

**GCSE (9-1)**

**Examiners' report**

# **RELIGIOUS STUDIES**

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**J625**

For first teaching in 2016

**J625/04 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 responses 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

J625/04 is the GCSE paper covering Buddhist beliefs, teachings and practices. There are two questions in this paper, both of which are mandatory. There are no optional questions. Both questions draw on all elements of the specification.

There are five parts (a to e) of each question. Parts (a) to (c) are low tariff questions, each worth three marks and assessing knowledge and understanding. Part (d) is worth 6 marks and requires a longer response. It is assessed using AO1 (knowledge and understanding) level descriptors. Part (e) is an essay question in which candidates are required to evaluate a stimulus statement. Part (e) is assessed using both AO1 (knowledge and understanding) and AO2 (analysis and evaluation) level descriptors. There are three marks available for AO1, with one mark on each level; and a total of twelve marks, spread over four levels, available for AO2. In addition to this, three marks are available for SPaG on Question 1 only.

Candidates generally performed well on this paper, demonstrating a high level of subject knowledge and examination skills. The best responses were in line with what might be expected at A Level. As in previous years, an area for improvement was that comparatively few candidates achieved Level 4 at AO2 on the part (e) questions, as this requires evidence of critical and evaluative thinking. It was more common for candidates to give opposing points of view, with supporting arguments on each side, rather than demonstrating the relationships between the arguments or suggesting why some arguments were more convincing than others. It was clear that some candidates had been taught to use the phrase 'this is a strong/weak argument'. However, this is only useful if followed by a genuine reason, which was uncommon. A better approach is to compare arguments to each other or to follow an argument with a counter argument so that the response becomes a genuine discussion.

There were few rubric errors, although a significant minority did not attempt Question 2 (b). There did not seem to be any common misinterpretations of questions, and there was no evidence of candidates having insufficient time to complete the paper.

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, including technical terminology, which they were able to use confidently and accurately</li> <li>• gave detailed responses to part (d) questions</li> <li>• answered the precise question asked rather than generalised responses to the wider topic</li> <li>• gave discursive and evaluative responses to part (e) questions that made use of critical thinking.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• lacked the detailed accurate knowledge about different Buddhist traditions</li> <li>• did not follow specific instructions in questions, such as referring to sources of wisdom and authority and discussing divergent groups and viewpoints within Buddhism in part (e) questions</li> <li>• did not give responses to all questions</li> <li>• gave very brief responses to part (d) and (e) questions.</li> </ul>

## Question 1 (a)

1

(a) Describe **one** of the three poisons/fires.

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..... [3]

This question specifically asks for one of the three poisons. Therefore, once a response went on to talk about a second poison, no further marks could be given. However, candidates were not penalised for listing the three and then going on to describe one in detail. Marks were given for correctly naming one of the poisons (in either English or Pali) and for further development. Marks were given for the English or the Pali name but not for both. Candidates generally gained full marks for this question. The few who did not, confused the three poisons with the three marks of existence or the three jewels.

## Question 1 (b)

(b) State **three** ways in which a Buddhist might celebrate Parinirvana day.

1 .....

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2 .....

.....

3 .....

.....

[3]

This question required candidates to list three ways in which Parinirvana Day might be celebrated, with one mark given for each correct response. Some candidates wrote very specific responses to this question showing a good level of knowledge particularly of the scriptures read on this day. Others wrote general ideas that are common features of Buddhists' celebrations or worship such as pray, meditate, offerings, read scriptures; so long as these were accurate and related to religious observance, they were credited. Very general responses such as 'have a party' were not credited. The majority of candidates gained full marks on this question.

## Question 1 (c)

(c) Describe what is meant by the term Enlightenment.

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..... [3]

This question required an explanation of the term 'enlightenment', demonstrating understanding as well as knowledge. Marks were given for correct statements and for relevant development and exemplification. The question asked about the meaning of the term and so candidates were not credited for describing how to reach enlightenment according to Buddhist teachings. The majority of candidates gained full marks on this question. Many candidates wrote a clear definition of enlightenment, describing it as an absence of suffering, a state of realisation about the truth or an escape from the cycle of samsara, having overcome the three poisons. Some suggested that enlightenment is synonymous with nirvana, which was credited as correct for GCSE, although opinion on this within Buddhism is divided. A common misunderstanding, which was not credited, was the idea that nirvana/enlightenment is a place that Buddhists go to when they die.

## Question 1 (d)

(d) Outline the importance of the Deer Park at Sarnath for Buddhists.

