



Examiners' Report

Principal Examiner Feedback

Summer 2025

Pearson Edexcel International GCSE

In Religious Studies (4RS1)

Paper 2A: Buddhism

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Principal Examiner's Report for Paper 4RS1_2A Buddhism

General Introduction

Once again this year there has been a large entry of candidates for 4RS1_2A Buddhism.

Here are a few initial general observations about this year's Paper, some of which will be exemplified further later in the Report.

- Candidates are required to answer all questions on this Paper, and this seemed to be generally well understood.
- Once again this year, a significant number of candidates used extra paper for their answers, though, depending on handwriting of course, it is possible to provide a full answer in the space available on the exam paper itself.
- The different question types have different demands. For example, a) questions test Assessment Objective 1 whereas the c) questions are much more directed towards testing AO2.
- The majority of this year's candidate cohort appeared well prepared for the examination in terms of their knowledge, understanding, and willingness to engage with the questions. There were some candidates who displayed less complete understanding on certain aspects of the Specification.
- There was little evidence of candidates being unable to complete the paper in the allocated time. When this did seem likely, it may have been because they spent too much time on questions, such as a) questions, which can usually be answered with just a few sentences.

Teachers and Centres may well find it helpful to look at the Principal Examiner's Report for each of the other religions, as there may be points made there about a specific question that will have more general application.

Comments on specific question types

a) Questions

These questions are worth up to 4 marks, 2 each for two developed responses. The command word is always 'Outline', though it is important to look for the further indicator of what is being requested. This could therefore be 'Outline two ways', 'two features', 'two reasons', or a number of other similar terms. If, for example, the question asks about a feature, no marks can be awarded unless a feature is identified, regardless of the quality of the answer.

The other key requirement for gaining full marks is development. In each case the response must be developed in a way that furthers the understanding of the response given, and which responds to the question. This development does not need to be extensive. For example, if a feature of a place of worship is identified, a sentence that goes on to explain the purpose of that feature can often gain the development mark.

b) Questions

These questions are worth up to 6 marks, and the marks are awarded in accordance with two Levels: Level 1 being worth up to 3 marks, and Level 2 from 4 to 6 marks. The requirements for these levels can be found in the current Mark Scheme, and they do not change from one series to the next. It is important for candidates to be aware of these requirements. In order to gain marks in the higher Level 2, candidates must demonstrate the ability to develop their responses (for 4 marks) and, furthermore, to demonstrate a deeper understanding of the topic (for 5 or 6 marks). For these higher marks, depth of understanding is more important than breadth.

c) Questions

These questions are worth up to 10 marks, and the marks are awarded in accordance with four Levels: Level 1 being worth up to 3 marks, and Level 2 from 4 to 6 marks, Level 3 allocates 7 or 8 marks, and Level 4 allocates 9 or 10 marks. The requirements for these levels can be found in the current Mark Scheme, and they do not change from one series to the next. In order to gain marks in the higher Levels 3 and 4, candidates must demonstrate the ability to develop their responses, demonstrate a deeper understanding of the topic, and also the ability to evaluate two points of view to arrive at a justified conclusion.

Currently the rubrics for c) questions allow candidates to refer to other religions. It is important for candidates to be aware that such references can only be rewarded when there is a clear attempt to explain why the experience of another religion might be significant for, and help in the understanding of, the religion being examined.

General issues per question type that may restrict candidates' marks

On a) questions, the most usual weakness in candidate responses is the lack of development, where only simple responses are given. Such responses cannot earn more than 2 marks in total, regardless of the number of such responses. Another occasional weakness is when candidates give features, for example, when they are asked for reasons. It is important to pay attention to that changeable key word. Also, if candidates are asked about one festival or one ritual, for example, both responses must relate to it, and marks cannot be awarded for reference to any further festival or ritual.

On b) questions, many candidates develop their answers and achieve Level 2, 4 marks. However, there can then be a tendency for these simply developed responses to be multiplied, rather than explained in greater depth, thereby candidates limiting themselves to 4 marks. Although there has been some improvement in this, following previous PE Reports, it is still a common feature in answering b) questions.

On c) questions, again many candidates develop their responses. However, an answer that says that some believers would propose arguments a, b and c, but other believers would argue x, y and z – without any attempt to demonstrate a deeper understanding or to evaluate the different points of view – is unlikely to go beyond the top of Level 2. Also, answers that do not at least consider more than one point of view cannot go beyond the top of Level 2.

It is rarely the case, in examples seen by the Principal Examiner, that references to other religions prove very productive, and so they often waste valuable time. The most common way this is used by candidates is to say ‘and this is very similar in religion x’ along with some description to back that up. That tells us very little about the religion being examined.

