



**General Certificate of Secondary Education  
June 2011**

**Religious Studies A (4050)**

**Unit 12: Buddhism**

**405012**

***Report on the Examination***

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## Unit 12: Buddhism

### General Comments

On the whole, candidates appeared to have been well prepared for this examination. That said, the full ability range had been entered and, as with the first examination of this new specification last summer, the paper seemed to be accessible to all. The depth of knowledge and understanding shown by quite a number of candidates at the top end was a credit to the candidates themselves and to the way in which their teachers had prepared them for the paper. Some candidates were able to demonstrate their ability to utilise and apply a wide range of Buddhist beliefs, practices and teachings, and it is always good to see a variety of approaches to some of the questions set. Well prepared candidates were able to marshal their time well and complete all the parts of their chosen question in Part B, giving coherent and detailed responses. This meant that they could add a considerable amount to their overall score. The usage of technical vocabulary was excellent, and examiners are pleased to see this improving year on year.

### Part A

#### Question A1 The Life of the Buddha

Part (a) proved to be a good starter for most candidates, and on the whole was very well answered, with many achieving full marks. Candidates who scored full marks knew plenty about the traditional accounts of Buddha Sakyamuni's birth. Candidates seemed to enjoy this as a good starter and a confidence booster for the rest of the examination.

Almost all candidates answered part (b) correctly. This was a quick and easy way for candidates to pick up 2 marks.

Some candidates seemed unsure of the term ascetic in part (c), and this could have hindered their overall score. That said, if candidates homed in on the phrase 'most important part of the Buddha's life' they could write something worthy of credit. Some candidates argued that the ascetic life was a pivotal point in the Buddha's actual life span so that he had the extreme of self mortification to contrast with his life of sensuality. Many candidates offered the view that the Four Signs the Buddha saw held the most significance for him as they set him on the path to try to find the truth of our existence. Balanced arguments scored well whether there was a concluding remark at the end of the response or not. Some of the very able candidates suggested that all aspects of the Buddha's life could be classed as significant and it is difficult to suggest that one area is more significant than another.

#### Question A2 Worship and Festivals

Many candidates revealed a good and varied grasp of the types of thing that might be found in a typical Buddhist temple in part (a). Some candidates achieved full marks by clearly indicating that they knew of the variety of artefacts, statues, stupas and other aspects of a temple, and some candidates did not confine their responses to objects. Those who made too many generalisations scored some marks but not full marks, even though their comments were sometimes reasonably accurate.

Examiners saw a wide variety of responses to part (b). Some candidates gave well-argued answers with reasoning and consideration of the importance of worship in a temple for Buddhists with like-minded followers. They suggested that the corporate feel and atmosphere of this scenario may help Buddhists gain enlightenment. Others thought that being at home with a personal shrine was more suited to calm and peace that people

associate with Buddhist practices. Some were confused, having made a bold statement early on in the response and then refuting it half way through. This was often because they did not focus on the phrase 'do not need'.

Some of the better candidates were able to distinguish between generalisations and specific examples of exactly what takes place at a Buddhist pilgrimage at Bodh Gaya in part (c). A few candidates got confused with events at the Buddha's birth, and some identified Bodh Gaya as either the place where the Buddha gave his first sermon or the place where he died.

In part (d) some of the more able candidates were clear in their expression of what 'essential' actually means in the context of what makes a good Buddhist. Meditation practised anywhere featured highly as an alternative to visiting Bodh Gaya. There were also references to places of pilgrimage being secondary in terms of importance to things like engaged Buddhism or becoming a monastic in Theravada Buddhism. Going on a pilgrimage might be deemed as having limited worth to a Buddhist, whilst candidates still acknowledged the importance of revering the Buddha at Bodh Gaya and what he taught following his enlightenment, and of wanting to do something to mark this (like a pilgrimage). Responses which were argued less successfully gave only one elaborated reason or two or more simple reasons without much clarification or depth.

