

A LEVEL

Examiners' report

RELIGIOUS STUDIES

H573

For first teaching in 2016

H573/06 Summer 2024 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 modules that candidates need to sit for 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%; therefore, marking is weighted towards consideration of candidates' argument, analysis and evaluation.

Overall, most of the candidates seemed genuinely well prepared for the paper and there were some excellent responses, some of which go 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 scholarly views and these came from a wide range of sources.

The majority of candidates' responses gained Level 4 or above, particularly on questions 2 and 4. There was no evidence that candidates struggled to complete the paper on time. The vast majority of candidates answered questions 2 and 3. For most candidates the third question attempted was Question 4, making Question 1 the least popular question by a significant margin.

Many candidates answered questions 2 and 3 first, leaving 1 or 4 until last. Questions 1 and 4 were the least well attempted on the paper, often involving a degree of educated guesswork. Questions 2 and 3 tended to produce responses similar to those envisaged in the mark scheme, which typically achieved high Level 4 to low Level 5. However, while there was more obvious differentiation in questions 1 and 4, with far more candidates not reaching Level 4, there was also more evidence here among the more successful candidates of nuanced critical thinking. The highest scoring individual responses tended to be for questions 1 and 4.

A small number of candidates 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 only briefly mentioned the concepts stated in the question and wrote about other concepts almost exclusively. This did not help them gain the higher marks.

Candidates who did well on this paper generally:	Candidates who did less well on this paper generally:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • had clear knowledge and understanding of the concepts or Buddhist schools named in the question • could show how different concepts interlink/contrast with each other. For example, rebirth happens within samsara and is determined by karma, which in turn can be influenced by the three poisons (greed, hatred, ignorance) and three antidotes (generosity, loving kindness and wisdom) • could critically compare the two schools of Pure Land Buddhism (Jōdo Shu (Pure Land) from Honen and Jōdo Shin Shu (True Pure Land) from Shinran) • exemplified their points to show that they understood key concepts and ideas • were concise and precise in their explanations and analysis (see exemplar 1) • could explain the relative importance of concepts and give judgements about which were the most/least important, and could justify this conclusion with valid reasoning. For example, 'misrepresenting the Buddha' might mean that the trikaya doctrine is not accurate and truthful; or 'most important' might mean that it had the greatest impact on the beliefs, practices and teachings of the Buddha. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • did not recognise the key terms accurately and therefore did not address the question. For example, confusing the trikaya doctrine with the three refuges • could not show how and why concepts interlink/contrast with each other • did not have sufficient knowledge and understanding of the two schools of Pure Land Buddhism in order to make valid comparisons • could not evaluate comparisons or the relative importance of concepts. For example, candidates said that the ascetic period of the Buddha life taught him self-discipline, renunciation and meditation; all of which are found in his later teachings and practices. However, candidates did not go on to say that this period did not give him the answers he was looking for. Therefore, it is an important period, but maybe not the most important • did not exemplify their responses to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding • included long and often un-necessary descriptions or narrative sections about the Buddha's life (see exemplar 2).

Question 1*

1* To what extent does the trikaya doctrine misrepresent who the Buddha was?

[40]

This was the least popular question and it was also the least successfully answered. Few candidates were able to give a clear account of the three bodies. Some responses just looked at the superficial differences between Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism with some reference to the trikaya doctrine. Most were able to explain the Nirmana-kaya and to equate this to the story of the Buddha's life and Theravada understandings of who the Buddha was. Most also knew the term Dharma-kaya, although they explained this less well. The Sambhoga-kaya caused confusion as a concept. Where candidates understood that this involved a supernatural understanding of the nature of the Buddha, they were able to argue that this defeated the object of the Buddha as a model of how a human can reach nirvana. Some argued that the idea of the Buddha as fully human was upaya to encourage Buddhists to strive for enlightenment. Many did not address the idea that the trikaya doctrine might be presenting an inaccurate or even false picture of the Buddha.

Stronger responses suggested that the ultimate nature of the Buddha is unknown, so it is pointless to argue about whether the doctrine is a misrepresentation or not. Some did go further and show that the trikaya doctrine is one of the fundamental differences between Theravada and Mahayana. Pali Canon has two of the three but is the third (Sambhoga-kaya) too far from how the Buddha saw himself/ how he is recorded. Some questioned whether it changes the nature of belief in the Buddha and his teachings. A few argued that Theravada is quite empirical and practical but the Enjoyment-body is outside of this understanding, so can we trust the teachings on anicca or anatta.