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..... [6]

This question required a longer and more detailed response. It was marked according to the AO1 level descriptors with a maximum of six marks available. Most candidates recognised the Deer Park as the place where the Buddha gave his first sermon and suggested that this made it a significant place as it was, effectively, where Buddhism began. Some went on to describe its modern significance as an important place of pilgrimage. A few candidates also added that it was a site where one of the Buddha's past lives had taken place, leading to it being established as a deer park in the first place. In order to achieve Level 3 candidates needed to be aware that this is where the Buddha gave his first sermon. They also needed to engage with the importance of the site to Buddhists, rather than just describing what had happened there. Less successful responses, which were awarded at Level 1, explained that the Deer Park was a site of pilgrimage, but could not connect this to a particular event. Some misidentified the site as the place where the Buddha was enlightened, or where he died. The majority of candidates attained Level 2 on this question. Generally this meant that they could describe what had happened at the Deer Park but did not really explain why this made it an important site for Buddhists.

### Assessment for learning



Read the question carefully.

This question asks for the importance of the Deer Park for Buddhists, not just for a description of what happened there. It is where the Buddha gave his first sermon, but why does that make it important? And how can you tell that it is an important place? What effect might going there have on a Buddhist?

## Exemplar 1

## Buddha's First sermon / teachings

↑

3

(d) Outline the importance of the Deer Park at Sarnath for Buddhists.

Deer Park at Sarnath is the place where the Buddha presented his first sermon and gave some of his first teachings. This is a crucial place for Buddhists to recognise and visit as it enables them to feel close to the Buddha as he is believed to have been present there. Moreover, since the Buddha presented and relayed his first teachings at the Deer Park, visiting it replicates the momentous event, allowing Buddhists to be immersed in their faith and the origins of the Dhamma. It is influential in encouraging Buddhists to show devotion and gratitude to the Buddha for formulating the Dhamma as it is a crucial form of [Paper] [6]



1(d) guidance and instruction on how to reach enlightenment, the ultimate aim of Buddhism. The Buddha said "my teaching is not a philosophy, it is the result of direct experience, my teaching is a means of practice, not something to hold on to and to worship." Through this being the main teaching of the Buddha and embodying the purpose of the faith, the Buddha delivering similar teachings at the Deer Park would have been heavily influential in shaping many people's understanding of the faith, and their journeys to enlightenment.

This response is focused throughout on why the Deer Park is important rather than just describing what happened there. It explains what effect visiting the site might have on a Buddhist and why.

## Question 1 (e)

(e) 'Becoming a bodhisattva is the goal for all Buddhists.'

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]

This is an essay style question, requiring an extended response demonstrating both AO1 (knowledge and understanding) and AO2 (analysis and evaluation). Candidates are asked to critically evaluate a stimulus statement. In this case they are asked to discuss the idea that all Buddhists should aim to become a bodhisattva. The majority of candidates understood what was meant by the term bodhisattva and were aware that it is usually associated with the Mahayana tradition. Many contrasted it with the path of the arhat, which they suggested was the goal of Theravada Buddhists. Many also contrasted it with the goal of Pure Land Buddhism, to reach the Pure Land rather than to become a bodhisattva. Few, however, explored the idea that the Pure Land itself was created by a bodhisattva. This would have been an interesting and helpful way to develop the discussion. Some suggested that the arhat path is selfish as it looks to enlightenment for oneself rather than helping others. This is a view expressed by some Mahayana schools, but candidates generally stated this as a view with no further development. This approach generally secured a mark in Level 3 of AO2. Candidates could have reached Level 4 by further developing some of these arguments, such as emphasising the compassion of the Buddha, or suggesting that the Buddha taught that each person was responsible for their own journey to enlightenment, meaning that there would be very little that a bodhisattva could do. A small number of candidates linked the question to sunyata and the interconnectedness of all things, suggesting that enlightenment is only possible if it happens for all beings, making the path of the bodhisattva the only logical way. Almost all candidates gained Level 2 or 3 at AO1, with most gaining three. At AO2 most gained either six (Level 2) or seven (Level 3) marks.

## Question 2 (a)

2

(a) Describe **one** form of Buddhist meditation.

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..... [3]

As in Question 1 (a), candidates were only asked to describe one form of meditation, and no more marks could be given if they started to offer a second. Where candidates described samatha, vipassana or metta bhavana meditation they usually gained full marks. Very general responses such as 'sitting still and clearing the mind' could gain full marks if they were sufficiently detailed. Candidates describing zen or zazen meditation were more likely to become confused and did not gain full marks. The majority of candidates gained full marks.

### Assessment for learning



Read the question carefully.

This question asks for one form of meditation. If the response begins to describe a second form of meditation no more marks can be given.

## Question 2 (b)

(b) State **three** of the twelve links (nidanas).

- 1 .....
  - .....
  - 2 .....
  - .....
  - 3 .....
  - .....
- [3]**

This question was problematic for many candidates and there were more 'No Response' returns here than for any other question on the paper. Where candidates did respond, a very significant number did not gain any marks. Where candidates did not know what the nidanas were they tended to guess, inserting any term they knew to be associated with Buddhism (such as dukkha, anicca etc.). Where candidates did understand the question correctly many gained full marks. Credit was given to the usual terms used, and to the pictures often associated with them in depictions of the wheel of life.

