

**GCSE (9-1)**

**Examiners' report**

# **RELIGIOUS STUDIES**

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**J625**

For first teaching in 2016

**J625/04 Summer 2023 series**

# Contents

|                               |    |
|-------------------------------|----|
| Introduction .....            | 3  |
| Paper 4 series overview ..... | 4  |
| Question 1 (a) .....          | 6  |
| Question 1 (b) .....          | 6  |
| Question 1 (c) .....          | 7  |
| Question 1 (d) .....          | 7  |
| Question 1 (e) .....          | 9  |
| Question 2 (a) .....          | 9  |
| Question 2 (b) .....          | 10 |
| Question 2 (c) .....          | 10 |
| Question 2 (d) .....          | 11 |
| Question 2 (e)* .....         | 13 |

## Introduction

Our examiners' reports are produced to offer constructive feedback on candidates' performance in the examinations. They provide useful guidance for future candidates.

The reports will include a general commentary on candidates' performance, identify technical aspects examined in the questions and highlight good performance and where performance could be improved. A selection of candidate answers is also provided. The reports will also explain aspects which caused difficulty and why the difficulties arose, whether through a lack of knowledge, poor examination technique, or any other identifiable and explainable reason.

Where overall performance on a question/question part was considered good, with no particular areas to highlight, these questions have not been included in the report.

A full copy of the question paper and the mark scheme can be downloaded from OCR.

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## Paper 4 series overview

Overall, many candidates seemed genuinely well prepared for the paper and there were some excellent responses, some of which went well beyond the expectations for candidates at this level. Candidates used their knowledge and analysis/evaluation skills appropriately to respond to the questions on the paper. For example, many candidates understood the key terms and concepts in the questions and could explain, analyse and evaluate them in relation to the topic and to broader Buddhist concepts. Candidates did this by taking an idea like the Eightfold Path and showing how the concepts within it link to other concepts not directly mentioned in the question, such as the three fires. By doing this, candidates demonstrated the depth of their knowledge and how well they had been prepared by centres beforehand.

Where candidates had good subject knowledge and were able to use this effectively, they achieved higher marks. For example, the three jewels and the defeat of Mara needed clear and specific information. Where candidates were precise with their knowledge, they achieved higher marks. Where they did not know these terms or only described the stories around these ideas without addressing the question, they were less successful.

| Candidates who did well on this paper generally:  | Candidates who did less well on this paper generally:   |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• had good subject knowledge and could use key terms correctly, such as mindfulness meditation</li> <li>• could explain the key terms they used accurately</li> <li>• understood how key ideas interconnect, e.g. candidates could link the Eightfold Path to enlightenment</li> <li>• did not waste time with lengthy responses when a more concise response was enough to achieve the highest marks, particularly on the 3 mark questions</li> <li>• had a good understanding of the questions and tailored their response to meet the requirements of the question</li> <li>• offered a good selection of appropriate sources of wisdom and authority, and used them well to address the question.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• confused different ideas so that they were not addressing the question</li> <li>• mixed up concepts, e.g. Samatha meditation was confused with mindfulness meditation</li> <li>• did not have clear subject knowledge and therefore did not fully address the questions</li> <li>• wrote everything they knew rather than addressing the question</li> <li>• had a limited understanding of the question, so only partially addressed it</li> <li>• limited knowledge and understanding of the influence on individuals, communities and societies</li> <li>• made a limited attempt to respond to the stimulus and therefore did not attract the higher marks.</li> </ul> |

### Misconception



Mindfulness Meditation is a separate form of meditation. It has links to Samatha meditation and in particular breathing meditation (anapanasati). However, mindfulness meditation is a separate type of meditative technique, and this can be seen in the Buddha's teaching in the satipatthana sutta. These same techniques are also used by the NHS and appears on their website.

## Assessment for learning



The specification states that the Mahayana concept of Tathagatagarbha is the potential to become a Buddha, and that the Mahayana concept of Buddha-nature is the inherent Buddhahood of all sentient beings. These two ideas have been conflated by many candidates. This is a common error because these two terms are sometimes used interchangeably in some sources of wisdom and authority.

