Developments in Buddhist thought (H573/06)
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Introduction

The following resource has been produced by the senior examiner team in relation to the Sample Question Paper for H573/06 Developments in Buddhist Thought:

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Evaluate the view that, for all Buddhists, the only goal of meditation to achieve nibbana/nirvana. [40]

Candidate A

Buddhists might argue that the only goal of meditation is nibbana/nirvana. However, some might argue that this is a limited view of both meditation itself and the goal of meditation.

Buddhist might agree with this statement because the Buddha achieved enlightenment whilst meditating beneath the Bodhi tree. They might point to the fact that meditation practice is in this model and therefore its goal is to achieve enlightenment. From the Buddha's original practice various forms of meditation have developed, latterly these have been grouped in Samatha (calm meditation) and vipassana (insight meditation). Samatha meditation includes the Buddha's teaching on anapanasati or mindfulness of breathing in and out. This technique is designed to calm the mind so that one can control the mind and overcome unwholesome thoughts or the defilements of craving, both of which lead to nirvana. Vipassana however, is the development of insight. This is done through meditating on a kasina or object of concentration. Through this higher levels of concentration can be developed leading to nirvana. Many Buddhists would therefore argue that all of these forms of meditation develop a practitioners powers of concentration and insight into the Buddha's teachings. However, Dr Rahula suggests that Samatha meditation has nothing to do with nirvana. He states that this form of meditation existed before the Buddha and although not excluded from Buddhist meditation it is not essential for realising nirvana. Gethin however, disagrees. He suggests that the mind is fundamentally clear and pure but they have become stained by the defilements of craving. Therefore this basic method is to restore the mind to something of its original state of clarity and stillness. This clarity of mind provides the opportunity for seeing into the operation of the defilements and the minds true nature.

However, it can be argued that in Theravada Buddhism the foundation of meditation is in the eight fold path. Here right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration are practised. However, within this context they are practised in order to overcome suffering and/or craving rather than with the goal of nibbana/nirvana. For example, right effort is all about putting effort into the four great endeavours as shown in the Anguttara Nikaya. These are to prevent the arising of unarisen unwholesome states. To abandon unwholesome states that have already arisen. To arose wholesome states that have not yet arisen. To maintain and perfect wholesome states already arisen. It can be argued that this has more to do with overcoming the suffering created by negative thoughts associated with craving, ignorance, hatred and greed rather than attaining enlightenment. It can however, be argued that the Buddha taught that overcoming craving is enlightenment. Similarly right mindfulness is about developing bare attention. Bhikkhu Bodhi describes this as a detached observation of what is happening within us and around us in the present moment. This is a way of coming back to the present without getting swept away by tides of distracting thoughts. For Bhikkhu Bodhi this is not enlightenment. However, Dr Rahula and Thich Nhat Hanh would disagree. Dr Rahula suggests that mindfulness meditation develops the insight necessary to liberate the mind. He suggests that the most important discourse on this comes from the Buddha in the Satipathana sutta in the Digha Nikaya. This focuses the practioner on the body, feelings, mind and teachings so that one can gain insight. For Thich Nhat Hanh the detached observation Bodhi describes is enlightenment as it is the development of bodhichitta or the enlightened mind.

Nevertheless in all forms of Buddhism meditation is used and its goal is enlightenment for example in Zen Buddhism Zazen meditation is used. Zazen is much like that described in right mindfulness. It is the allow the development of bare attention. Allow thoughts to drift through one's mind within attaching anything other than detached observation to these thoughts. Both Bodhidharma and Dogen describe this state of mind as the enlightenment even if a practioner only gets a brief flash or glimpse of it. However, both see that this may only happen whilst meditating. This was also the Buddha's concern with the ascetic practices he followed. Therefore, mindfulness could only be seen as true enlightenment if it is a permanent change to a practioners mind. Even the most ardent advocates for mindfulness such as Thich Nhat Hanh would agree that this is not a permanent change in disposition and therefore, this form of meditation can lead to flashes of enlightenment but not necessarily to fully enlightenment. Despite this the benefits of mindfulness to the individual, their mental state and their conduct mean that this form of meditation is very important and one could even argue that the pacifying of the mind and conduct are a goal in themselves.
Candidate A (cont)

Despite this view there is a difference in goals between (in the Theravada tradition) monastic and lay practitioners. For example, the monks will be aiming for enlightenment, however the lay practitioners will merely be looking for good karma, a better rebirth and a reduction in suffering. Melford Spiro suggests that there are three types of Buddhism and that meditation helps develop a certain goal in each type. The three types are apotropaic, kammic and nibbanic. Apotropaic Buddhists seek protection for themselves and their communities and therefore meditation is an aid to overcoming unwholesome thoughts which lead to good moral conduct. Kammic Buddhists use meditation to develop good kamma whereas only nibbanic Buddhists would seek enlightenment. As the majority of Buddhists are lay Buddhists is can be argue that the majority of meditation would fit in with apotropaic and kammic Buddhism.

