

A LEVEL

Examiners' report

RELIGIOUS STUDIES

H573

For first teaching in 2016

H573/06 Summer 2023 series

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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.

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Paper 6 series overview

The paper is one of three that candidates need to sit in order to gain the A Level. Candidates need to attempt three out of the four questions. All of the questions attract the same number of marks. There are two assessment objectives; AO1 attracts 40% of the marks and AO2 attracts 60%.

Overall, most of the 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, the majority of candidates understood the key terms and concepts in the questions and could explain, analyse and evaluate them in relation to the topic and in relation to broader Buddhist concepts. Most candidates made good use of scholars' views and these came from a wide range of sources, both on and also beyond the specification. This showed evidence of wider reading on the part of the candidates and helped them demonstrate their knowledge and understanding.

Misconception



Some candidates were not entirely clear on what Zen Buddhism is and there seemed to be a focus on the ideas of killing (cats and in war), the use of koans and the disregard for scripture. While all of these are correct in their own context they do not necessarily give a clear indication of what Zen Buddhism is.

Zen is founded on the principle that language has a conventional use (to describe the world around us and communicate). However, words give a false impression that all phenomena are separate entities. In fact all phenomena only exist in relation to, and because of, all other phenomena. Therefore, language is unhelpful and is to be overcome. This can be done by showing the helpful nature of language through koans or through meditative practices that try to remove the discriminating thoughts that make up three of the five khandhas (Perception, mental formulations and consciousness), and returning the practitioner to their original mind (the enlightened mind or bare attention).

A small number only answered two questions, and no candidate did all four questions. Candidates do need to remember to read the question carefully and answer that specific question. Some candidates missed the idea of upaya in Question 3 and some missed the idea of duty in Question 2. Some did not number the questions correctly and while this does not normally cause a problem it is wise to make it very clear which question a response is directed to. This action will avoid any confusion and potential loss of marks.

Candidates who did well on this paper generally:	Candidates who did less well on this paper generally:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • for Question 1 candidates did well when they showed a thorough and detailed understanding of Zen and the original teachings of the Buddha. They also demonstrated, through exemplification, their detailed understanding. Through this range and/or depth of examples they showed how Zen might be unique and/or a development of the Buddha's ideas. Their conclusions showed insight into the question • for Question 2 candidates did well when they had a detailed understanding of the complexity of the debate surrounding Buddhist engagement with environmental issues and whether this is a duty. They can show this through a range/depth of examples. Concepts were clearly understood and used within the discussion to analyse whether Buddhists have a duty • for Question 3 candidates did well when they showed a holistic understanding of upaya and the Buddha's teachings. They could demonstrate through exemplification their detailed understanding. They showed how everything might be upaya or that the Buddha's ideas are fixed/true. Their conclusions showed that they understood the nuances in the debate • for Question 4 candidates did well when they demonstrated a holistic understanding of nirvana and how different Buddhist denominations may view it. They could demonstrate through exemplification their detailed understanding of different denominational views/teachings on nirvana, and suggest why it is the goal for some and maybe not others. The word 'all' is important here; those who fully addressed the idea that it is a goal for all performed better. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • for Question 1 candidates did less well when they were not sure what Zen is and had a limited understanding of the Buddha's teachings. They might have attempted a comparison, but this was often unsuccessful or inaccurate • for Question 2 candidates did less well when they could only explain that some Buddhists are environmentally aware and some are not. They often had a little information that was relevant or correct and a limited number of examples • for Question 3 candidates did less well when they showed a limited understanding of upaya and why it is in Buddhist teachings. Some just focused on the truth of the Buddha's teachings, rather than whether they were true or upaya. This did not fully address the question • for Question 4 candidates did less well when they showed a limited understanding of nirvana and who might see it as a goal and who might not. They often presented a general discussion of nirvana as the goal for Buddhists and did not fully discuss the idea that it is the goal for all.

Question 1*

1* 'Siddhartha's original teachings can be clearly seen in Zen Buddhism.' Discuss.

[40]

The more successful candidates were not only able to discuss 'Zen' and *other* forms of Buddhism, but were also able to highlight the difference between the Soto and Rinzai Zen. This allowed them to use a wider range of Buddhist group specific beliefs/practices as a comparison to the 'original teachings of the Buddha'. The better responses considered whether sunyata could be equated to dependent origination or not, and whether the Buddha's original teachings contained anything that could be understood as Buddha Nature or not.