The Mahayana concept of Tathagatagarbha (the potential to become a Buddha) stems from the Tathagatagarbha sutra which expresses the idea that all beings have the potential to become the Buddha. This is often translated as Buddha-embryo. Whereas, in the Mahaparinirvana sutra this concept gets linked with the idea of Buddha-nature (the inherent Buddhahood of all sentient beings). This is the belief that all beings are already enlightened Buddhas, but this is masked by the minds' own negative mental projections.

In Zen Buddhism we find the term Buddha-nature meaning inherent Buddhahood used, whereas elsewhere in Mahayana Buddhism 'Buddha-embryo,' meaning potential for Buddhahood, is used.

### Question 1 (a)

1 (a) State **three** forms of Buddhist worship.

1 .....

.....

2 .....

.....

3 .....

.....

[3]

Most candidates got this correct and wrote three forms of worship such as puja, mantras, and chanting. Some included pilgrimage as a way of worship, which is not correct. Other candidates gave three types of meditation, which is not strictly correct. Meditation is used in worship, but it is also a separate religious practice. Some candidates wasted time writing lots when really it was not needed.

### Question 1 (b)

(b) Describe **one** of the Three Jewels.

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[3]

Many candidates successfully attempted this question. They most commonly chose the Sangha or the Dhamma, and these often achieved the full 3 marks. Candidates who wrote about the Buddha sometimes struggled to achieve the third mark as they ran out of things to say, lapsing into a story about his life. Some candidates included the colour of the jewel as part of their response. A few, but not many, mixed the three jewels up with the three poisons or the 3 marks of existence.

### Question 1 (c)

(c) State **three** Buddhist beliefs about rebirth.

1 .....

.....

2 .....

.....

3 .....

.....

[3]

Most common responses included the six realms one could be reborn into, the 49 days between death and rebirth, how kamma determines your rebirth, mentioning that rebirth was part of the cycle of samsara, and how enlightenment allowed you to escape rebirth. Some responses explained about a soul being reborn, or wrote 'reincarnation' instead of rebirth, and so were not given the marks.

### Question 1 (d)

(d) Describe the aim of mindfulness meditation.

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[6]

Many candidates described the aim of meditation well, although some lapsed into descriptions of different types of meditation with no link to the aim of it. More successful responses focused on the aim being to gain insight, or to calm the mind (see Exemplar 1). Some candidates are unaware of the specific aim and practice of mindful meditation, so very few candidates could achieve the highest mark here. They often referred to mindfulness meditation's aim being to empty the mind, or to be mindful of the Buddha's teaching. It was most commonly mixed up with Samatha meditation.

## Exemplar 1

Mindfulness meditation is used to deepen your concentration of your mind it helps get rid of the three poisons which are greed hatred and ignorance. Furthermore it is helps you <sup>are</sup> focus on the 6 perfections which are ~~are~~ wisdom, ~~mindfulness~~ generosity, morality, meditation, patience and ethics which ~~help you~~ furthermore it helps you concentrate on one thing which helps you attain better wisdom which helps in the three fold way which are wisdom, ethics and morality. Buddhists believe meditation is useful as just as Siddharta Gautama sat under the Bodhi tree to meditate it helps overcome the cycle of samsara and achieve enlightenment. It also helps buddhist annica which is 'that nothing last forever' and annata which is no-self. [6]

This response is not given full marks because the candidate does not show enough specific knowledge and understanding of what mindfulness meditation was. However, they do demonstrate a good awareness of the aims of mindfulness meditation and make effective use of their knowledge of Buddhist concepts to show some aspects of what mindfulness meditation aims to achieve.



### Question 1 (e)

(e) 'All beings have Buddha-nature.'

Discuss this statement. In your answer, you should:

- Analyse and evaluate the importance of points of view, referring to common and divergent views within Buddhism.
- Refer to sources of wisdom and authority.

