

Kiyozawa Manshi and the Renewal of Buddhism

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The Meiji period (1868-1912) was a time of great change as Japanese society encountered Western culture. The relentless pressure of modernization called for resourceful leaders to respond to its repercussions throughout the society and culture. Such a man in Buddhism was Kiyozawa Manshi (1863-1903).

Japanese Buddhism was strikingly affected by these changes. It not only had to respond to the challenge of Christian missions and its educational institutions, but it also had to counter negative social criticism and political restrictions which led even to the physical destruction of temples and images.

Reacting to these challenges, some scholars promoted nationalistic interpretations of Buddhism, maintaining strongly that Buddhism had benefited Japanese society and culture through many centuries. Others attacked Christianity as unsuitable for Japan, employing resources drawn from modern, western critics. Yet others, influenced by western critical methods in the study of religion, engaged in scientific research on language, texts, translation, and the history of ideas. Another approach can be seen in Kiyozawa Manshi who sought to revitalize Buddhism as a living, personal faith.

Kiyozawa graduated in philosophy from the Tokyo Imperial University where he was a student of Ernest Fenellosa (1853-1908) and learned the dialectical philosophy of G. W. Hegel. Kiyozawa was greatly influenced by numerous western philosophers such as Spinoza, Hegel, Fichte, Schelling, Leibniz, Spencer and Lotze. After becoming a Shinshu priest, he loyally served the Otani branch of Hongwanji in various educational roles. Notably, he became the president of the newly established Shinshu University (later, Otani University) where he taught history of philosophy, as well as tutor for the young Abbot-to-be. He combined the roles of scholar, priest, educator and reformer.

During his career he attempted to reform the Hongwanji through advocating the awakening of religious consciousness, religious subjectivity, and commitment to the teaching of Shinran beyond institutional forms and rituals. As a leading intellectual of the time, he also believed that it was necessary for Buddhism to respond to contemporary, western philosophical currents.

Though Kiyozawa lived a very short life, pursuing his ideal of reform for some eight years, his seriousness, determination and insight have influenced generations of followers far beyond his limited life-span. While he lived, he advocated high Buddhist ideals which he attempted to fulfill in his own life. Rather than becoming a cloistered monk, he combined a practical approach to Buddhism with an active life in society. Awakened to religious faith, he explored the depth of his own psyche and the field of religious experience. Not being a person given to halfway measures, he experimented with extremes of self-denial and austerity.

Following his death in 1903, his legacy endured, challenging future Shinshu leaders, as well as other Buddhists, to take up the cause of reform by his example. He stimulated modern interpretations of Shinshu, exemplified by the work of Sasaki Gessho, Soga Ryojin, Kaneko Daiei and Akegarasu Haya. The impact of his seminal insights extend to our own time.

Kiyozawa's understanding of religious faith is relevant not only for Shinshu followers, but for all Buddhists who struggle to make Buddhism meaningful in modern society. This is also

true for western people who have recently encountered the diverse styles of Buddhism that have taken root in the West

Kiyozawa Manshi stressed the fundamental importance of personal religious experience for the survival of a tradition. He faithfully served the Otani sect in many ways from a sense of obligation, after being supported by the temple for his education. However, realizing that he had not attained a living faith within himself, he set out on a grand experiment to challenge his own spiritual capacity by living an extremely ascetic life. He transformed himself from a modern, intellectual gentleman to a monk like individual with stubble hair, coarse robes, geta and eating only meager food. Following a self-power (jiriki) path of "the minimum possible" life, he tried to experience the spirit of Buddhism. However, he learned the meaning of Other Power when he reached the end of his physical and spiritual resources through the failure of his health, tragic family losses through death, and the failure of his reform movement. In his extremity he had to rely on the Buddha, which he termed the Infinite, for the outcome of his life and on the support and care of his friends. He gave expression to his understanding of Other Power in his Waga Shinnen (My Faith) written a few days before his death.

While his efforts for reform did not succeed, he published periodicals, such as Kyokai jigen (Timely Words for the Religious World) and Seishinshugi (Spirituality), the publication of his reformist organization Seishinkai (Spiritual World). In his residence which he named Kokodo he gathered his disciples and instructed them.