Candidates who did not have a detailed understanding of the Zen schools were not able to make the same level of distinctions between the similarities of the two schools and the various Buddhist beliefs and practices. There were a number of candidates who did not really understand Zen Buddhism. For example, some students conflated Zen and Pure Land or saw Pure Land as a school of Zen. A common argument was that there was a point of congruence in that Zen had its origins in the flower sermon given by the Buddha, but relatively few candidates were aware that the source of this is a later Mahayana document and is not necessarily historical - very few had that discussion.

Exemplar 1

However, it can also be ^{argued} ~~proved~~ that Siddhartha's original teachings ~~can't~~ ^{cannot} be clearly seen in Zen Buddhism. This is because in Rinzai Zen (founded by Eisai) there are two daily Sazen interviews, which consist of quick-fire questions in between a Roshi (master) and pupil. The Roshi can curse even hit the student if they try to answer intellectually. The master is someone who is already enlightened and helps to guide the student. The student submits to the authority of the teacher. But this is not an original teaching of the Buddha, since he taught ~~for~~ self-reliance. The ^{Although} Buddha did have teachers (Alara Kalama and Uddaka Ramaputta) to teach him meditation, he didn't rely on them too much and sought his own middle way between asceticism and hedonism (the eightfold path). The Buddha wanted each individual to be 'a lamp unto oneself' and experience his dhama for themselves, rather than using a Roshi like in Zen Buddhism. The Buddha also promoted ahimsa and showed non-violence through his five precepts, so ~~the~~ aggressive responses from the teacher wouldn't be supported by Siddhartha. Therefore, Siddhartha's original teachings cannot be clearly seen in Zen Buddhism because he ~~taught~~ focused on the self and Zen focuses a pupil-teacher relationship which the Buddha didn't have.

Exemplar 1 gives a good example of this level of specialist subject knowledge. For example, they know the different divisions within Zen and talk about Rinzai, saying who it is founded by and explaining one of the monastic practices of that form of Zen. The candidate in this example makes very good use of this knowledge to make a clear and well-argued point. They compare the student in the Rinzai monastery submitting to the authority of their master to the way that Siddhartha did when he joined various sramana movements, and they develop this by showing that although there is a recognition of an authority there is still an expectation that one develops by one's own efforts rather than relying on others. This is an essential part of the Buddha's teaching and shows a good link between it and Zen.

Question 2*

2* 'Buddhists have a duty to be more environmentally aware.' Discuss.

[40]

This question had a range of responses. Lots of candidates made reference to the idea that although there is no specific teaching that the Buddha gave in relation to environmentalism, some of the central teachings of Buddhism (such as the five precepts with the idea of not to harm any living thing) can be used as a means of supporting the claim that nonetheless Buddhists have a duty to be environmentally aware.

Some candidates also used the argument that it brings about good karma to be environmentally aware. Some candidates referred to specific movements in Buddhism in order to show that being environmentally aware is a duty, for instance 'Engaged Buddhism'. Often, they linked this to the idea of a duty, even though that duty may be imposed by the order of interbeing rather than the Buddha himself. Where candidates used all of these points they performed very well. The better responses were generally evaluative, weighing the centrality of attaining nirvana, and the relevance of anicca and sunyata against the fact that interconnectedness means that the environment is central. The weaker responses were very vague and focused on 'being nice' or on social issues in general such as war. A very odd idea, which occurred more than once, was that the monk who self-immolated showed a lack of environmental awareness as he wasted fuel and did not consider that his action might cause pollution.

Exemplar 2

Through the life of the Buddha, he did not teach much about being environmentally aware as there was not a great environmental change in those times. This is why it is argued to be ludicrous to apply teachings from centuries ago, to the modern world. The Buddha did not experience this yet was aware of how his followers, monks would affect the world. He told them to not release themselves in or near running water as some people use it to wash and drink. Showing the pollution of water was considered. He also guided them to say how they should not harm any living creature in practice; this means destroying habitats to build monasteries etc. Therefore, the Buddha was environmentally aware and inclined us to be the same. ^{Buddhists} ~~we~~ have a duty to follow what has been taught and be environmentally aware. *

Yet they do have a duty to be aware, in the five precepts they are told not to harm others including animals, showing 'consideration' for the environment. When ~~Aloka~~ ^{Aloka} caused a war with a lot of bloodshed, he felt guilty and ~~created~~ ^{created} rules after converting to Buddhism that nothing should be harmed including animals that are hunted for and the practice of 'vegetarianism' is in ~~the~~ many Buddhists beliefs. While the Buddha did not teach environmental awareness on its own it's clear the principles and precepts used can still be applied today.