Some responses were not closely related to the question at all, and it was obvious that the candidate was guessing what the trikaya doctrine actually was.

Misconception



The trikaya doctrine suggests that all Buddhas have three bodies. The Dharma-kaya (truth-body) is the embodiment of the dharma or truth. This is the essence of all Buddhas. The enlightened historical individual was known as the Nirmana-kaya (manifestation-body). Nirmana-kaya is the term used to describe the physical body of the Buddha who was born, gained enlightenment, taught the Four Noble Truths and died. The historical Buddha, Siddhartha Gotama, had a Nirmana-kaya sometimes called the earthly body. The Sambhoga-kaya (Enjoyment-body) can be considered as the body through which the Buddha appeared in the world. The Enjoyment-body is considered to be a person, although not necessarily a human. This body is often called the heavenly body. In Mahayana Buddhism a Bodhisattva would also have a Sambhoga-kaya in order to manifest into the most appropriate form to be of assistance to Buddhists. In the Pali Canon, the Buddha seems to make a distinction between himself as the enlightened but mortal individual and on the other hand the embodiment of the truth.

Is this a misrepresentation? To answer this one would need to ask if this doctrine presents a wholly false, misleading or inaccurate picture of the Buddha. It can be argued that as two thirds of this doctrine are within the Pali Canon then it is not entirely inaccurate. The discussion therefore rests on the validity of the Sambhoga-kaya. The truth or falsity of this idea would probably be a matter of belief rather than historical fact and is therefore open to debate.

Exemplar 1

1	<p>The trikaya doctrine, as interpreted by Theravada Buddhists shows that the Buddha can be described like a god. Acts such as puja (offering incense to the Buddha and and other gifts) and worship him is very similar to how hindu and Christian also orientate towards their gods. The Buddha is shown through the trikaya as someone who can be worshipped and someone who and someone that people pray to to forgive their sins. This can be seen as a misrepresentation as god^{Buddha} for Theravada isn't necessarily a God. The puja is for respect and the prayers aren't to be answered but as a sign of gratitude and acknowledgement of him as a higher being. The trikaya is wrong to place description on him^{Buddha} as a God as he is outside samsara and unable to forgive sins or answer prayers like a God does. However, Richard Gombrich found that Buddhists in Sri Lanka believe that for Buddha can actually forgive sin when you pray to him which suggests the belief that he was seen a god-like being in a misrepresentation. This is only a selection of Buddhists in Sri Lanka though and overall, the view that he is a a God in the trikaya is a misrepresentation of his nature.</p> <p>Further, the trikaya presents the Buddha as a god based on the idea he can perform miracles. The Buddha was able to walk 7 steps at birth, he was born with 32 marks of a great person (one mark being that he</p>
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had wheels on the bottom of his feet). He also performed miracles as he grew such as shooting fire and water out of his body at the same time. These ~~shows~~ all portray the Buddha as a God who was able to perform miracles due to his nature. This is a misrepresentation however as his miracles can be placed down to ~~to~~ being a natural result of a being with such high karmic merit. Also, ^{some} throughout Buddhism ^{such as Bhikkhu Bodhi} it has been suggested that meditation can even sometimes bring super-powers and abilities or such which suggests the Buddha wasn't a God but was a human being who realised the ultimate truths. However, this view is limited by the idea that the Buddha himself said he was 'turiya genesis'. This was the idea that he wasn't a god, wasn't a human, he was just in a league of his own. Therefore, although the trikaya is wrong to represent the Buddha as a God, the Buddha said himself he is turiya genesis and out of anyone's understanding ability to understand. Despite the Buddha stating he wasn't a God, this transcendency is a very god-like feature which may suggest the Buddha was more a God than anything else, perhaps suggesting the trikaya didn't entirely misrepresent him.

* -> last page cdd.

Mahayana Buddhists further present ~~to~~ the Buddha as a god-like being as they describe him as ~~to~~ living up in the pure land (Sukhavati) and helping people to reach enlightenment from there. ^{in his sambhogakaya form} This is a very god-like feature and presents the pure land almost identical

to heaven. With the view, he is still in samsara, Mahayana Buddhists believe that he can answer prayers and help people that pray to him. However, this is a misrepresentation of the Buddha as a characteristic of God is to be a permanent, uncaused being. The Buddha has not always been the Buddha, as he was born as Siddhartha and then became a Buddha when enlightened by the truth. This limits him as God like as it is natural to assume that a god has always been a God and the Buddha has not always been a Buddha. However, this Mahayana interpretation may not be a misrepresentation as the three bodies of the Buddha (dharmakaya, sambhogakaya and nirmanakaya) suggest that the Buddha has always been a Buddha and Siddhartha that was seen as mortal was the Buddha in his nirmanakaya form sending down the dharmakaya body to earth to encourage people to follow him. Therefore, it may not be a misrepresentation from the trikaya to suggest the Buddha was a God due to the explanation of the three bodies of the Buddha.

