

Does Buddhism have conscience?¹ (Part 1 of 2)

Conscience as we vaguely know it today is notably absent from early Buddhism. Apparently, it is peculiar to Christianity. Gentler versions of it, however, are found universally, and nobler forms of it characterize early Buddhism, as we shall see below.

A gentle form of **conscience** is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) as “consciousness of right and wrong; moral sense.” This almost universal definition of conscience was apparently earliest recorded in 1225.

The OED adds that this is the internal acknowledgement or recognition of the moral quality of our motives and actions. It is the sense of right and wrong regarding an action for which we are responsible. It is the faculty or principle which pronounces upon the moral quality of our actions or motives, approving the right and condemning the wrong. This is, of course, not uniquely a Christian view of conscience, not even a religious one, but all this is found in early Buddhism.

Even around 1325, according to the OED, we find conscience used in a non-religious sense, meaning, “inward knowledge, consciousness; internal conviction.” But this sense is now obsolete. Interestingly, this is a sense that is close to how early Buddhism would have defined conscience, that is, in terms of our mental states. It is in this “obsolete” and psychological sense that *conscience* exists in early Buddhism.

The obsolescence of such a modern and wholesome definition clearly was due to the Church and scholastics imposing their religious ideas onto others. The expression “good conscience” (and conversely, “bad conscience”) was first recorded in 1340. This means that the two senses probably competed with one another for a good while, but it was clear which prevailed.

The Old Testament notion of conscience often compares harmoniously with early Buddhist sentiments, if we allow the natural adaptation of the notion of “God” be replaced by, say, “the heart,” just as how early Buddhism adapts the “godly abiding” (*brahma, vihāra*) as the lovingkindness, compassion, gladness and equanimity that we can and should cultivate, whether we are religious or not.

A famous example of the early Buddhist teaching on conscience is found in **the Ādhipateyya Sutta**, where the Buddha declares:

There is in the world no secret | of one who does a bad deed.
You yourself, O man, | know what is true and what is false!
Alas! My friend, you, the witness, | look down upon your own goodness!
How can you hide the bad that there is | in the self from the self?
The gods and the tathāgatas [thus come] | see the fool living falsely in the world.
(**Ādhipateyya Sutta**, A 3.40/1:147-150), SD 27.3²

¹ This reflection is an abridgement of **SD 41.6 (2.3.5)** on the (Dasaka) Cetanā'karaṇīya Sutta (A 10.2).

² For the Buddha's power of doing this, see **Jhān'abhiññā Sutta** (S 16.9), SD 50.7; **Puris'indriya, lāṇa Sutta** (A 6.62), SD 61.5.

This moral self-counselling is remarkably close to the way young Rāhula is taught by the Buddha in **the Amba,laṭṭhika Rāhul’ovāda Sutta** (M 61).³ Instead of an imaginative almighty agent as overseer, Rāhula is taught to internalize and build his wholesome “conscience.”

Even more remarkable is the fact that the Buddha himself, in **the Vīmaṃsaka Sutta** (M 47), in similar words, invites us to examine *him*, whether he is really fully awakened, or whether his thoughts and actions betray falsity in *him* in any way!⁴ We only have the “word” of God that he is good, but we know only too well, according to the good book, how he wreaked vengeance and destroyed nations, just as the Spanish conquistadors did in South America and elsewhere. They were only acting in “good conscience” to rid the world of heathens, in God’s name.⁵

Western Christianity, at the height of its worldly power, that is, the Middle Ages until the 16th century, found it advantageous to inculcate “conscience” in their flock, and to “educate” that conscience. In 1215, the Fourth Lateran Council made it an obligation for all Christians to confess their sins and receive sacraments once a year. This came to be known as the “tribunal of conscience,”

Annual confession and penance, too, became a universal legal requirement. Such a special burden of responsibility, a unique western phenomenon, acted as a reliable tracker on every sheep in the Church’s flock. After all, a shepherd must keep careful watch over his flock.

