



Examiners' Report Principal Examiner Feedback

June 2025

Pearson Edexcel Advanced Level
In Religious Studies (9RS0)
Paper 4A Buddhism

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9RS0 4A Advanced Buddhism

Introduction

This paper enabled candidates to respond to their in-depth study of Buddhism. They were able to explain the beliefs, values and teachings, sources of wisdom and authority, and the practices that shape and express religious identity within Buddhism. Many candidates were able to show good knowledge and understanding (AO1) of Buddhism, demonstrating the key ideas studied in the specification. Most candidates were able to assess and analyse (AO2) the beliefs that were studied in this paper, some candidates showed an outstanding level of understanding of Buddhism. Most candidates managed their time well and answered all questions in detail. Where candidates did not perform so well, their responses were less detailed and the AO2 questions contained more AO1 information than AO2.

Q1 Explore the significance of the Tipitaka as a source of wisdom in Buddhism. (8)

The vast majority of responses to this question scored well. The answers indicated that candidates had a thorough knowledge and understanding of the Tipitaka. Candidates were usually able to identify each of the sections within the Tipitaka by name, and most were able to explain the significance of the scriptures in Buddhism. The most effective responses explored the use of the Tipitaka as well as the significance of them for Buddhists, thus comprehensively developing key religious ideas and beliefs to show a depth of understanding (AO1) as required by the level descriptors in the mark scheme. The best answers discussed the Tipitaka as a whole and included examples of the way the content of the Tipitaka is or is not used.

Weaker responses tended to give a narrower range of knowledge and understanding than was required by the question.

Q2 Assess the importance of the Five khandas for Theravada Buddhists. (12)

Most candidates were able to access this question. Many candidates were able to give a description of importance of the Five khandas for Theravada Buddhists including a discussion of the lack of importance which fulfilled the required focus on AO2. Some candidates answered by describing the Five khandas, unfortunately these candidates only fulfilled AO1 and therefore gained low marks. Sadly a few candidates attempted the question poorly, these candidates confused the Five khandas with the Five precepts and gained no marks. It is important that candidates are familiar with all the key terms and the content of the specification.

Q3a (a) Clarify Buddhist ideas about the trikaya (Three Bodies) shown in this passage. (10)

Most candidates responded well to this question and were able to use the passage to support ideas about the trikaya. There were some secure and detailed responses that considered each of the trikaya mentioned, but some candidates did not seem to know what the trikaya were and these answers did not specifically answer the question and gained fewer marks. The best responses were able to show knowledge and understanding of key religious ideas and beliefs which was detailed and fully developed. Weak responses repeated the passage, rather than using knowledge and understanding to clarify what it meant or to provide background information.

Q3b Analyse the early development of Mahayana Buddhism. (20)

There were many strong responses to this question. Candidates were able to reveal their knowledge and understanding about the development of Mahayana Buddhism and some were able to critically deconstruct religious information/issues leading to coherent and logical chains of reasoning. Candidates were not required to analyse the development chronologically, giving specific examples of changes in practice but many of the better answers did so.

Candidates with weaker knowledge and understanding usually relied on a description of differences between Theravada Buddhism and Mahayana, without explaining how or why these arose, such answers were often rambling rather than organised and showed only basic connections between a limited range of elements in the question, as such they were unable to achieve more than Level 1.

Q4 Evaluate the importance of the four sights in the life of the Buddha. (30)

This question was a good discriminator of candidates' religious studies skills; it gave candidates the opportunity to discuss the life of the Buddha with a focus on the impact of the four sights on his actions and teachings. Most candidates gave the correct amount of time to this question allowing them to show the AO1 and AO2 skills required. Some candidates ran out of time, and these gained lower marks as a result. Most candidates were able to describe the four sights showing their depth of knowledge and understanding, they then developed their arguments and assessed the significance of the four sights by discussing alternative events in his life or the hagiographic nature of the sights. Better candidates accurately used specialist language and terminology. The strongest responses were able to critically deconstruct religious information about the influence each of the four sights may have had of specific parts of the Buddhas teaching leading to coherent and logical chains of reasoning, they were then able to contrast this with information about other Buddhist concepts.

Weaker responses simply described the four sights gaining some LO1 marks.

Summary

Based on the performance on this paper students should:

- Apply material specifically to the question asked.
- Write concisely and use evidence to support arguments
- Learn and use specialist language and terminology
- Ensure that answers requiring AO2 limit the amount of AO1 material given.
- Remember that contrasting arguments to an idea is an effective way to show AO2 skills
- Be familiar with all the requirements of the specification
- Practice answering exam questions in the time given