### **Question A3 Meditation**

Many candidates offered superb responses in part (a). Others made more generalisations, relying on the picture in the paper for help and stating, for example, sitting cross-legged with eyes closed would help Buddhists meditate.

In part (b) many candidates explained in some detail why Buddhists meditate. Reasons given included trying to control the mind and to increase concentration. Some candidates used technical words such as metta and karuna, while others gave more general responses about showing respect and reverence to the Buddha. Many scored well on this question.

Many candidates demonstrated that they had been taught well on the topic of meditation in Buddhism and were able to bring different dimensions into their evaluative reasoning in part (d). Some were fairly damning of Buddhists who decide not to get involved in 'engaged Buddhism' and hide themselves away meditating in a monastery. Others suggested that there was a time and a place for all aspects of Buddhist practice. Very good responses considered the idea that without meditation, Buddhists could not reach the goal of their faith.

### **Question A4 The Dhamma (Dharma)**

Part (a) rarely troubled candidates. Many responded on the teaching of dukkha, but there were some excellent responses on anicca and anatta too. Most candidates realised that the number of marks available meant that they were being asked for more than one word or phrase. Those that fared less well gave responses relating to the Tripitaka or Four Noble Truths.

In part (b) some candidates had sound knowledge of the three baskets of scripture in Buddhism, but some appeared to have no knowledge whatsoever of this area of the specification. These candidates either left the page blank or made guesses along the lines of the Three Universal Truths. Most were able to suggest what the baskets were but some omitted importance from their response and failed to gain full marks. At the top end, candidates mentioned how the Tripitaka is still used as a teaching aid today and how a deeper understanding of the Buddhist Dhamma can come from reciting and chanting the scriptures. Both of these angles taken by candidates are to be applauded. The more generalised responses just linked the Tripitaka to the idea that the Buddha taught what is in there, so it must be important.

In part (c) some of the more able candidates were clear in their expression of how some could argue that only an enlightened being would be able to express whether it is difficult or not to understand enlightenment. Some candidates related their responses to the way the Buddha would have taught it and how Buddhists learn to control and discipline the mind to enable an understanding of what enlightenment is about. Equally, a few candidates made the intelligent argument that enlightenment is the goal of the Buddhist faith; because it is achievable, it can be understood. As with many evaluative answers, the less successfully argued responses gave only one elaborated reason or two or more simple reasons without much clarification or depth.

## **Part B**

### **Question B5 The Sangha and Attitudes to Life**

Part (a) proved quite popular with candidates, but a few made generalisations about laity and monks and nuns and did not separate out the tasks and duties performed by one rather than the other. Responses tended to be weighted towards what the laity does for the monks than the other way around. Some offered a detailed response with some analysis related to the different types of activities one may find in a vihara, whilst others referred back to Buddhist teachings on the precepts for monks and nuns such as not handling gold or silver (or, in modern terms, money); this is where the laity are able to assist. Some candidates had learned specifics of exactly what to include in a response to a question such as this, covered different traditions such as Tibetan Buddhism and Zen, and were awarded full, or near full, marks. Though not a requirement, it was good to see some variation in practice being explored here, and responses which included this also gained good marks.

Part (b) was an evaluative question about the Five Moral Precepts in Buddhism and whether they are the most important duty for a monk. Again, this seemed to be popular with candidates, with even the less able gaining mid-level marks. That said, some candidates simply elaborated on what the Five Moral Precepts are. On the whole, though, most responses contained something worthy of credit. As with last year's more general question on the precepts, there were some lengthy explanations of two of the Precepts, 'Do not take life' and 'Do not take what is not given'. Candidates clearly thought that these two precepts would be the most important for a Buddhist monk to adhere to. Those who tackled other duties monks should perform, including trying to gain enlightenment by chanting, reciting and reading scripture, being involved in 'engaged Buddhism' and meditation, showed an astute side to their arguments which enabled them to reach the higher levels with their full, coherent, well-balanced responses. The fact that candidates are able to weigh up whether the Five Moral Precepts are the most important duty or not shows that they have been well taught.

