals cruel? Why is it okay to eat animals? You might find that the answer to each question is very different and you could have an argument by yourself using your own ideas! Go on and argue - you will understand more about what you believe. You will begin to understand the subject more deeply. And this helps you to feel comfortable with it. And you might change something or you might not. When we ask ourselves questions, we start to understand ourselves and our lives, and it's up to us to make changes or not. If the ideas in your head agree, this means you have integrity. What you say and what you do are the same. Everyone respects someone who has integrity!

By thinking and questioning, we can understand more and maybe prevent problems caused by misunderstanding. But philosophy can also cause problems and conflict when people don't agree. When one group of people choose one philosophy to believe and another group of people choose a different philosophy, when they need to think or make a decision together, they start trying to change each other instead of working together on bigger ideas about life.

So when you have some spare time, ask yourself the following philosophical questions:

Does the world own us or do we own the world?
Which is more important, humans or stars?
If a tree falls where nobody can hear it, does it make a sound?
And the Zen Buddist riddle: What is the sound of one hand clapping?