## Question 2 (c)

(c) State **three** Buddhist beliefs about the monastic sangha.

- 1 .....
  - .....
  - 2 .....
  - .....
  - 3 .....
  - .....
- [3]**

This question asks for three points to be listed, with one mark given for each correct point. Credit was given for any accurate information about the monastic sangha, and the majority of candidates did not have any difficulty achieving full marks. Many described the various ways in which the monastic sangha supported the lay community and were supported by them in return. Some talked about the rules that the monastic community have to follow, while others pointed out that some Buddhists believe that enlightenment is only possible for members of the monastic sangha.

## Question 2 (d)

(d) Describe Buddhist beliefs about the causes of suffering.

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..... [6]

This is a longer response question marked using the AO1 (knowledge and understanding) level descriptors with six marks available across 3 levels. The question asks about the causes of suffering, so responses specifically about how to escape suffering and reach nirvana were not credited. Typically candidates either wrote about the Four Noble Truths, and in particular tanha, or about the three poisons. The strongest responses explained both. The best responses described in detail how these things cause suffering. The majority of candidates achieved Level 2, as many did not tightly focus on the cause of suffering.

### Assessment for learning



Read the question carefully.

This question asks for an explanation of the causes of suffering according to Buddhist teaching, not for an explanation of how to escape suffering. For this question responses should be focused on why people suffer.

## Question 2 (e)\*

(e)\* 'Worship (puja) does **not** help to overcome suffering.'

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]

This is an essay style question requiring a detailed and thoughtful response to the stimulus statement. To gain Level 4 at AO2 it is necessary to show evidence of evaluation and critical thinking. Generally speaking, candidates were less successful here than they were on Question 1 (e). For some candidates the question posed a problem as they did not seem to understand the nature of puja within Buddhism. In particular, many candidates confused puja with meditation and then argued for how meditation could overcome suffering. Stronger responses specifically identified puja with the giving of offerings and praise, generally to a rupa, and could then argue that this was less effective than meditation, since the Buddha is not generally regarded as a divine being who can intervene to give help. Against this, some explained that puja gave a chance to reflect on the Buddha's teachings (for example a flower or a mandala representing anicca) and that this could lead to enlightenment and the end of suffering. A few also mentioned Pure Land Buddhism and that puja in the form of chanting the name of Amida Buddha could lead to an end of suffering in the Pure Land.

## Exemplar 2

- Shrine: honours (anica) <sup>mean: "to the Dhamma for refuge"</sup> <sup>→ comforting, helps overcome suffering</sup> <sup>A</sup> "my teaching is a means of practice, not something to worship & hold on to" <sup>→ instead, do as we can</sup>
- (e)\* 'Worship (puja) does not help to overcome suffering.'
- 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.
- <sup>D</sup> Does help → devotion, appreciation of Dhamma → skillful action can include meditation "may be well"

[15]

Some Buddhists may agree with the statement and argue that since Buddhism has no god(s), ~~there~~ worship is pointless and does not help overcome suffering. Worship may actually subvert the three marks of existence as it shows an attachment to scripture and perhaps certain idols (if they are involved in worship). Notably, the three fires are anicca, meaning everything is impermanent, anatta, meaning there is no fixed self, and dukkha, meaning suffering. Through worship, Buddhists are mainly perpetuating ideas of permanence as diligent focus is placed on scripture and mantras. In fact, these are also impermanent, so relying on them heavily as a part of worship goes against anicca and disregards the transience of everything, as taught by the Buddha. The Buddha also taught that "my teaching is



a means of practice, not something to hold on to and to worship". Therefore the Buddha himself discouraged worship, showing ~~its~~ its preventative nature in overcoming suffering. This is a weak argument as the Buddha said "to the Dhamma for refuge I go", showing that his teachings and worshipping them are crucial to overcoming suffering and achieving enlightenment. Moreover, a focal point of worship is usually shrines with offerings such as flowers, that physically represent Anicca. Therefore, worship is arguably helpful in overcoming suffering as it can physically represent key teachings.

Some Buddhists may disagree, arguing that worship does help to overcome suffering as Buddhists can show devotion to the Buddha and conscious appreciation of his teachings. Observing the ~~Dham~~ Dhamma closely can also enable Buddhists to develop Right [Paper] <sup>additional</sup> ~~pothet~~



2	(e)	<p>Wisdom and Concentration, key parts of the Eightfold path. Meditation is often considered worship as people embody what the Buddha advised, <del>allowing</del> allowing key ethical teachings like metta and karuna to be extended to all people; "may I be happy", for instance.</p> <p>Overall, I disagree as worship is crucial to overcoming the three fires.</p>
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This is a good example of an evaluative and discursive response to an (e) part question. It uses arguments and counter arguments to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the different viewpoints.

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