

Examiners' report

GCSE

RELIGIOUS STUDIES

**OCR Level 1/Level 2 GCSE (9-1) in
Religious Studies**

J625

For first teaching in 2016

J625/04 Summer 2025 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.

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Paper 4 series overview

J625/04 is the GCSE question paper Buddhism: Beliefs and teachings & Practices. There are two questions in this paper, both of which are mandatory. There are no optional questions.

There are five parts (a) – (e) of each question. Parts (a) – (c) are low tariff questions, each worth 3 marks and assess knowledge and understanding. Part (d) is worth 6 marks and requires an extended response, often requiring candidates to explain how two ideas within Buddhism relate to each other. It is assessed using AO1 (knowledge and understanding) level descriptors. Part (e) is an extended response 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 3 marks available for AO1, with one mark on each level. There is a total of 12 marks, spread over four levels, available for AO2. In addition to this, 3 marks are available for SPaG on Question 1 (e) only.

Candidates generally were successful on this question paper, demonstrating a high level of subject knowledge. In general, candidates tended to be more successful on Question 1 than on Question 2. As in previous years, 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.

The less successful responses often did not attempt several of the questions, most commonly the (d) and (e) parts of the question paper. There did not seem to be any common misinterpretations of questions, and there was no evidence of candidates having insufficient time to complete the question paper.

Use of subject knowledge

Candidates often have very good subject knowledge; however, they need to develop the ability to apply this knowledge to specific questions. This may mean that they need to have real understanding of the importance of Buddhist teachings and their influence on wider life.

Candidates who did well on this paper generally:	Candidates who did less well on this paper generally:
- had good subject knowledge, including technical terminology, which they were able to use confidently and accurately - gave detailed responses to part (d) questions - responded to the precise question asked rather than generalised responses to the wider topic - gave discursive and evaluative responses to part (e) questions that made use of critical thinking.	- lacked detailed and accurate knowledge about different Buddhist traditions - 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) - did not give responses to all questions - gave very brief responses to part (d) and (e) questions.

Question 1 (a)

1

(a) State **three** features of a Buddhist shrine.

1

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2

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3

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[3]

Most candidates successfully responded to this question, gaining all 3 marks. Common responses included a Buddha rupa, candles, incense and other offerings. Responses that were effectively repetitions of each other, for example, statues and pictures of the Buddha were only given once.

Question 1 (b)

(b) Describe what is meant by the term **anatta/anataman/anatman**.

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..... [3]

Most candidates responded successfully to this question and gained all 3 marks. They were able to explain the idea of 'no soul' or 'no unchanging self' well, with many including an explanation of the khandas. Candidates who gained 1 or 2 marks usually correctly identified the term as meaning 'no soul' but did not understand the implications of this, as they went on to explain how it meant that the soul is separate from the body and goes on to be reborn. A few candidates confused anatta with anicca and talked about impermanence.

Question 1 (c)

(c) Describe the importance of the lay sangha.

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..... [3]

Most candidates successfully responded to this question and were able to gain 3 marks. The majority understood what was meant by 'the lay sangha' and were able to explain their role in supporting the monastic sangha. The 'importance' was generally given by implication, in the description of the role of the lay sangha within Buddhism. The most successful responses directly addressed the importance of the lay sangha. Some pointed out that they allowed the monks to concentrate on generating puna, which benefitted all Buddhists. Some candidates confused the monastic and lay sangha and so could not be given any marks. A few candidates did not know what the sangha was and guessed that it was a sacred text or a significant person.

Question 1 (d)

(d) Explain the relationship between dependent origination and the cycle of samsara.

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..... [6]

Most candidates showed a good knowledge and understanding of samsara and its relation to karma. In addition to this, most were aware that dependent origination means that everything is dependent on something else for its existence. Where candidates described the relationship between them, they usually explained that rebirth is dependent on karma. This type of response was given a mark in Level 2 (3 or 4 marks). A few responses showed a detailed understanding of dependent origination or were able to explain the relationship between the 12 nidanas and rebirth, or the importance of breaking the links to escape samsara. Very few responses explained this connection in sufficient depth to gain all 6 marks.

Exemplar 1

Dependent origination is the idea that every being, thing, and event is interdependent of one another. This means that every action causes a chain reaction of events. This links to the idea of karma, where unskillful and skillful actions dictate your karmic energy, which decides what happens when you die. If it dictates that you are reborn, you continue the cycle of samsara in a different realm. If it dictates that you have become enlightened, you finish the cycle of samsara and reach the state of nibbana, or the flowing out of the three poisons of greed, hatred, and ignorance.

This response shows a good understanding of samsara and its relationship to karma. The candidate is aware that dependent origination is connected to the idea that everything is dependent on something else and links this to the understanding that samsara is dependent on karma. However, there is no deeper understanding of dependent origination, or the 12 nidanas and their link to samsara. This response is typical of those at the top of Level 2 and was given 4 marks.

Question 1 (e)

(e) 'Death rituals have nothing to do with the Buddha's teachings.'

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 question is marked using both AO1 (knowledge and understanding) and AO2 (analysis and evaluation) level descriptors. Many candidates gained 2 or 3 marks (of a possible 3) for AO1, as they were able to describe different Buddhist death rituals in some detail. Most discussed were the Japanese Obon festival and the Tibetan ritual of sky burial. Where candidates gained 2 rather than 3 marks, this was because they had some knowledge of the death rituals themselves but were unable to connect them with the correct Buddhist traditions. This often led to confusion and made it more difficult for candidates to follow a line of reasoning. Candidates who gained 1 mark for AO1 or did not gain a mark at all generally did not understand what was meant by 'death rituals' and instead discussed whether the Buddha taught anything about death or the afterlife. The least successful responses did not address the question at all and typically consisted of one or two lines generally summarising Buddhist teaching.