Kiyozawa's approach to religion began to take shape as he taught philosophy and religion to students in the Shinshu University . On the occasion of the World's Parliament of Religion in 1893, he wrote The Skeleton of a Philosophy of Religion which was translated into English and disseminated at the conference. Though the impact of the text is not known, it is significant for showing Kiyozawa's concern to integrate Buddhism into the modern intellectual and spiritual environment by placing it in a universal context and interpreting it without using the traditional terminologies unfamiliar to non-Buddhists.

In this text Kiyozawa distinguishes sharply between the Infinite and the finite. The Infinite, which is an abstract term, reflects Amida which also means infinite. The Infinite or Absolute is not something separate from everything else, but as Infinite, it must include and be the essence of all things. Thus he took issue with the western concepts of God and theories of monism such as taught by Spinoza as inadequate for spirituality. The relation of the individual and the Infinite was based on correlation not identity as in monism. Further, the subject-object distinction cannot be avoided in thought but must be accounted for in relation to reality. While everything is known through a mind, knowledge is subjective or known by the mind. However, both the subjective realm and the objective exist in an organic unity within the context of the universal subjectivity of the Infinite Absolute.

In the process of religious awakening one moves from attachment to ordinary views of objectivity to awareness of the subjective, inner realm and finally transcends both the subjective (small self) to awareness of the Absolute (large Self) embracing and transcending the subject-object dichotomy. This process provides a rational basis for the principle of Other Power. Thus the person cannot find satisfaction only in pursuing things in the objective world such as money, possessions etc, but discovers the inner world which is cultivated through various practices. But the assurance of salvation and satisfaction is not reached simply through restraining the self. Finally when one exhausts one's efforts to attain the goal, one becomes aware of the Infinite as the source of one's satisfaction and spiritual peace. This process mirrors Kiyozawa's own experience.

It also means that the individual is not locked into his own subjectivity, but finds his relation to the whole. This is important in our modern mass society where people are likely to feel

isolated. It fits well with the contemporary ecological perspective that we are all connected and we must respect and support each other and the environment.

Kiyozawa was, in large measure, reacting to the growing dominance of the principle of scientific objectivity in the modern world which claimed that only objective knowledge is true. However, he also rejected any thought which stressed subjectivity while dismissing the objective world as simply delusion. Kiyozawa believed that Buddhism could be integrated with scientific thought. Where science and religion conflicted, religious thought would have to be revised to harmonize with science. Further, he held that religious reality could not be verified by appeal to objective facts, since religious faith is a subjective reality. His effort anticipates much of modern thought in trying to harmonize faith and reason, religion and science. His solution provides a basis for a vital religious faith, while maintaining a critical scientific perspective.

With respect to religious subjectivity or religious consciousness, Kiyozawa does not mean mere subjectivism in which only what I experience is true. Rather, beyond the ordinarily understood subject-object dichotomy, true subjectivity means the discovery of the Infinite as my True Self, thereby linking myself to all other beings. Behind his expression is the Mahayana Kegon philosophy which teaches that we are all one as the manifestation of the Buddha-mind. Attaining the experience or awareness of this truth becomes the basis for religious faith and commitment.

This perspective also provided the basis for understanding true individuality. He was inspired and influenced in establishing the religious foundation for concrete individuality by the Greek Stoic philosopher Epictetus along with the Theravada Agamas and the "Tannisho" for which he is credited with the modern revival of interest after centuries of obscurity. His interpretation of the significance of individual awareness of the Infinite implied that clergy and lay are equal and the religious life is a matter of choice. He believed that the focus of religious faith was on the development of the human spirit as a present subjective reality and not merely a matter for after death. Along this line he rejected the dichotomy of eternal truth and worldly truth taught in the traditional concept of shinzoku-nitai.

Rather, religious morality exhibits the gap between ourselves and the ideal and reveals our need for Other Power.

Though Kiyozawa was a man of his time, his thought points forward and remains a guidepost for the contemporary revival of Buddhism.