

# ***'Waga Shinnen' ('My Faith'): Kiyozawa Manshi's Final Reflection on His Faith***

**by Richard Tennes, Ministerial Aspirant, Institute of Buddhist Studies  
Berkeley CA**

## **Introduction**

The purpose of this paper is to offer a reflection on Kiyozawa Manshi's final work, "Waga Shinnen," [1] written shortly before his death, in the context of his life and intense search for religious truth and, in doing so, to consider what his words might have to say to us now, over one-hundred years later. These words, the ultimate reflections of a Meiji era Jodo Shinshu priest, may seem of little significance now, in a world so radically changed from the one in which Kiyozawa lived. Yet, these personal reflections transcend the social and historical conditions under which he lived. Kiyozawa, although a priest and scholar, did not speak from the perspective of religious doctrine. Religion is subjective truth and is inevitably unique for each person who truly seeks a path beyond the self. Through his sincere seeking, Kiyozawa Manshi arrived at the limits of his own power and awakened to the realization that it was utterly without substance, the total negation of the illusory self. This negation is the Wisdom of Tathagata, the inconceivable working of Amida's Vow.

## **Life of Kiyozawa Manshi**

Kiyozawa Manshi was born in 1863, the son of Eisoku Tokunaga, a low ranking samurai with a respect and reverence for Zen Buddhism. His mother, Taki, was a humble and devout follower of Jodo Shinshu who hoped that her son would become a priest and explain the teachings to her. [2] Although raised by such deeply devout parents, the fact that he did become a priest was due more to forces outside their control. When Kiyozawa was only five years old, Japanese society was radically transformed by the political and social upheavals of the Meiji Restoration. This change brought about the end of the position and economic stability of the samurai class, to which the Tokunaga family belonged. [3] This meant that the children of these families needed to acquire the necessary education in order to find careers in the new society that was developing. In Kiyozawa's case, it was partially the desire for a good education which led him towards the priesthood. [4]

After graduating from lower public school, Kiyozawa, like many sons of samurai fathers in the same predicament, enrolled in one of the foreign language schools set up by the government as a way of training individuals with the skills needed for Japan's involvement in world affairs. He studied English for two years until the program was discontinued, then attempted medical studies. Although an excellent student, this did not work out for some reason. While pondering what to do, he learned of a scholarship program offered by Higashi Honganji. [5] This program was meant to attract promising students to the Jodo Shinshu priesthood and required ordination. [6] While he may have been tempted to think of this as merely a way of continuing his education, there is no doubt that the influence of his upbringing and his mother's encouragement, along with the obligation he must have felt to honor his commitment, prevented him from considering a secular career after graduation. [7]

After being ordained and beginning his education under the program, Kiyozawa began to notice discrepancies between the spiritual way he had learned to understand religion, and the attitude manifested by those who were meant to be its representatives. Because Kiyozawa had been raised in a lay family, where religion was practiced out of genuine devotion and where its sacred aspects were taken for granted, he could not help but be disappointed by the behavior of his fellow students, the sons of priests who saw the

priesthood as a mere job, and Jodo Shinshu as an institution. [8] His parents viewed Buddhism as a guide to their actions, and devotions at the family butsudan had been part of his daily life as a child. When, however, he began to study it academically, he found Buddhism reduced to a "...textbook subject he had to study." [9] Contradictions such as these would play a large role in shaping his view of religion and the struggle for truth that characterized his life. In any case, he determined to set an example to others of a "man of religion who renounces the world and makes the search for truth his central activity." [10]

After graduating from Higashi's Ikueiko School in 1881, he continued his education at Tokyo Imperial University, studying western philosophy under Ernest Fenollosa. His previous study of English, and the German he had learned while studying medicine, [11] were now useful resources as he encountered the thought of western culture, a study that would enable him to re-approach Buddhist doctrine, grown stagnant through lack of creative engagement with the realities of life, with new concepts and ways of articulating spiritual ideas borrowed from the west. Although he would later come to an understanding of the "personal implications of Buddhism as a way of practice or...faith," [12] this exposure enabled him to see Buddhism as compatible with western systems of thought. This ability to affirm Buddhism intellectually, at a time when the religion was subject to serious criticism from a society anxious for modernization (as well as from political pressure and competition from Christianity), demonstrates Kiyozawa's keen insight and refusal to be swayed by conventions, however "modern" they might be.