Overall, it is more logical to believe the trikaya does ~~not~~ represent misrepresent the Buddha by describing him as a god. The Buddha describes himself as 'sui generis' and ~~very~~ although highlights he is no God or human, ^{despite} the transcendence makes him very God-like. Furthermore, he is portrayed as a being that can perform miracles and ~~be~~ be prayed to which despite the argument that

~~those are just~~ Gombrich suggest it true that he can forgive sin, isn't a representative view and therefore when described as a God it is misrepresenting him. It is also a misrepresentation to believe that God is just a human as the traditional teachings of the Buddha suggest that there is only ever one Buddha at a time so even if he is not a God, he is more than just human. Therefore, it is the strongest to believe that Buddha is simply 'a human' and is therefore misrepresented by the trikaya.

* ↓ per/§.

The trikaya doctrine further portrays the Buddha as simply an enlightened being. When born, Siddhartha is born by a human mother into a wealthy family and until his decision to renounce the world he lived as a normal man. This depiction of the Buddha is a misrepresentation due to the idea that the Buddha went on to become enlightened and it isn't rational to explain him as simply human. where it is also unrealistic to assume the Buddha's life story is to be taken literally, for example it is irrational to assume the Buddha's first time seeing a sick man, dead man, was during his four sights. Therefore, the trikaya also misrepresents the Buddha also by describing him as a human.

This response does not fit in with the comment above but does provide a very good response to the question. There are a few inaccuracies but the overall argument is very good. The candidate attempts to show that the trikaya doctrine does not misrepresent the Buddha because there are supernatural elements to the life of the Buddha. This is the main criticism of the idea of the Sambogha-kaya and therefore, the candidate is demonstrating how this is an invalid criticism.

Question 2*

2* 'The Buddha's asceticism before his enlightenment is the most important part of his life.' Discuss. **[40]**

The majority of candidates gained marks in Level 4 or low Level 5 for this question. Most could give a good solid response, but few were outstanding. The approach was generally to outline the Buddha's life and comment on the relative importance of different aspects of it (see exemplar 2). Many suggested that it was the Four Sights that was the trigger event that ultimately led the Buddha to enlightenment and so this should be considered the most important. Stronger responses tended to suggest that the question is not a valid one as no particular aspect of the Buddha's life is more important as they all form an interconnected whole. Some candidates argued that since we do not know how much of the Buddha's life story is historical, it is the Dhamma rather than his life that is important. A few related this back to Question 1 and the trikaya.

Very good responses were able to use a range of evidence to show the relative importance of different aspects. For example, is the life event linked to the Buddha's teaching career (during this period the Buddha taught this idea) or his development of ideas (seeing the Four Sights helped the Buddha to develop the 3 marks or the 4 noble truths) or does it shape who the Buddha was (extremes of wealth and poverty)?

Assessment for learning



All concepts within Buddhist thought are inter-related, and in fact can only be fully understood when seen in relation to Buddhist thought as a whole. Therefore, any analysis or evaluation needs to see the strengths and weaknesses of both the concept itself and the concept within the wider Buddhist context.

Exemplar 2

02		<p>Siddhartha Gautama was the historical Buddha and lived centuries ago. His journey to enlightenment and his teachings form the foundations of Buddhism. His life can be split into three main sections: life of luxury, asceticism, and enlightenment. Some might argue that 'the Buddha's asceticism before his enlightenment is the most important part of his life'. Many would disagree with this and say that following the middle way and his enlightenment is the most important part of his life. This is a more valid argument.</p> <p>The Buddha grew up in a life of luxury. As the son of a king, he was protected from the outside world and showered in gifts and pleasures. However, he was not fulfilled. Once, he ventured ex outside of the pro palace and saw what is known as the four sights: old age, sickness, death, and a holy man. This discovery led the Buddha to become dissatisfied with his life of luxury, and so he renounced it. While the Buddha's life of luxury taught him pleasure, peace, and security, it is</p>
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unreasonable to say that it was the most important part of his life. He did not gain wisdom or knowledge, and only became exposed to suffering when he renounced his life.