[15]

 Spelling, punctuation and grammar [3]

Some candidates did not really understand the concept of a Buddha-nature. Candidates referred to it as being like the Buddha in some way (often by being a mortal, or possessing some wise/compassionate characteristics) or an understanding of Buddha-nature as being the Buddha seed inside you. Some candidates considered Theravadins to be the ones who subscribe to this idea, rather than the Mahayana. Some defined Buddhahood as the Brotherhood of Buddha. Some candidates argued that non-human beings cannot have a Buddha-nature because they aren't able to meditate. There were lots of references to Arhats and how they cannot have a Buddha-nature because you can't become a Buddha, only an Arhat. There were also many references to Bodhisattvas and how they would not bother to come back into the cycle of samsara if there was no chance we could become enlightened. Many candidates translated Buddha-nature to mean 'all can become enlightened' or 'everyone has the chance to be' – comparing it with the Theravadin view that only monks can become enlightened. More successful responses wrote about how Buddha-nature contradicts teachings of anatta or wrote about the analogy of bees around a honey pot.

### Question 2 (a)

2 (a) Outline the story of the Buddha's defeat of Mara.

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..... [3]

Most candidates were given 1 or 2 marks here. Some lapsed into a story of the Buddha's trip to the Bodhi tree in the first place, rather than focusing on Mara. Many candidates summarised it as 'He sat under the Bodhi tree meditating. Mara came with his attractive daughters, Buddha ignored them'. More successful responses included reference to the precise temptations, and the earth being a witness to the Buddha's enlightenment and thus defeat of Mara. Some candidates linked the temptations to the three poisons and showed how defeating Mara is a metaphor for overcoming the three poisons.

### Question 2 (b)

(b) State **three** ways in which a Buddhist might celebrate Lama Tsong Khapa Day.

1 .....

.....

2 .....

.....

3 .....

.....

[3]

Most candidates provided very generic 'worship' responses to this question. A few added 'of Lama Tsong Khapa' at the end.

### Question 2 (c)

(c) Describe **one** function of a Buddhist retreat.

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.....

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.....

.....

[3]

Some candidates spoke about Vassa and how the function of a retreat was to prevent bugs from being trampled. Most understood it to be a place to focus on meditation or learning from monks. For some candidates it was impossible to tell from their responses if this was about a retreat or a generic trip to a temple. Some candidates referred to pilgrimages, which was occasionally given a mark if they tailored their response to the demands of the question. Some discussed retreats as a weekend away from the normal life, which was given marks.

## Question 2 (d)

(d) Describe how following the Eightfold Path can help Buddhists achieve enlightenment.

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.....

..... [6]

Most candidates attempted this question and made some effective use of their knowledge. Some referred to the Eightfold Path, saying how it was the Buddha's teaching of how to reach enlightenment so Buddhists should use it, or how it was the fourth noble truth and should be used to reduce craving. These more general responses did not attract as many marks as those which drew on specific parts of the Eightfold Path and show how they might help lead a Buddhist to enlightenment (see Exemplar 3).

Responses that were given more marks took aspects of the Eightfold Path (or threefold way) and explained how each could help enlightenment be reached. For example, they discussed how the meditation part of the threefold way could help Buddhists to overcome ignorance and thus see things as they really are and reach enlightenment. Many responses focused on the ethics part, saying how it helped Buddhists to live their lives in the best way, so they can develop good karma and get closer to a better rebirth and hopefully reach enlightenment.

## Exemplar 2

If Buddhists follow the eightfold path they become enlightened and can end suffering and ~~overcome~~ <sup>follow</sup> the four noble truths to become enlightened. The eightfold path is the key Buddhist concept on how to become enlightened and achieve Nirvana. If you follow the eight fold path it helps you overcome the three poisons and help you meditate which is important in order to become enlightened. It helps you attain the three marks of existence and helps you realise that nothing is permanent, nothing lasts forever and there is no self.

In this response the candidate uses the Eightfold Path in a very general sense. They do not break it down into parts and show how different parts (either individual stages or the threefold division) can work towards attaining enlightenment. They make some good links to other Buddhist concepts, but the response is general and unspecific.

## Question 2 (e)\*

(e)\* 'Obon is the most important Buddhist death ceremony.'