In response to these pressures, Buddhism was championed by some for nationalistic reasons, while being studied through western critical methods by others. Kiyozawa sought instead to revitalize it, "as a living, personal faith." [13] Kiyozawa's scholarly excellence led him, after graduation, to a prestigious appointment as principal of Jinjo Middle School. He also married Yusako, a daughter of the priestly Kiyozawa family, which, having no son, expected him eventually to take over priestly duties at their temple. Though hesitant, he agreed to the arrangement and accepted the family name Kiyozawa as his own, giving up his family name of Tokunaga. [14] In the meantime he took up his new educational duties at Jinjo, and as lecturer at two other schools. He lived, at this time, a luxurious life, dressing in elegant western fashion, as was popular in the early Meiji era, living in a large house, smoking expensive cigarettes, and being conveyed to his work in a rickshaw. [15] But Kiyozawa's deeply religious nature could not help coming to the surface. In 1890, disturbed by the behavior of his fellow priests (who were often politically-minded bureaucrats with little concern for religious truth), and drawn by the desire to lead a more authentic Buddhist life, he brought his elegant Victorian way of life to a sudden halt.

Kiyozawa expressed his feelings in a conversation he had at the time with a friend:

"The tenor of life among the Jodo-Shin sect priests has been gradually deteriorating. Therefore, I have in mind resigning as principal one of these days. I shall dress in cotton garments, with a black robe and black kesa, wearing geta and go about to various places on pilgrimage. By demonstrating the true meaning of religion, I hope to bring about the extension of the religious way of life." [16]

This statement illustrates Kiyozawa's sincerity and his uncompromising nature. True to his word, he resigned from his post as principal and embarked upon a period of severe ascetic practice. He eventually became so weakened through self-denial that he contracted severe pulmonary tuberculosis, a condition that would ultimately kill him. During this time, he continued his work as an educator and for the reform of Higashi Honganji's educational institutions.

It was also during this time that he wrote "The Skeleton of a Philosophy of Religion," which was read at the 1893 World's Parliament of Religion in Chicago. [17] Kiyozawa's physical

collapse brought about a new phase in his life. Although he had undertaken religious practices mainly in order to experience for himself what "self-power" truly meant, rather than because he viewed it as superior to "Other-Power," [18] it seems to me that his attitude toward religion was yet somewhat objective and analytic rather than personal. This is apparent in the almost mathematical language of "The Skeleton of a Philosophy of Religion." It was when he experienced the total failure of his own efforts that he began to be able to integrate his personal experiences into his expression of a living Buddhism. Nevertheless, his sickness was only the beginning of the sufferings which would follow him to the end of his life. After his recovery, Kiyozawa became active in an attempt to reform the Higashi Honganji institution, a movement that ultimately failed. Having lost his teaching position as a result of this, he returned to his wife's family's temple, Saihoji. However, due to renewed illness and the fact that he was not well-liked by the temple's members (who were put off by his illness and thought his dharma talks too difficult to understand), he came to view himself as one who is as useless as a "December Fan" (rosen), an expression which he began to use as a pen name. [19] It was from this period until his death that his most significant writing was done.

Although ill and "useless," it was in this "December Fan" period that Kiyozawa found the religious conviction that he was able to express in the essays he later wrote. At this time, he discovered, and immersed himself in, three separate works: [20] The Agama Sutras, which allowed him to recover for himself the spiritual path taught by Sakyamuni Buddha; the Discourses of Epictetus, which helped him to develop his understanding of "Other Power;" and "Tannisho," which guided him to a true appreciation of Shinran's teaching. [21]

Kiyozawa was soon reinstated by Higashi and spent most of his remaining few years in productive work, although even these were filled with strife. It was during this time that he wrote one of his most important essays, "Seishinshugi" ("Spiritual-ism" or "Spiritual Awareness/Activism") which articulated one of his central concerns, that of "self-awareness." [22] In his final year, he suffered the collapse of his educational work and the death of the oldest and youngest of his three sons as well as of his wife. [23] A week before he died he wrote his last essay, "Waga Shinnen."

