

Examiners' Report/
Principal Examiner Feedback

June 2011

GCSE Religious Studies (5RS15)
Buddhism

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GCSE Religious Studies 5RS15/01 Buddhism

Introduction

This is the second year the new specification for Edexcel GCSE Religious Studies has been assessed.

The specification introduced a few new topics and the weighting of the assessment objectives has changed from the legacy specification. The specification continues to be a very popular course as teachers and schools recognise the benefits of an examinable course that both interests and educates young people. The variety of choice within the new specification allows teachers to teach the course that most suits their students and as such the examination is unique.

Unit 15 covers Buddhism as a world religion.

1(a)

Those who responded incorrectly confused anicca with anatta, and therefore were unable to be awarded any marks. Thorough learning of key words would prevent this confusion.

1(b)

Although a lot of candidates were able to correctly identify what the five khandas were there were few answers that were able to explain why they might be important.

1(c)

A question about prajna, that was attempted well by candidates of all abilities. Candidates were able to tie prajna into the basis of right understanding and various other Buddhist concepts.

1(d)

The question needed candidates to evaluate a statement about whether the Four Noble Truths are the basis of Buddhism. Most candidates responded well to the new layout of the (d) question and were able to state their own opinion and give reasons for it in (d)(i). Although most candidates dealt with the Four Noble Truths as a whole, some used reasons focusing on the different aspects of the Truths and how these could be seen to be the basis of Buddhism, which was an acceptable alternative approach.

2(a)

This question was very well answered by candidates and most who attempted it gained full marks.

2(b)

Most candidates were able to state their own opinion about the importance of the sangha and then give a reason for their opinion.

2(c)

Well answered by candidates who were able to explain why the Dhammapada is important. Less well answered by candidates who described what the Dhammapada is and did not link it to importance.

2(d)

Some candidates failed to recognize what the three marks of existence were, they provided answers focused around the three poisons which did not answer the question set.

3(a)

This question was well answered by candidates and most who attempted it gained full marks.

3(b)

Most candidates were able to state their own opinion about whether the death and parinibbana of the Buddha are the most important events of his life and then give a reason for it. Some candidates did not have an understanding of what the parinibbana was, and focus should be given to both the death and parinibbana in preparation for the examination.

3(c)

The majority of responses to this question focused around a description of Mahayana Buddhism and not around the distinctive features or the reasons for them. Candidates should read the question carefully to understand what the question is asking.

3(d)

Some candidates confused the founding of the sangha with the existence of the sangha. Some candidates combined the two together but a large number could not gain marks without a focus on the actual founding.

4(a)

The candidates' understanding of the glossary definition of the Lotus Sutra was mixed.

4(b)

Candidates were usually able to state their own opinion and then give at least two reasons for this opinion. This answer tended to get two marks for two simple reasons. However, some were able to develop their responses and gain full marks.

4(c)

Well answered by candidates, who were able to explain why the Four Sights are important. Less well answered by candidates who described what the Four Sights are and did not link it to importance.

4(d)

Most candidates responded well to the layout of the (d) question and were able to state their own opinion and give reasons for it in (d)(i) and then give an alternative opinion in (d)(ii). They were able to provide simple reasons as to why all viharas should or should not be the same.

5(a)

Most candidates who answered this question gained full marks. The language used also suggested that the glossary definition had been learnt by a large number of candidates.

5(b)

Most candidates were able to state their own opinion about whether mudras aid meditation and most gave two reasons. Some candidates focused on mudras performed by the worshipper rather than the mudras on the buddharupa; this was an acceptable approach and often provided more developed reasons. A small minority of candidates mixed mudras up with mandalas or mantras. Care should be taken to differentiate between them.

5(c)

This question about vipassana meditation was generally answered well. The candidates who achieved the lower levels tended to focus on the general importance of meditation, those candidates who achieved levels 3 or 4 highlighted the specific importance of vipassana meditation.

5(d)

Most candidates responded well to the layout of the (d) question and were able to state their own opinion and give reasons for it in (d)(i) and then give an alternative opinion in (d)(ii). They were able to provide simple reasons as to why New Year should or should not be celebrated by Buddhists. Most reasons focused on the secular celebration, and little reference was made to the celebration in various sections of Buddhism.

6(a)

Candidates often confused Wesak with Vassa.