Strengths and Weaknesses of approaches to specific questions:

Section 1 focuses on Origins and their impact on the community

1a Outline two ways Buddhists may use their sacred texts.

This question was well understood by candidates, who were able to speak of both practical uses for the sacred texts, such as being used in recitation, and also their more instructive significance. It was a well answered question, and many answers were developed by reference to teachings found in specific texts.

1b Explain why the example of the Bodhisattvas are important for some Buddhists.

This proved a more challenging question for some candidates. A number of candidates did not know the meaning of the term Bodhisattva, and either did not answer the question at all, or speculated about its meaning. Even with those who did understand the term, there was a tendency to provide just simple developments for a number of different aspects of their importance. On this question, fewer candidates seemed able to provide evidence of a deeper, more comprehensive understanding.

1c Discuss the suggestion that ‘Taking refuge in the sangha is an essential feature of Buddhism’.

The importance of the sangha in Buddhism was well understood, both the monastic sangha and the wider community. There were good discussions, though it was perhaps surprising that quite a number of candidates didn’t refer to ‘taking refuge in the sangha’ as one of the Three Jewels.

Those who did so were often able to engage in a sophisticated discussion of the relative importance of each of the Three Jewels in the context of Buddhist life.

Section 2 focuses on Celebration and Pilgrimage

2a Outline two rituals associated with the celebration of Nirvana Day.

Most candidates were aware of Nirvana Day, and knew some of the many ways in which it is commemorated. Just occasionally, candidates failed to notice that the question asked for rituals, and went straight to discussions of significance. In this question it was identifying the ritual that gained the initial marks, and answers about significance could only be rewarded as development of those first answers.

2b Explain why going on pilgrimage is important for some Buddhists.

This was a well answered question. It allowed candidates to answer about the importance of pilgrimage in general, but also full marks were available for those who chose to write about specific places of pilgrimage. This may be an important place to note that the b) questions are not discussion questions, in the sense that no marks are available for the alternative view – in this case that some Buddhists may not think that pilgrimage is important, but that was not the question. A few candidates made that mistake.

2c Discuss the suggestion that ‘Celebrating festivals helps the journey to enlightenment’.

The significance of festivals was well understood, and generally this was a well answered question. Some candidates focused a little too much on a slightly different question, about whether festivals are important, and this will have limited their marks somewhat. Better answers took up the challenge of relating festivals to the journey to enlightenment, and provided some very developed responses.

Section 3 focuses on Worship and Practice

3a Outline two ways Buddhists use prayer wheels.

Most candidates were aware of prayer wheels, and were able to outline rituals associated with them. Some found it more difficult to develop their answers, and instead offered more than two outlines, which limited them to a maximum of two marks. That said, many candidates were able to gain the development marks, usually by explaining the significance, or meaning, of the actions. Some candidates answered by referring straightaway to the significance of the use of

prayer wheels (such as, 'prayer wheels can help to focus the mind') and, in this question, which did not ask for actions specifically, this was an acceptable approach.

3b Explain why private meditation is important for some Buddhists.

This was a well answered question, with most candidates able to develop responses about the ability to focus better, about the value of a quiet place for meditation, and about the inherently personal nature of meditation as some perceived it. There were a number of fully developed responses.

3c Discuss the suggestion that 'There are no essential design features for a vihara.'

Candidates understood that the term 'vihara' could - in the context of this question - refer either to monastic viharas or local places of Buddhist worship, or indeed both. Many answers focused on the issue of visualisation, and the relative importance of images of the Buddha or a Bodhisattva, or of mandalas, for example. They often came to the view that each individual Buddhist will take their own path, and that some will find these things important, and others less so. There were some very good, developed answers.

Summary and Recommendations to Centres to improve candidate performance.

- Development is very important. On Paper 2 candidates will always add value to their response if they further describe, illustrate or explain their answer. In b) and c) questions such development is essential to gain access to the higher Levels.
- On b) questions, any number of simply developed responses can gain only a maximum of 4 marks, and a demonstration of depth of understanding is required to gain the higher marks in Level 2.
- On b) questions, candidates should not provide an alternative point of view. A question about why pilgrimage may be important to some, for example, is not usually helped by explaining why, for others, it is not.
- In b) and c) questions, some description can help to develop a response, such as description of pilgrimage sites or aspects of worship. However, in 'explain' and 'discuss' questions, only development of reasons and points of view can take answers into the higher marks.
- Candidates should only spend time explaining the point of view of another religion if they are confident they can show how that helps to provide a better understanding of the religion being examined. Otherwise, the time could be better used.