With the rise of urbanization and divine kingship (where the king’s power was absolute: a famous example of whom is king Henry VIII of England, 1491-1547), the notion of the Church’s flock had grown into the idea of a national tribe, with the king as its apex.

The “voice of conscience” was, to God-believers, the voice of God within them. This helped promote public prudence and courtesy, for the sake of a civil society, especially for the benefit of the Church, those who protect and sustain it, that is, the king, royalty, and their armies. But they wielded power over many kings and many countries. Rome, headed by the Pope, used Christian conscience as leashes on the kings and rulers of Europe.

By the 15th century, the fear of invasions by the powerful Ottoman Muslims, forged the nations of Europe into **Christendom**, the Christian world. When the Muslim distraction was contained, the Spanish and the Portuguese, with the enthusiastic blessings of the notorious Borgia Pope Alexander VI (1431-1503), initiated the conquest and conversion of the “less-than-human” heathen world. Christian conscience needed to be planted in these members of inferior races.

The Protestant nations of Europe, learning of the vast lands and immense wealth that Catholics were colonizing outside of Europe, eagerly joined in the quest of “gospel, glory and gold” (but they were less zealous in the gospel aspect). In this global plundering game, a new national awareness arose amongst the participating nations. Their conscience now was greatly externalized and centred around these nations and their kings. Whatever is for “God, king and country” was always morally right, no matter what the costs. Conscience was nationalized, especially after Napoleon’s defeat in 1812.

³ M 61 ([SD 3.10](#)).

⁴ M 47 ([SD 35.6](#)).

⁵ See, eg, [SD 38.1](#) (3.2).

The general idea then was that everyone had a conscience, but those of the heathens were inferior to the Christian conscience. Colonial Christianity liberated what it “deemed to be inferior races from the fears to which their idolatrous and superstitious consciences were prone.” The Protestant colonizers were generally more generous in allowing some freedom of religion, but tacitly their Christianity was always superior. “Being most developed, the Western consciences helped others develop, too. Western expansion was optimistically expected to moralize the world.”⁶

The authority of conscience received its fullest religious legitimacy in the theory of “inner light” common to many 17th-century English sects. Instead of being an act of interpretation of a law, this conscience was an absolute and final insight.⁷ British philosophy personalized moral conscience by identifying the consciousness of right and wrong with the voice of an inner moral law, as in the unwritten, inborn law of which Cicero (107-4 BCE) spoke in *Pro Milone* 10.⁸

The Renaissance (14th-17th centuries) opened up new learning to Europe. This new learning, especially the sciences, continued growing (despite the Church’s cruel attempts to stop or control it). The European colonizing of Asia also brought back greater awareness of the spiritual wealth of oriental religions. The Church’s inner dissensions⁹ split and weakened it, further loosening its grip on society.

The 18th century saw a sense of separation between conscious and **consciousness**, and the widening gap between the two. While many still naively believed in their stable, good and unerring conscience, **literature** (especially the novel) in the 18th and 19th centuries “explored the chasm between conscience and the vagaries of consciousness.”¹⁰

Thinkers of the times became more aware of the distinction between the abiding (the conscience or the “heart”) and the transitory (consciousness or the “head”) in our sense of self. They began to notice that although both conscience and consciousness—heart and head—were our inner voices, consciousness’s persistent whispers were seductive and persistent. Often, the public voice of conscience was simply a disguised echo of that consciousness (or mind).

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[an occasional re-look at the Buddha’s Example and Teachings]

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⁶ Michel Despland, *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd ed, 1988:1943.

⁷ Michel Despland, *ibid*.

⁸ Michel Despland, *op cit*, 1988:1940.

⁹ The 16th-century Protestant Reformation freed northern Europe (esp Germany and Switzerland) from Roman Catholicism.

¹⁰ Michel Despland, *op cit*, 1988:1943.