6(b)

Most candidates were able to state their own opinion about whether all people should practice samatha meditation. Candidates tended to be able to develop their reasons better on this question than other (b) questions, perhaps because of the linking of the question to "everyone". Candidates should be prepared to develop reasons from a Buddhist perspective.

6(c)

Well answered by the majority of candidates, who were able to give several reasons why the mantras are important to Buddhists. A small minority of candidates mixed mantras up with mandalas or mudras.

6(d)

This question caused very few problems for candidates, most were able to give three reasons backing their view in (d)(i) and three reasons for an alternative view in (d)(ii) about whether puja in the home or the vihara was the same.

7(a)

Most candidates knew the glossary definition for the pansils. This question generally gained full marks.

7(b)

Stronger candidates recognised that this was a question asking about the vihara in the local area and they were able to gain good marks by developing using the benefits (or lack thereof) of viharas to the local area. Lower scoring responses did not realize that the question was not a general one on viharas and their importance to Buddhists for worship.

7(c)

This question was generally answered well. Candidates were able to use a myriad of Buddhist teaching to explain why an organization might work to relieve suffering.

7(d)

Most candidates were able to respond to the quote but some did not give substantive reasons why patience might only be important for a Buddhist. Better answers referred to specific Buddhist beliefs and why they might require patience.

8(a)

Most candidates who answered this question gained full marks. The language used also suggested that the glossary definition had been learnt by a large number of candidates.

8(b)

Most candidates were able to state their own opinion as to whether a Buddhist should live the five additional pansils and then give reasons for it. However, a significant minority of candidates focused on the five pansils and could not be awarded any marks.

8(c)

Higher level responses to this question used examples of specific Buddhist beliefs and why they might be easier to live in today's society. The lower level responses tended to focus on the multi faith nature of society without development.

8(d)

Most candidates were able to respond to the quote but some did not give coherent reasons as to why right livelihood should or should not affect a person's choice of job. Answers tended to describe what right livelihood is and did not answer the question.

Summary

Candidates produced some very interesting answers to the questions posed. This indicated that they and their teachers had not only studied the topic but importantly had linked them to their everyday life and that reflected in the society around them.

Teachers and candidates should note these general points in order to improve candidate's achievement in future years:

There is a choice of two questions per section, each as four sub questions, candidates can either attempt the sub-questions in the top questions (odd numbers) or the sub-questions in the bottom question (even numbered). Candidates who choose questions form a mixture of the top and bottom questions will not receive marks for all their questions and as such are at a clear disadvantage.

Candidates are asked to indicate which question they have answered by putting a cross in a box at the top of the paper, some candidates did not do this they should be reminded to do this as part of examination preparation.

The amount of space on the question paper is more than adequate for candidates to achieve maximum marks. There is no need for candidates to write more than this. Almost all the candidates who used extra paper had already achieved maximum marks of that question. Any candidate who needs extra space can use that space allocated to other questions as long as they clearly indicate on their paper that this is what they have done.

A number of candidates did not complete the final section due to timing difficulties. Candidates should be encouraged to spend about twenty minutes per question leaving ten minutes to check through work at the ends of the paper.

Some general points can be made on how best to answer the various question types:

Maximum marks on the (a) questions are easily gained by learning the Edexcel glossary definitions.

Only the candidate's point of view is credited in (b) questions. The easiest way to gain full marks is for candidates to concentrate on stating their opinion and writing two separate reasons for it, each in a distinct paragraph and to develop each of the reasons with an example or a quote.

Candidates can gain the higher mark within the level by writing coherently. Part (c) questions test AO1 and so will either ask for candidates to 'Explain why' or to 'Explain how'.

Many of the d questions this year produced interesting answers. However candidates should ensure that they start by stating their own view and reasons for it in the (d)(i) part and state reasons why someone might hold a different view in the (d)(ii) rather than confusing the two halves. At least one of the reasons given in either (d)(i) or (d)(ii) must be explicitly religious to go beyond 3 marks. It should be pointed out that (d) questions on this unit can ask for the candidate to refer to Buddhism.

Teachers who would like to learn more about the specification should attend on of the Edexcel insets which can be found on the Edexcel website. Specific queries can be answered through Ask the Expert which is also found on the Edexcel website.

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