Both parts of Exemplar 2 show utilisation of the central teachings. In the first extract the candidate has clearly made the point that there is no real teaching on environmentalism but that there is an understanding of a duty of care. The second extract shows how the candidate has made excellent use of the five precepts to demonstrate that when applied to a situation the precepts clearly give instruction to be concerned about the environment.

Question 3*

- 3* Evaluate the claim that none of Siddhartha's teachings were true, they were only upaya (skilful means). [40]

Most of the candidates discussed differences between the different groups of Buddhism with a more intense focus on the difference between Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism in light of the concept of upaya. Some successful candidates indicated that this is not a concept that is accepted within the Theravada tradition with respect to the scripture as there is a common belief that 'Pali Cannon' is the closest/best representation of the Buddha's original teachings and thus tend to be true, and should (at some level) be accessible to all who wish to follow them. Whereas Mahayana (and other subsequent schools) use the lotus sutra as a means of allowing incorporation of 'new', and development of older, concepts to meet the needs of the society at the time. Although infrequent, some candidates made references to the idea of a hagiography of the Buddha's teachings and life with reference to the idea that they should be looked at as upaya. Some of the better responses identified at least the three marks of existence and the first two Noble Truths as demonstrably factually true but suggested that the way of dealing with this could be seen as upaya as the Buddha suggested his teachings be used as a raft. Stronger responses discussed the parable of the burning house and the analogy of a finger pointing at the moon.

Assessment for learning



The Buddha taught different teachings to different groups of people. His focus shifted to suit their understanding of the world. For example, if the Buddha's first sermon had been to a group of farmers or householders then it would have had to look very different from the deer park sermon. The deer park sermon is a very concise outline of the Buddha's understanding of the causes of suffering, made to a group of renunciants who would have known the context of the teachings and therefore understood it. This is an excellent example of upaya. It may not be entirely correct to suggest that the Pali Canon is a fixed set of teachings.

A good teaching activity to show this is to ask students to pick a small number of different sutras from the Pali Cannon (www.accesstoinsight.org is helpful here). At the start of each sutra is the context of the story, who the Buddha is talking to. If students look carefully they can see that each story is about overcoming craving to end suffering but the language and ideas are adapted to the audience. The Kalama Sutta and the Sigalovada (Sigala) Sutta are two good examples.

Question 4*

4* To what extent is nibbana/nirvana the goal for all Buddhists?

[40]

Most candidates tended to argue that at the core of Buddhism is the goal of reaching nibbana, even if the focus in the current lifetime is something else, e.g. gaining good karma for a better rebirth or hopes of being born in the Pure Land. These are means to an end, which is enlightenment. Some candidates attempted an argument that those seeking to just develop their wisdom and not attempting to achieving enlightenment will actually achieve nibbana.

Some candidates looked at the difference between an arhat and a bodhisattva. They used these concepts to show that an arhat might work towards their own enlightenment and that this is the overriding goal. Whereas a bodhisattva works towards the enlightenment of all others, so nibbana is not their goal, at least in the short term.

Some made use of their wider Buddhist knowledge and showed how Western Buddhists might differ in their outlook from Buddhists in Asia, and very good responses explained why this might be. For example, for some Buddhism was a culture into which they were born rather than something with which they actively engaged and that their interest in it might be purely in the reduction of suffering; whereas Western Secular Buddhism suggests that nirvana was not really a goal, as it rejected the supernatural elements of Buddhism, seeking instead to cultivate peace and mindfulness.

Exemplar 3

Western Buddhists tend to see Buddhism more as a philosophy rather than a religion. For many, the concept of Nirvana is ~~just a mystical word~~ ~~doesn't~~ ~~fit~~ doesn't resonate with their rational world view and hence many western or secular Buddhists practice Buddhism through their morals rather than rituals. There are over 250,000 Buddhists in the UK, many of whom are British converts rather than East Asian and South East Asian ~~immigrants~~ immigrants. It can be assumed that the majority of these Buddhists don't practise in a monastery, but rather practise mindfulness and meditation. This shows that Nirvana is not the end goal for the majority of western Buddhists and therefore Nirvana isn't the end goal for all Buddhists.

Exemplar 3 is a good example of Buddhism knowledge. The candidate has used the idea of Western Buddhism not being focused on nibbana and they have explained why. However, their explanation is a little limited and so does not achieve the higher marks. But they make a very good point as part of a well-reasoned discussion.

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