After his renunciation, the Buddha became an ascetic, the complete opposite of the man he had been before. The ascetics pushed themselves and their bodies beyond human capability; inevitably, the Buddha was still dissatisfied. Living off very little food starved his mind of the concentration he desired, and he was not able to find answers to his questions. However, living as an ascetic allowed the Buddha to discover that extremities were not the path to enlightenment. He had not reached enlightenment in a life of luxury, or as an ascetic, so therefore he established the middle way. It is understandable that some would say asceticism was the most important part of his life, because it led him to this conclusion, however this is not a valid argument because it discounts all his work after his asceticism, which is

arguably more important.

The Buddha found the path to enlightenment to be the 'middle way'. He released himself from all luxury, in order to attempt to release himself from all suffering. He found peace and harmony, which led him to become enlightened. After his enlightenment, he became a teacher, and expressed his findings to anyone that would listen. The Deer Park sermon was ~~he~~ his first sermon, and this was the start of the growth of Buddhism. It is important to note that becoming enlightened and teaching is the most important part of the Buddha's life, as Buddhism could not exist if he had not done this. Buddhists worship and respect the Buddha as a teacher, and an enlightened being, not as an ascetic nor a prince. This demonstrates that his enlightenment and teaching career was the most important part of his life.

~~And concluding,~~ In conclusion, the Buddha's enlightenment and teaching career is the most important part of his life.

While his time in luxury and asceticism taught him how to become enlightened and ~~he~~ led him to the middle way, neither can be said to be the most important part of his life.

This response is typical of the responses to Question 2 (and 3). It demonstrates a good level of knowledge and understanding of the life of the Buddha. The candidate has understood the key Buddhist concepts and can show where these originate in the Buddha's life. The candidate is clear, precise and concise with the information they give and have clearly been well prepared for the exam. However, it is not fully focused on the ascetic period of the Buddha's life and presents a narrative explanation of the early part of the Buddha's life, with a small amount of evaluation within each paragraph. This was given the bottom of band 4 for AO1 and AO2. Candidates would be advised to focus more of their response on the topic stated in the question and evaluate those ideas rather than giving a more narrative response.

Question 3*

3* Assess the view that the teachings on samsara and rebirth are the least important of the Buddha's teachings.

[40]

Many candidates gave superficial reasons why these are important/ not important such as they lead to enlightenment, but didn't analyse how and why, or explain what a Buddhist would need to know or do. Most compared different teachings, giving a final judgement on which were most important. Most argued that samsara describes the problem but is less important as it does not offer any solutions. Stronger responses suggested that the Dhamma is an integrated whole that must be accepted or rejected in its entirety, so to suggest one part is more important than another makes no sense. Many suggested that teachings about samsara and rebirth are less important in Western Buddhism which often rejects any supernatural elements. Very few candidates separated samsara and rebirth and discussed the extent to which Buddhist teachings on rebirth (as opposed to reincarnation) are actually understood. If what most Buddhists effectively believe in is reincarnation then teachings on rebirth are actually unimportant. Knowledge marks tended to be higher than evaluation as most gave detailed accounts of samsara, the six realms, and the 12 links. While many compared these to the Four Noble Truths etc, few were able to discuss the connections between them (for example that samsara must be accepted before the rest of the teachings make sense.)

More successful responses could have given reasons why these concepts are or are not important, such as the links between these concepts and others. Samsara can be linked to the six realms, karma, the three fires, the three marks of existence, dependant origination (12 nidanas), etc. They could have argued that these are theoretical rather than practical and so the 8-fold path is more important. Or candidates could have made comparisons to Mahayana teachings. For example, are karuna and prajna more important or chanting the nembutsu? Why are they more important? However, responses that are like GCSE ones where they compare these ideas to Pure Land Buddhism and say they do this and the others do that, are not likely to gain the higher marks.

Assessment for learning



Using examples is an excellent way for a candidate to demonstrate their understanding of a concept. Candidates can use the examples they find in textbooks or online to show their understanding of a concept. However, it can be unclear if the candidate understands the concept or has just learnt the example.

Alternatively, candidates can choose to use their own personalised examples, and the responses that attract the most number of marks tend to have well thought out and precise personalised examples in them. Unfortunately, the responses that do not score very well are often let down by the use of an inappropriate example or one which clearly demonstrates that a candidate has not understood the concept.

The parable of the mustard seed and the parable of the burning house (from the Lotus Sutra) have often been used in this series (both stories primarily demonstrate the concept of upaya - skilful means). However, they have often been used unsuccessfully and this does suggest that the candidates do not understand the concepts or stories. It also suggests that the candidates have only learnt these stories and therefore just tried to make them fit wherever they can, rather than having their own examples to exemplify a concept.