Many candidates displayed some excellent knowledge and understanding of what happens at a Buddhist death ceremony in part (c); some were perhaps inspired an episode of the Human Planet on BBC 1 this year which showed one Buddhist tradition of the sky burial. Most responses to this question covered the sky burial in some depth. This question allowed candidates to exhibit their grasp of a variety of differing Buddhist traditions and how they bury or cremate their dead. Many candidates showed good development of knowledge and understanding and, although some responses were very descriptive, others showed a good grasp of the requirements of the trigger word 'Explain'.

In part (d) there were some well-balanced responses, with the more able candidates often writing about the issue of whether anyone has ever returned from the dead to tell others there is life after death and about how the Buddha focused on becoming happy in this life alongside alleviating suffering rather than focusing on enduring another rebirth. Some

responses were a little one-sided, which made it difficult for candidates to access the higher levels. As with last year, those candidates who had paced themselves well were able to write at length offering well balanced analysis, concluding with their personal view, even in this, the last question on the paper. Equally, it was pleasing to see Buddhist traditions other than the Theravadan one brought into responses. The less able gave more subjective responses but were still able to score mid-level marks. Examiners were pleased to see, at the top end, such mature and thoughtful reflection in response to this evaluation question about rebirth. They were also pleased that many candidates were clear about rebirth in Buddhism, rather than confusing it with reincarnation.

### **Question B6 Global Issues and The Eightfold Path**

As with last year's B6 question on the environment, some less able candidates struggled to move beyond generalisations and show more than an elementary knowledge and understanding of Buddhist attitudes to animal rights in part (a). On the other hand, there were also some thoughtful responses which included references to vegetarianism, the Five Moral Precepts, and links with Right Livelihood in the Eightfold Path and the doctrine of Karma (Kamma). It was good to see some of the more able candidates using ahimsa in their explanation, as well as the fact that, in the Buddhist faith, there is a close connection between human and non-human. A few candidates mentioned the link between the environment and animal rights; much of what they offered was credit worthy, commendable and appropriate.

The evaluation question in part (b) provoked a better and more sustained line of argument against the statement made on the paper than in favour, perhaps indicating how some people see the statement as a little idealistic and not always practical. Some candidates were vehemently against the statement, supporting their view with reference to self-defence and war; these answers were somewhat one-sided as they failed to consider that Buddhists might find it impossible ever to take a life, given the First Moral Precept. Some of the more able took an interesting view; they considered whether it was right for monks to disrobe to fight against oppression and injustice at the expense of their Buddhist beliefs. Many candidates offered well-argued responses showing consideration of more than one point of view and a well-informed insight into the issue.

Candidates, if they had gauged their time well, answered part (c) at length and showed a sound grasp of some of the Buddha's main teachings. Some candidates listed the elements of the Noble Eightfold Path with no explanation, so were not able to access the higher levels. Generally, however, this question was answered reasonably well. Many candidates identified, as part of their response, the fact that the Buddha had taught three trainings of panna (prajna), sila and samadhi on the Eightfold Path and how these should be practised simultaneously rather than consecutively. Apart from this, answers mostly concentrated on the morality aspect. There were many responses that gained full marks.

There were some well-balanced responses to the evaluation question in part (d), which followed on nicely from part (c). Candidates considered the consistency of the Buddha's teachings and whether they are for all ages and peoples. Very few offered unsupported opinion or no relevant evaluation. Some candidates took a more global view and looked at, as part of their response, whether any religious teachings relevant years ago continue to be so today, then refocusing on the Buddhist perspective in their conclusions. Some of the best answers considered whether, because the teachings of Buddhism do not come from a divine source, they have as much relevance in the modern world as other religious teachings or carry as much importance even for Buddhists who practise the faith.

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