

The Nature of My Faith

Kiyozawa Manshi

Translated by Mark L. Blum

Introduction

In his short but eventful life, Kiyozawa Manshi was to leave a long-lasting impression on Japanese notions of the sacred in the modern world, and on what a religious life in this period should look like. A person of enormous self-discipline, his asceticism led to both physical collapse and penetrating spiritual insight; a personal legacy that remains vibrant in Jōdo Shinshū as we near the centennial of his death.

Along with his earlier inquiry into Western philosophy, *The Skeleton of Philosophy of Religion* (*Shūkyō tetsugaku gaikotsu*), Kiyozawa's best known essay is this terse statement of faith, "The Nature of My Faith" ("Waga shinnen"). Written one week before his death in July, 1903, when his strength was slowly waning, it is considered a summation of his final state of mind regarding what he believed and what that faith meant to him. Originally titled "This is How I Believe in the Tathāgata" in his diary, *December Fan* (*Rōsenki*), in the process of preparing it for the journal *Spiritual World* (*Seishinkai*), he apparently changed the title to "Waga shinnen" 我信念 after consulting with his editors, and the extant draft in Kiyozawa's hand held at Ōtani University confirms this correction. The expected term in the Shin Buddhist tradition for religious faith is *shinjin* 信心, but Kiyozawa seems to have consciously avoided such language out of disdain for the way such words are weighed down by established conceptualization built upon centuries of interpretation. Instead he chooses the word *shinnen* 信念, which also signifies belief, but in today's Japanese is not typically used in a strictly religious context. *Shinnen* is more commonly found expressing conviction in a particular cause, or belief in oneself or one's own ability.

Although Kiyozawa battled a political culture throughout his life that he found anathema to the spiritual goals of education, both in his own church and society as a whole, this particular period had become even more stressful. Just ten days before Kiyozawa was to write this profession of faith, Japan was rocked by the suicide of Fujimura Misao (1886–1903), a promising student of philosophy at Daiichi High School in Tokyo. Dressed in his school uniform, Fujimura threw himself in the enormous waterfall at Nikkō called Kegon-no-taki, leaving behind a suicide note expressing a profound hopelessness that was published in the newspapers. This occurred at a time when the yearnings for freedom of thought within the educated youth clashed unmercifully with the expectations of the government that they would support government policy uncritically. In writing this essay, Kiyozawa seems to have been at least partially motivated to offer an alternative of religion to the young intellectuals of Japan, profoundly disheartened by Fujimura's act. But knowing he had little time left, Kiyozawa must also have been motivated by the desire to clarify his own religious feelings for the benefit of the students directly under his guidance. What we have as a result is a statement of enormous power and confidence, a remarkable testimony of faith from a remarkable individual.

Translation

I always seem to be discussing such things as “faith” (*shinnen* 信念) or “tathāgata” (*nyorai* 如來). But when I speak of my faith, what do I mean? What is this tathāgata to which I believe? I would like to try now to answer these questions.

It should be obvious at this point that faith for me refers to how I believe in the tathāgata. This, then, calls forth two issues: believing and tathāgata. The two may appear to be two completely separate things but as far as I am concerned, they are absolutely indivisible. On the question of what my faith is about, the answer is that it is about believing in the tathāgata. On the question of what this tathāgata is, the answer is that it is the basic reality of what I believe in. If we divide them, we could call one believing and the other what is believed in. In other words, my believing is precisely my faith, and that which is believed in by me is the tathāgata. Another way of putting it is

to use the traditional categories of the individual who believes (*ki* 機) and the Dharma that is believed in (*hō* 法). But if we insist on only using traditional categories such as believer and what is believed, etc., we run the risk of losing our understanding of what is in fact understood, so I will not pursue this line of thought.