Question 4*

4* 'There is no significant difference between Jōdo-shū and Jōdo Shinshū Pure Land Buddhism.'
Discuss.

[40]

Many candidates focused on a small number of differences and tried to show that they are significant because they are different, rather than showing the degrees of separation between the ideas. Many responses were therefore vague and showed a lack of detailed subject knowledge. The majority were able to give a basic account of what Pure Land Buddhism is (although many thought Honen had invented it). A surprising number confused or conflated Amida with Siddhartha. Comparatively few candidates were actually able to give a detailed and accurate account of the actual differences between the two schools, and there was quite a bit of confusion, leading to lower marks in AO1. A significant minority gave up any attempt to compare the two schools and instead compared Pure Land to Zen Buddhism, sometimes at great length. Those candidates who did have the accurate and detailed knowledge required gained high marks, often through skilful and nuanced discussion (see exemplar 3). Successful responses concentrated on Honen's insistence on monasticism and celibacy, the purpose of chanting the nembutsu, and the different approaches to morality.

Exemplar 3

		<p>Jodo shu and jodo shin shu show no difference through the rituals that they perform. Honen and Shinrans schools both believe the only important act to do is to chanting. the They teach that chanting 'namo amida butsu' is the only way for Amida to recognise you and help you get to his pure land. Neither of them place an emphasis on any not other acts other than chanting to Amida which shows rather there is little difference between them. However, the similarities of the two are limited by the intention behind the chanting. The jodo shu school of pure land buddhism believe it is the action of chanting and how many times you chant that is what allows Amida to help you. He encourages people to chant as much as 64,000 times a day. This is different to the jodo shin shu school of beliefs. Shinran teaches that chanting is simply a form of gratitude to shin Amida Buddha, it is not for his help. He believed that Amida will help regardless of whether you chant or not and therefore the act of chanting is only done to say thank you. Therefore, jodo shu and jodo shin shu differ at in the intentions behind the chanting, honens school places emphasis on the act of chanting whereas Shinrans places importance on chanting as an act of gratitude showing the differences between the two.</p>
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This is a good example of a more successful response. Here the candidate has shown a similarity in the practices of both Jōdo Shu and Jōdo Shinshū and then suggested that the difference between them is intention. This demonstrates a higher level of knowledge and understanding and recognises that the differences between the schools are not major but subtle and nuanced. Even so there are still significant philosophical differences.

More successful responses could have looked at what differences there are, whether these differences are significant and what makes them significant. Candidates could suggest that there are no significant differences in doctrine, it is just that they focus on different aspects of the same tradition. Significance might be looked at by asking: are they totally different ways of viewing life which would affect how you lived? Or are they scholarly disagreements that have little real impact on the lives of believers?

Misconception



The main similarities and difference between the Jōdo-Shū and Jōdo Shinshū schools of Pure Land Buddhism are:

- both Honen (Jōdo-Shū) and Shinran (Jōdo Shinshū) thought that Pure Land Buddhism was the true teaching of Mahayana Buddhism because it could bring liberation to women and men from all walks of life, and to all beings everywhere. They also believed that anyone can say the Nembutsu, but the power of the recitation is said to have been derived from the limitless compassion that comes from beyond the ego self, known as 'other power'
- Honen taught that there was a Pure Land created by Amitabha Buddha, and anyone who chanted the name of Amitabha Buddha with total concentration, trust and faith in Amitabha Buddha would be reborn into the Pure Land. Jōdo Shinshū Buddhists would not agree
- Shinran taught that faith in Amitabha Buddha was more important than chanting. Chanting on its own had no value at all. For Jōdo Shinshū Buddhists chanting is nothing more than an expression of gratitude to Amitabha Buddha and an expression of the chanter's faith. Jōdo-Shū Buddhists would not agree
- Shinran also taught that enlightenment is the consequence of a person achieving genuine faith in Amitabha Buddha and in Amitabha Buddha's vow to save all beings who trusted in him. Honen disagreed. Shinran also taught that faith in Amitabha Buddha is not something that the believer should take the credit for since it is not something that the believer does for themselves, their faith is a gift from Amitabha Buddha. Jōdo-Shū Buddhists would agree to some extent with this
- Jōdo Shinshū Buddhists don't accept the idea that beings can earn merit for themselves by their own acts; neither good deeds, nor performing rituals help. The moral implications of this are that a sinner with faith will be made welcome in the Pure Land - even more welcome than a good person who has faith and pride.

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