### **'Waga Shinnen'**

Kiyozawa's final essay has been translated several times, by several noted scholars, each of whom rendered its title in a slightly different way: "My Faith" (Bando Shojun and Kunji Tajima/ Floyd Shacklock), "My Religious Conviction" (Nobuo Haneda), "The Nature of My Faith" (Mark Blum). Kiyozawa had, in fact, originally given it a longer title, "Ware wa kaku no gotoku Nyorai o shinzu," [24] which referred to the main theme of the article, namely the manner or nature of his faith in Tathagata. Because it is natural to assume that the essay's contents will be a rational declaration of belief, it might help to alert us to Kiyozawa's purpose here if we understand... (which had originally been the essay's subtitle) as "My Reflection on My Faith [in Tathagata]." [25] In "Waga Shinnen," Kiyozawa is articulating, in his own way, the experience of trust of which Shinran said, "I have no idea whether the nembutsu is truly the seed for my being born in the Pure Land or whether it is the karmic act for which I must fall into hell." [26] This is an expression of faith in which self, trust, and the object of trust exist in mutuality, and their objective existence is beside the point. As Kiyozawa had said in an earlier essay, "we must consider it improper to question whether or not certain facts about religious faith are objectively accurate. Concerning a matter related to the content of religious faith, we should ask ourselves if we can believe it or not; it is not necessary to discuss whether it is real or not apart from our respective minds." [27] The faith expressed by Kiyozawa emerged from the experience of a man who continually struggled to live an authentic religious life. In "Waga Shinnen," written less than a week before his death, Kiyozawa struggles to overcome the limits of language in

order to express his personal experience of faith or trust. Because this experience is non-dualistic, it cannot be expressed with precision but can only be referred to, or hinted at:

“What is my religious conviction? It is to trust in Tathagata. What is the Tathagata in which I trust? It is the fundamental reality underlying my existence as a believer.” [28]

Kiyozawa is not concerned with providing a definition of faith or Tathagata. The Tathagata he trusts is not an “object” of faith that can be defined within a dualistic relationship. Likewise, he specifically refuses to explain the relationship between faith and Tathagata. Noting that the relationship could be described in the doctrinal categories of *ki* and *ho*, [29] he rejects such a method as leading to dualistic misunderstanding:

“I shall not be concerned any longer with technical terms such as *no-jo* (subjective aspect-objective aspect) [30] and *ki-ho*, since they are liable to obscure what should be made clear.” [31]

Actually, this attempt to transcend dualistic categories of thought goes back to his early writings. Even in “The Skeleton of a Philosophy of Religion,” despite the more objective tone of this work, Kiyozawa had already rejected the notion of a substantial soul (the basis for any kind of dualistic understanding) and had emphasized that reality was to be understood (at least religiously) in terms of oneness or unity. [32] However, at this point his understanding of non-duality may still have been intellectual and impersonal. By the time he wrote “*Waga Shinnen*,” experience and strife had deepened Kiyozawa’s understanding to a point far beyond intellectual knowledge. “My faith in Tathagata,” he was able to say, “may be traced until the ultimate limits of my knowledge.” [33] It was in Kiyozawa’s “December Fan” period that sickness and failure led him to the inner transformation that made this realization possible. Also, during this time he had encountered the three texts that were to re-orient his thinking and help him to clarify the spiritual conviction that is articulated in his final essay.

“...around this time Kiyozawa also began to study the Agamas...to learn both about Sakyamuni’s understanding of human existence and the Buddhist spirit of self-renunciation and self-cultivation. At the same time, [he] discovered the writings of Epictetus, a Stoic philosopher who was a slave in the Roman Empire...Epictetus, who preached the attainment of inner freedom through self-reflection and ascetic practices, asserted that freedom and mental equilibrium could be achieved by maintaining an attitude of disinterestedness towards things that are beyond one’s ability to control...” [34]