Therefore Buddhists might see that the ultimate goal of meditation is nirvana. But meditation itself is used for more than just its ultimate goal.

Examiner commentary

AO1: The question is focused on throughout without there needing to be a ‘this is what meditation is’ descriptive paragraph. Instead there is an excellent breadth and depth of knowledge and understanding of meditation across the range of Buddhist viewpoints. The candidate understands key terms and shows an excellent awareness of a range of views from both scriptures and scholars. Therefore this response all of the criteria for level 6. The final mark will be towards if not at the top of Level 6.

AO2: Scholars views are used well to discuss the different points put forward. There is a simple structure to the responses which focuses clearly on the question throughout. There is a range of critical analysis and this makes excellent use of the views of scholars. Views are developed with the use of the scholars arguments and show an understanding of the subtly within these views. Again this response meets all of the criteria for Level 6 and the final mark would be near to the top of that level.
Evaluate the view that, for all Buddhists, the only goal of meditation to achieve nibbana/nirvana. [40]

Candidate B

Meditation can be used to separate a person’s thoughts and feelings so that they can become fully aware. This awareness is called nirvana. However meditation can be used for health benefits because it brings about a sense of peace and calm. This has nothing to do with nirvana.

Meditation is a physical and mental action which can be used to separate out a person’s feelings and emotions from rational thought. This is not about getting into a hypnotic state or communicating with a supernatural entity but taking control of both the body and the mind. This sharpens perceptions and can help to live moment by moment without thinking or judging. It can also help a person to focus on one thing rather than having a stream of thoughts always running through their head. This stilling the mind is a step towards nirvana. Nirvana is a state of mind beyond suffering and the things that cause suffering. This can only happen when the mind is stilled.

There are four modern types of meditation. Concentration meditation is where a person focuses on a single object or kasina. This can be a very simple object such as a candle, a picture, a teaching or even a thought or feeling. By focusing their attention on one thing a person can become more concentrated and this can help become absorbed in what you are doing. For Theravada Buddhists this type of absorption leads through the four jhanas to enlightenment.

The second type of meditation is about developing a certain mental skill or thought process. For example, some Buddhists focus on loving kindness (metta). Through this they can develop a better attitude towards themselves and others. This makes them more kind and considerate. However, it does not lead to nirvana in itself. It does however, lead to good karma and this might lead to a better rebirth and in that life a person might gain enlightenment.

The next type of meditation is about being mindful of thoughts and feelings that arise when meditating. This helps a person to control these thoughts and feelings. The Buddha saw that this was important and gave a speech about the importance of mindfulness. He thought that it was an important skill to develop in order to gain enlightenment. Buddhists today practice mindfulness in order to advance towards nirvana.

Lastly meditation is about reflecting on behaviour or teachings so that a person can gain a greater understanding of them. For example in Zen Buddhism a person might focus on a koan (a teaching from a previous Buddhist master) and use this to gain a deeper understanding of the Buddha’s teachings. Other might do the same but with a mantra like “Om mani padme hum” which focuses the mind on the six virtues of giving, wisdom, meditation, ethics, patience and diligence. Theravada Buddhists might use a line from the dhammapada. All of these help the person to focus their mind and develop a better understanding which leads them to nirvana.

However, some scholars like Rahula say that it is only this reflective or insight meditation that truly leads to nirvana. He says that a person has to develop an understanding of the nature of impermanence and not-self in order to gain enlightenment and only this type of meditation can help them do it.

Also, some might say that mindfulness is more about developing a healthy mind. This is used in the NHS and as part of CBT and helps a person to overcome things like depression or OCD. This might be done by looking at things like a beautiful landscape or picture or imagining yourself on a perfect beach. These help a person feel more calm and it helps them to focus on positives rather than on negative thoughts. However, this has nothing to do with getting nirvana. A Buddhist would use this for the same reasons and not be thinking about nirvana.

Therefore, Buddhists do see that meditation helps to get nirvana but it is also useful for other things as well like good mental health.
Examiner commentary

AO1: There is some good knowledge and understanding in this response and this would be at the top of Level 4. There are areas which show that the candidate understands a range of Buddhist traditions, the teachings of the Buddha and the views of scholars again this would put the candidate into Level 4. Some use of technical terms but there could be more of this. Many points need further explanation and supporting with some kind of evidence, whether that is a quote, a scholarly view or a teaching from the Buddha. The final mark is likely to be towards the top of Level 4.

AO2: There is a good discussion running through this response. It is clear that they are trying to show the range of views but because they are not fully developed the discussion seems more stated than analysed. This would put it in Level 3 however, where views are given there is some analysis of the different ideas. This would move the mark into the bottom end of Level 4. To move the mark higher there would need to be greater critical analysis. The question needs to be the focus throughout and paragraph 7, although correct is not really helpful to the response.
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