Discuss this statement. In your answer, you should:

- Analyse and evaluate the importance of points of view, referring to common and divergent views within Buddhism.
- Refer to sources of wisdom and authority.

[15]

Some candidates did not know what the Obon Festival is. Several mixed it up with the Sky Burial, or with Cremation, or the practice of saying the name of Amitabha Buddha into the deceased's ear. Some discussed Wesak instead of Obon, while others mentioned the Parinirvana day, which could be given marks, but only when compared to Obon within the context of the question.

There were many generic responses about death ceremonies in general, with a line or two saying 'Some Buddhists believe Obon is not the most important death ceremony. This is because they believe that another festival is more important because...'. Some knew it was a Japanese festival, so their evaluation ran to 'not important outside of Japan'.

More successful responses knew what Obon was (see Exemplar 3), discussed how it can be helpful to those involved and a reminder that death is not the end, before pointing out the contradictions of this view with that of anatta and rebirth. These candidates often pointed out that the deceased should be reborn in a new body/realm and so would not be coming back to visit relatives. They talked about how this ceremony encouraged attachment, contradicting mainstream Buddhist views on anicca. Candidates may have contrasted Obon with Tibetan Sky burials and shown why each is important within their own context, leading to a conclusion that Obon only has importance in Japan. These responses tended to be given more marks.

Exemplar 3

only Japan

8

Shy kind!  
F:  
honour  
respect  
metta, karma,  
kamma

(e)\* 'Obon is the most important Buddhist death ceremony.'

Discuss this statement. In your answer, you should:

- Analyse and evaluate the importance of points of view, referring to common and divergent views within Buddhism.
- Refer to sources of wisdom and authority.

[15]

On one hand, Obon is the most important death ceremony. Japanese Buddhists would agree since it is the ceremony that they perform. It is significant as it promotes honour, love and shows respect to the deceased. Buddhists clean their loved one's graves, ~~and~~ ~~that~~ meditate, and think about them for the period of 3 days that Obon is celebrated. It also encourages key Buddhist teachings of metta, karma and kamma, which help increase positive merit of a person by doing good deeds, and in return it counts towards their spiritual growth. Also, the name 'Obon' means 'happy dance' and comes from a story about a Japanese monk who prayed to get his mother out of the hungry ghost realm. When she did, he did a happy dance. This is important in reminding Buddhists to pray for the deceased and to obtain good kamma for a good rebirth. It also reminds them of anicca, and impermanence, that life is not forever.

On the other hand, Obon is not the most important ceremony. In Tibetan Buddhism, the Tibetan book of the dead is read to the dead or dying, in order for them to gain good karma. Also, sky burials are very important, as it is easier to carry out since Tibet is mountainous, but also because it is a display of some key Buddhist teachings. For example, the body is put on a high platform and fed to the birds, showing metta and karuna by feeding them. Also, the body re-enters the cycle of samsara, linking to pratityasamutpada, the Buddhist teaching of dependent origination, emphasising that 'if that exists, that <sup>also</sup> exists. If that ceases to exist, that also ceases to exist'. This links to the teaching of dukkha also. The Buddha also said, 'life is a journey. Death is a return to the earth', further highlighting how everything is interdependent. Sky burials are also important in teaching anicca, ~~and~~ <sup>one</sup> ~~and~~ <sup>of</sup> ~~the~~ <sup>the</sup> 3 universal truths. ~~Anatta~~ <sup>Anicca</sup> is taught ~~like~~ <sup>by</sup> ~~sky~~ <sup>sky</sup> burials ~~are carried out to~~ to show the impermanence of the body in a sky burial.

In conclusion, I feel that the statement is incorrect, as there are more important ceremonies, like sky burials. Also, Obon only happens in Japan.

The candidate has a good grasp of Obon and of Tibetan sky burials and uses them well to make a distinction between the relative importance of each ceremony. The candidate shows a very good level of subject knowledge and uses the concepts well to develop their points. The descriptive content in the first paragraph is good because it shows their knowledge and understanding of the stimulus. The conclusion, although rather short, does show the point to their discussion. However, if the candidate had made more direct comparisons between the ceremonies, they may have been given more marks.



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