If Kiyozawa was awakened to the necessity of self-reflection by Epictetus’s writings, it was his exposure to both the Agamas and the “*Tannisho*” that brought him to embrace the true goal of self-reflection, which is the negation of the self. [35] This is important because, on one level, Kiyozawa’s faith brought him relief from his (very real) suffering. [36] On deeper reflection, however, he emphasizes the fact that his quest for the meaning of life ended when he “...found life’s meaning to be inscrutable.” [37] Having exhausted all his “knowledge and devices,” he realized that his own efforts, his self-power, were useless. This understanding came from seeing himself, as he had once written, “at the extreme where life turns to death.” [38] Espousing the necessity of arriving at this state self-negation, Kiyozawa asks what, then, is the nature of his faith:

“..the Tathagata in which I believe is the basic potentiality that enables me – who am utterly incapable of discriminating between good and evil, truth and untruth, happiness and unhappiness, and therefore unable to make even a single move in any direction...in this world fraught with discriminations... – to live and die in this world

dispassionately and calmly. Without putting faith in this Tathagata, I can neither live nor die." [39]

Many people would easily accept the Stoic notion that a dispassionate attitude could make living and dying easier. However, confronting Kiyozawa's uncompromising assertion that neither death nor life is possible except from this self-negating, subjective, standpoint, they might ask in what way actions and choices are possible without objectivity. It must be understood, however, that Kiyozawa takes Buddhist teachings (which have, of course, arisen from subjective experience) as the norm in his thought, as opposed to empirically confirmed facts or socially accepted conventions, even when considering objective matters. As such, he can advise, "Suppose there are people who wish to gain insight into the fundamentally deluded nature of everyday life. Once they realize that it is no longer possible to rely on the objective approach to solve problems, they necessarily come to rely on the subjective approach." [40] Although it might seem that insight into our deluded nature would require an objective perspective, our same deluded nature is by definition incapable of objectivity and becomes, in fact, even more deluded when assuming such a perspective. Thus, for Kiyozawa, the ability to truly live or die begins with a realization of one's limits and the practice of self-examination. This self-examination leads to faith in "Other Power," but only when the false apprehension of one's capacity for accurate, objective, understanding has been thoroughly abandoned. He writes:

"Personally speaking, I formerly found it most difficult to escape from the delusion of attempting to inquire into the perfect standard or the infinite reality by way of finite, imperfect, human knowledge, while declaring myself to be finite and imperfect. Formerly, I also used to feel the whole universe crumble and all society reduced to chaos when I lost sight of the standards of truth and morality. But now I am convinced that the standards of truth and morality could not possibly be raised by human knowledge." [41]

Kiyozawa ascribes his release from "bondage to the illusions of evil knowledge and views" [42] to the infinite wisdom of Tathagata. Thus, his faith in Tathagata is established by Tathagata who "enables me...to live and die in this world dispassionately and calmly." [43] In other words, the self-reflection that led him to reject all faith in "human knowledge" gives rise to the faith in that infinite wisdom (Tathagata), which enables such reflection in the first place, and sustains and protects him from the anguish and mis-direction caused by a delusional trust in his own objective knowledge. Thus, we return full circle to the essay's opening reflection, "What is my religious conviction? It is to trust in Tathagata. What is the Tathagata in which I trust? It is the fundamental reality underlying my existence as a believer." [44]

Thanks to this, Kiyozawa can "now respectfully acknowledge and appreciate the confessions of 'Honen, an ignoramus,' and the 'foolish, bald-headed Shinran.'" [45] He can now live calmly and assuredly with his ignorant self. This calm and peace Kiyozawa ascribes to the infinite compassion of Tathagata, whose working made possible the faith and trust upon which his peace is established. Freed from the delusion of self-power, Kiyozawa found that his faith accorded him "infinite potentiality."

Able to completely trust this dynamic process called Tathagata, he could totally let go of all pressure to conform to expectations, laws, morals, customs, etc. Attempting to fulfill all these rules and customs is very difficult because they depend upon trust in our own discriminatory faculties, which are rooted in our unstable and limited selves. "If we attempt to observe them faithfully," he points out, "we are bound for the grief of 'impossibility,'" that of the "Two Truths" (Absolute and Worldly) utilized by Jodo Shinshu leaders to "require followers to observe social order." Developed in order to protect Shin Buddhists from the harsh punishments inflicted by the government, this concept had the effect of separating

religious truth and faith from worldly or secular responsibilities. As a result, Shin Buddhists lacked the religious resources to resist or criticize government policy, having been taught their main duty, in the worldly sphere, was to obey and be loyal to authority.