What does it mean for me to believe, and why do I do this? What sort of effects are produced by such a thing? There are various points to consider here. Let me look at the effects first. This believing that I do has the primary effect of removing distress and pain from my life. One could call this the salvific effect. Whatever it is called, I can say that during those moments when I have feelings of anxiety or even agony, emotions which can be brought on by a variety of different causes and conditions, if this faith should manifest in my heart I suddenly feel calmed and even joyful. The way it happens is that when my faith becomes manifest, it takes over my mind completely such that there is simply no place left for deluded perceptions or deluded thoughts to settle [and play a role in my consciousness]. At that point, no matter what [potentially disturbing] influence or situation may occur, as long as my faith is present such things will not be able to provoke feelings of distress or anxiety within me. Particularly for someone sensitive like myself, and especially now when my emotional state is aggravated by illness, if this thing I am calling faith were not there, it would be impossible to avoid extremes of distress and anxiety. I think, however, that such faith is just as essential for a healthy person beset with much suffering. When I speak of a religious sense of gratitude, what I am referring to is the elation that comes from having my agonies actually swept away by my faith.

The second question concerns why I believe in the tathāgata. As I stated above, this [situation] is the result of the effects [of my faith], but there are other reasons as well. Saying one benefits from the effects is only relevant after this believing has begun, for before believing one has no idea what the effects will be, if any. Of course, one hears of the effects from others and at that point one may have no reason not to believe, but the impact of what amounts to hearsay never really goes beyond supposition. It is only through personal experience that one can truly know the presence or absence of the benefits of faith.

But my belief in the tathāgata is not just the result of seeing the effects of this faith. It has another important basis. My belief in the tathāgata occurs at the limit of everything that I know. Aside from a time in my life when I lacked real concern for human affairs, once I seriously began to take even the slightest interest in the human condition I felt obsessed with the question of the meaning of life. And when I reached the conclusion that the meaning of life is incomprehensible, it was at that point that my faith in the tathāgata arose. Gaining faith probably does not require that one go through such a lengthy process of inquiry, so the course of events that led me to this conclusion may indeed seem accidental. But in fact in my case, it could not have been any other way.

Within my faith there is an element which believes in the ineffectiveness of my own efforts.¹ And to believe in my own ineffectiveness, it was necessary first to exhaust my entire range of intellectual faculties to the point where I could no longer even raise my head. This effort involved an incredible ordeal. Before I finally reached this limit I speak of, time and again I concluded that religious conviction must be such and such, only to have that conviction destroyed by subsequent experience. As long as we attempt to establish their religious grounding by means of logic or research, such upheavals are inevitable. What is good, what is evil? What is truth, what is falsehood? What is happiness and what is unhappiness? One cannot possibly understand any of these. When I stood on that ground of understanding nothing, I threw up my hands regarding all this and came to trust in the tathāgata, and this became the focal point of my faith.

The third question queries the nature of my faith itself. The answer to this is that my faith believes in the tathāgata. The tathāgata is what I am able to believe in and, moreover, cannot help but believe in. Faced with the truth of the powerlessness of my own efforts, I [know I] lack the ability to stand on my own, but this tathāgata in which I am able to believe is the essence of

¹This translation of *Jiriki no mukō* 自力の無功 is actually reading the last character as *Kō* 効 instead of *Kō* 功. This is because I take this phrase to be in conscious contrast with the phrase in the previous section *Shinnen no kōnō* 信念の効能. If in fact, Manshi is not contrasting the two notions, and wants us to read his text as written, then the phrase must mean rather “the lack of any accomplishments that came from my own efforts.”

what enables me to be what I am. Faced with a world filled with good and bad, truth and falsehood, happiness and unhappiness, I am one who lacks the ability to distinguish one from the other. Thus I am unable to move even an inch, right or left, forward or backward, indeed in any direction to accommodate these things. This tathāgata in which I am able to believe is the essence of what enables such a person as myself to course through this world calmly and without malice.² Without believing in this tathāgata, I would neither know how to live nor how to die. I could not exist without believing in the tathāgata. This tathāgata is a tathāgata which I cannot but believe in.

This, then, is a summary of my faith. In terms of my first problem [of anxiety], the tathāgata for me is infinite compassion. In terms of my second problem [of ignorance], the tathāgata is infinite wisdom to me. In terms of my third problem [of practice], the tathāgata for me is infinite power. As such, my own faith believes in the reality of infinite compassion, infinite wisdom, and infinite power.

Because the tathāgata is infinite compassion, from the moment when my faith was resolved, the tathāgata enabled me to immediately gain peace and tranquility. The tathāgata in which I believe did not wait for the next world, but brought me enormous happiness here and now. I am not saying that I have not gained various degrees of happiness from other things, but none surpass the joys of this faith. For that reason, the happiness of my faith is my greatest happiness in this world. This happiness is something that I experience every day and every night. As I have not experienced happiness in the next life yet, I cannot comment on that.