To gain 3 marks for AO1, candidates must include sources of wisdom and authority and discuss different views and traditions within Buddhism. It was often a failure to do this with sufficient accuracy that prevented a response from reaching full marks for AO1.

For AO2, the most common marks were at the top of Level 2 or the bottom of Level 3. Most candidates who had gained 2 or 3 marks at AO1 were able to offer arguments on both sides of the question. Most suggested that while the Buddha did not specifically teach about death rituals, many death rituals were concerned with things he had taught about such as compassion, transfer of merit, and impermanence. There was some discussion of how far death rituals created either more or less suffering. There were few responses in Level 4, and those that were typically gained 10 marks at the bottom of the level. This was because candidates did not compare the different arguments they had used or give a detailed conclusion that assessed the different viewpoints. Responses at the bottom of Level 2 or below tended to speak generally about Buddhism rather than the Buddha's teachings specifically. Overall, candidates demonstrated good knowledge about death rituals but found it more difficult to apply this to the specific question that had been asked.

Exemplar 2

~~Many Buddhists would disagree~~
 some theravada Buddhists may disagree because
 in the Pali canon it says the Buddha teaches
 suffering and that's it. ~~this is~~ in the Pali canon,
 which is the Dharma that Theravada Buddhists
 follow, it says 'I teach suffering, and the end of
 suffering.' This means that the only thing linked
 to the Buddha's teaching is suffering and how
 to end it. This means they would agree because
 the ~~Buddha's teaching~~ death rituals ~~don't have~~
 do not have anything to do with suffering or the
 end of suffering as the person has already been
 reborn. However, some ~~monks~~ Buddhists
 may argue that some rituals contribute to the
 rebirth someone gets so it technically does have
 to do with the end of suffering as it makes it easier
 to escape samsara.

This candidate has demonstrated analysis by showing that a single point, that the Buddha stated that his whole teaching was connected to ending suffering, can be interpreted in two ways. It can mean that death rituals are not related to the Buddha's teachings, since he only taught about ending suffering, or that they are indirectly related as they help to ease suffering. This is a demonstration of analysis and evaluation, allowing this response into Level 4 at 10 marks.

Question 2 (a)

2

(a) State **three** unskillful actions.

- 1
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- 2
-
- 3
-

[3]

Most candidates successfully responded to this question and gained all 3 marks. Those that did not generally listed the three poisons with no further comment. These were not given as they are not actions. Others misread the question and listed three things that Buddhists might consider good. Most responses gave actions that are morally wrong, although this is not the only possible interpretation of 'unskillful action'. Any action that was likely to make it more difficult for a Buddhist to achieve enlightenment was given.

Question 2 (b)

(b) Describe **one** activity that takes place in a monastery on an Uposatha Day.

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-
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-
-

[3]

Marks on this question were evenly distributed across the full range from 0 to 3. Any action that could be considered accurate was given, even if it is not specifically associated with Uposatha. Many candidates who were less successful across the paper therefore gained a mark with a single word response such as 'meditation'. The most successful responses often described the practice of reading the monastic rules and confessing any breaches of them to fellow monks.

Question 2 (c)

(c) Describe **one** way that impermanence causes suffering.

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..... [3]

Most candidates successfully responded to this question and gained all 3 marks. The connection between attachment, loss and suffering was well understood and explained.

Question 2 (d)

(d) Explain how devotional worship helps to end dukkha.

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..... [6]

Most candidates gave less successful responses to this question as they did not have a good understanding of the term 'devotional worship' and were not able to distinguish this from meditation. Most candidates, therefore, gave an accurate account of the relationship between meditation and the ending of suffering, which only partially addressed the question and so was limited to Level 2. The most successful responses looked at the value of chanting the name of Amida Buddha in the Pure Land tradition and suggested that focusing on a Buddha rupa encouraged contemplation of the teachings of the Buddha, which would lead to enlightenment. Some also suggested that contemplation of the Buddha gave encouragement that enlightenment was possible.

Question 2 (e)*

(e)* 'The Middle Way is not important to Buddhists today.'

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 question is marked using both AO1 (knowledge and understanding) and AO2 (analysis and evaluation) level descriptors. Candidates were generally less successful with this question than Question 1 (e), with many being uncertain what was meant by The Middle Way. While most candidates gained 3 marks at AO1, there were many who did not, and a higher proportion than in Question 1 (e) failing to gain a mark. Most candidates correctly thought that The Middle Way was associated with a middle ground between luxury and privation, with most connecting this to the life experience of the Buddha. However, many were less successful in suggesting reasons why this was or was not important. Some compared The Middle Way to things they knew to be important in Buddhism such as the Eightfold Path. This often caused confusion since the Eightfold Path is often equated with The Middle Way in Buddhism making a direct comparison of their importance impossible.

The most successful responses suggested that the teachings of the Buddha were less important in Pure Land Buddhism, and this included The Middle Way. Others suggested that the importance of several teachings was diminished in Western Buddhism and that it was harder to avoid luxury in a western consumer society. Some confusion was caused by candidates less successfully identifying different traditions, assuming that Theravada Buddhists were 'strict' while Mahayana Buddhists were more 'relaxed'. Candidates often took this to mean that Mahayana Buddhists were not serious or committed to Buddhism, and this meant that the arguments they used were not accurate.

Assessment for learning



Candidates often do not have a sound understanding of the differences between different Buddhist traditions.

There is a general misapprehension that Theravada Buddhists are 'strict' and that Mahayana traditions are more relaxed, and often that they do not take Buddhism or the Buddha's teachings as seriously. Candidates need a detailed and accurate understanding of the differences between traditions, the reasons for these differences, and how the differences affect Buddhists to successfully respond to analysis and evaluation questions.

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