Kiyozawa, through his radical insistence on the primacy of religious (personal and subjective) faith, was able to transcend the doctrine of Two Truths, insisting that religious values were absolute. The only reason worldly truth should be taught alongside absolute truth was to demonstrate the impossibility of human "good" and the sole reality of "Other Power." This position has relevance in discussing "engaged" Jodo Shinshu (see Ama Toshimaro, "Towards a Shin Buddhist Social Ethics," *The Eastern Buddhist* 33, No. 2 (2001): 35-53). Kiyozawa discusses the morality and Two Truths in "Discourse on Religious Morality and Common Morality" (see Mark L. Blum translation, in "Two Modern Shin Buddhist Thinkers," Kyoto: Otani University Shin Buddhist Comprehensive Research Institute, 1999, 9-24). Causing us endless suffering, [46] these rules, morals, customs, etc., are rooted in our human desire to do good and benefit others through compassionate acts. Since our motives are never pure, we find ourselves unable to follow them wholeheartedly. In addition, mixed emotions underlie the rules since we ourselves create them. This same thought was expressed by Shinran when he said, "however much love and pity we may feel in our present lives, it is hard to save others as we wish; hence, such compassion remains unfulfilled." In fact, "it is impossible for us, who are possessed of blind passions, to free [even] ourselves from birth and death through any practice whatever." [47] Thus, we spend our lives in great turmoil attempting to prove ourselves and secure finality, meaning, and goodness in the world. For Kiyozawa, all such attempts cause us nothing but suffering.

Only when all finality and meaning is given up and entrusted to Tathagata can we begin to live our lives and, when we must, die with calm and conviction. There is no need to worry about good or bad, right or wrong; ultimately these are egoistic concepts rooted in our misguided self-reliance. We are free to act. In his final essay, Kiyozawa Manshi expressed his deepest religious experience, that of finding faith at the limits of himself. There are, of course, many other aspects to the religious journey and a great deal more to say about Buddhism and Jodo Shinshu. However, the aspect of faith that transcends the self, and the nature of that faith, may be said to be the most crucial issue of all. In the end, it is the strength and authenticity of Kiyozawa's expression of this faith that gives this essay its great power. Why is this faith necessary? As Sakyamuni Buddha taught, desires and cravings, rooted in ignorance, are the fundamental cause of our suffering. Today, our thirst to satisfy these wants seems to be growing rather than diminishing. Modern societies and economies appear to be dedicated to the creation and nurturing of wants and illusions, thus unwittingly multiplying our miseries and capacities for self- (and mutual) destruction. In this condition, Kiyozawa Manshi's uncompromising expression of liberating faith may suggest to us an alternative way.

"The Tathagata's potentiality is supreme...The Tathagata's potentiality comprehends the ten directions and acts freely and unrestrictedly. I take refuge in the wondrous power of the Tathagata and receive great peace and calm. Surrendering the great matter of life and death to the Tathagata, I never feel any unrest of dissatisfaction." [48]

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1] "The Great Path of Absolute Other Power & My Faith." Translated with Introduction by Bando Shojun. *The Eastern Buddhist* 5, No. 2 (1972): 141-152...

2] Nobuo Haneda, appendix to *December Fan: The Buddhist Essays of Manshi Kiyozawa*, by Kiyozawa Manshi, translated by Nobuo Haneda (Kyoto: Higashi Hongwanji, 1984), 77.

3] *Ibid.* 78.

4] Patricia A. Honda, "A Study of Kiyozawa Manshi's 'The Skeleton of a Philosophy of Religion,'" M.A. Thesis, (Kyoto: Otani University, 1986), 11-12.

5] Ibid.

6] Haneda, 79.

7] Honda, 12.

8] Ibid., 18.

9] Ibid., 17.

10] Ibid., 12.

11] Haneda, 78-79.