Because the tathāgata is infinite wisdom, I receive its illuminating protection and am liberated from the delusions that stem from wrong understandings and wrong views. Almost unconsciously I find myself drawn into inquiry and research by force of habit, and easily fall into a host of useless arguments. There are times when I have even attempted to prove the existence of infinite compassion by means of finite, inelegant speculation. Thanks to the establishment of my faith, however, even if

²The phrase “calmly, without malice” renders *kyoshin heiki* 虚心平気, which expresses the notion of a clear state of mind without grudges, resentment, or prejudice.

I should fall into such illusory thinking for a period of time, it is easy for me to reflect upon the imprudence of this activity and abandon such theorizing. The aphorism, “To know what you do not know, this is knowledge,”³ may be the apogee of human wisdom, but we have a hard time accepting this. I used to hold truly presumptuous opinions. But, as a blessing of my faith, I now appreciate such expressions [of humility] as “ignorant Hōnen,” or “foolish, stubble-headed Shinran.”⁴ I, too, have learned to be truly content with ignorance. In the past, though I discussed the finite and the imperfect, I still had a hard time freeing myself from the absurdity of using that limited and imperfect human knowledge to pursue a perfect standard or the reality of the infinite. In the past I, too, feared that if we did not clarify the norms for judging truth or good and evil, that heaven and earth would crumble and society would become unmanageable. But now I have reached the conclusion that human knowledge could never create standards for truth or goodness.

Because the tathāgata is infinite capacity, through my faith a great capacity is granted to me. Under normal conditions our own considerations and discriminations lead us to determine how we will respond to things, but when something became even a little complicated that same ability to consider and discriminate easily becomes insufficient. That is why these inquiries and researches gain momentum. When, as mentioned above, we seek out standards or search for reality, then the difficulty of deciding how to act mounts precipitously and we become completely nonplussed. One should carefully choose their words, one should conduct oneself properly, one must not break the law, one must not violate the codes of morality, one must not breach the rules of propriety, one must not go against accepted modes of behavior. There are obligations to oneself, obligations to others, obligations within the family, obligations within society, obligations to parents, obligations to one’s lord, obligations to one’s husband, obligations to one’s wife, obligations to siblings, obligations to friends, obligations to good people, obligations to bad people, obligations to the old, obligations to the young, etc. Such duties and obligations that arise out of the teachings of so-

³From the *Analects* of Confucius, chapter two (為政): 「知文為知文、不知為不知、是知也」.

⁴These are words used by the individuals themselves as expressions of humility.

called ethics and morality are exceedingly difficult to carry out. If one is serious about fulfilling all of these obligations, in the end he or she will only end up faced with the depressing truth of the *impossibility* of the entire enterprise. When I ran up against this *impossibility* it distressed me immensely. If I had thought that there were no alternative but to agonize interminably over the reality of this *impossibility*, I would have ultimately killed myself. But through religion I have shed this anguish and now feel no need for suicide. In other words, through my belief in the infinite compassion of the tathāgata, today I have gained peace and calm.

How does the tathāgata of infinite compassion enable me to gain this peace? [The tathāgata] saves me by none other than taking responsibility for everything. No matter what sins I may have committed, before the tathāgata such things matter not a whit. I no longer have any need to discern good from bad, right from wrong. In whatever I do, I simply follow my inclinations and act according to what my heart dictates, without hesitation. I have no concern whatsoever as to whether or not my behavior is in error or in sin. The tathāgata graciously takes responsibility for all my actions. Simply by believing in this tathāgata I am able to live in continual peace. The capacity of the tathāgata is infinite. The capacity of the tathāgata is unsurpassed. The capacity of the tathāgata is ubiquitous. The capacity of the tathāgata pervades every direction in its unrestricted, undefiled activity. Entrusting myself to this sublime power of the tathāgata, I gain a great calm and a great peace. I entrust my very death, my very life to the tathāgata, and feel not the slightest anxiety or unease. It is said, “Death and life are in the hands of fate, riches and honor are the appointment of heaven.”⁵ The tathāgata in which I believe is the core reality of heaven and of destiny.

⁵From the *Analects*, chapter six (顏淵): 「外生有命、富貴在天」.