12] Gilbert Lee Johnston, Kiyozawa Manshi's Buddhist Faith and its Relation to Modern Japanese Society, Ph.D. Diss., (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1972), 57.

13] Alfred Bloom, "Kiyozawa Manshi and the Revitalization of Buddhism," *The Eastern Buddhist* 35, Nos. 1&2 (2003): 1

14] Johnston, 59-60.

15] Ibid., 60-61.

16] Honda, 9.

17] Haneda, 82.

18] Honda, 24.

19] Haneda, 85.

20] Mark L. Blum, introduction to "Discourse on Religious Morality and Common Morality/The Nature of My Faith," by Kiyozawa Manshi, translated by Mark L. Blum, in "Two Modern Shin Buddhist Thinkers," (Kyoto: Otani University Shin Buddhist Comprehensive Research Institute, 1999), 6.

21] Shin'ya Yasutomi, "The Way of Introspection: Kiyozawa Manshi's Methodology," *The Eastern Buddhist* 34, Nos. 1&2 (2003): 105-106.

22] This concept of seishinshugi also became the leading principle in Kiyozawa's reform efforts. One of Kiyozawa's disciples described it as "a practical path for self cultivation for gaining liberation from anguish and suffering. Its aim is to lead each individual to spiritual contentment and freedom...Spiritual Activism employs introspection." Yasutomi, Shin'ya, "The Way of Introspection: Kiyozawa Manshi's Methodology," *The Eastern Buddhist* 34, Nos. 1&2 (2003): 102.

23] Haneda, 89.

24] see Bando Shojun, introduction to "The Great Path of Absolute Other Power & My Faith," translated with introduction by Bando Shojun, *The Eastern Buddhist* 5, No. 2 (1972): 143.

25] For the sake of simplicity, I will from this point on refer to the essay itself as "Waga Shinnen" and will continue to employ the English words "faith," "trust," and "conviction" as they seem appropriate.

26] "The Collected Works of Shinran" (hereafter CWS), Translated, with introductions, glossaries, and reading aids, by Dennis Hirota, Hisao Inagaki, Michio Tokunaga, and Ryushin Uryuzu, (Kyoto: Jodo Shinshu Hongwanji-Ha, 1997) 662.

27] Kiyozawa Manshi, "Religion is a Subjective Fact," translated by Nubuo Haneda. (unpublished).

28] "December Fan: The Buddhist Essays of Manshi Kiyozawa," translated by Nobuo Haneda, (Kyoto: Higashi Hongwanji, 1984), 53.

29] According to Hisao Inagaki, "A Dictionary of Japanese Buddhist Terms," fourth edition (Kyoto: Nagata Bunshodo, 1994), ki (..) refers to human potentiality to receive Dharma, one able to become a buddha. ho (..) is the Dharma but can also refer to an object of thought.

30] ....

31] Kiyozawa Manshi, "The Great Path of Absolute Other Power & My Faith," translated with introduction by Bando Shojun, *The Eastern Buddhist* 5, No. 2 (1972): 148.

32] "Religion is the Unity of a Relative and the Absolute...of a Mode and the Substance...of a Man and the God...of a Living Being and the Buddha." M. Tokunaga, (former name of Kiyozawa) "The Skeleton of a Philosophy of Religion," translated by Senshiro Noguchi, (Tokyo: Sanseido, 1893), reprint: (Kyoto: Otani University ShinBuddhist Comprehensive Research Institute, 2001), 16.

33] Kiyozawa, "...My Faith," trans. Shojun, 149.

34] Yasutomi, 104.

35] Ibid.

36] Kiyozawa, "...My Faith," trans. Shojun, 148-149.

37] Ibid., 149.

38] Yasutomi, 105.

39] Kiyozawa, "...My Faith," trans. Shojun, 150.

40] Yasutomi, 109.

41] Kiyozawa, "...My Faith," trans. Shojun, 151.

42] Kiyozawa, "...My Faith," trans. Shojun, 150.

43] Ibid.

44] Kiyozawa, December Fan, trans. Haneda, 53.

45] Kiyozawa, "...My Faith," trans. Shojun, 151.

46] Ibid.

47] CWS, 663.

48] Kiyozawa, "...My Faith," trans. Shojun, 152.

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