

Towards a Shin Buddhist Social Ethics

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I. The Need for a Shin Buddhist Social Ethics

SOCIAL ethics does not refer to personal morality, but rather deals with the question of a person's role in, and responsibility towards, social problems, and how one can best engage oneself in society in order to create a better world. This was not a problem in the pre-modern age when society and the state were accepted as "given," and when people were generally content with keeping their position in society as good subjects. It was only when the ideal of a nation state came into existence that social ethics became a topic of serious debate, as people were then able to participate in the creation of the nation and society as equal members of their country.

In Japan, social ethics became an important issue only in 1945 when, with her defeat in World War II, the imperial system collapsed and a new Constitution, based on popular sovereignty, was adopted. In this sense, "social ethics" is a fairly new concept in Japan, which became an issue, first and foremost, at the level of the ordinary citizen, as it still is today, where active participation in political, economic, educational and environmental problems—all of which substantially affect daily life—was required as morals for citizenship.

Under such circumstances, why is it necessary to stress the need for a social ethics based on Shin Buddhism? As stated above, such ethics is a matter of individual concern with one's relationship to society, and therefore, it may be argued that it is sufficient for a Shin Buddhist to participate in society at the level of an ordinary citizen. However, it is important to note that

behind this argument lies the notion that religion belongs to a transcendental realm beyond the affairs of this secular world, which must be considered carefully.

Therefore, I should like to suggest the following three reasons as an answer to the question above. First, Shin Buddhism, historically, has often been engaged in society in a misguided way. Second, religion presents a perspective which, by making all things in this world relative, serves to deepen and enrich civic social ethics. Third, there is a general misunderstanding of the central teaching of Other Power (*tariki* 他力) which has prevented the followers from active participation in social matters.

First, the Shin Buddhist institutions actively supported the modern imperial nation. Not only did Higashi and Nishi Honganji provide financial assistance when the Meiji government was established, but they also sought to create, up to the time of Japan's defeat in 1945, "loyal subjects" needed by the imperial government. Particularly during times of war, they took the lead in preaching that the duty of a Shin Buddhist was to die gloriously on the battlefield, and therefore urged the simple believers to march off to combat.¹ Furthermore, the abbots of both Honganjis took imperial princesses as their wives and thus established close ties with the imperial family, which further served to provide an important emotional support for the imperial system, especially as these abbots were regarded as living buddhas. Of course, in that age, Japan needed nationalism if she was to remain an independent country. During the early Meiji period (1868–1912), the Shin Buddhist institutions had suffered a severe blow from the anti-Buddhist persecution and therefore, it may be understandable that they became entangled with nationalism in order to re-establish themselves. However, the path they took led them far away from the Buddhist teachings, as in glorifying war to such an extent, they justified the slaughter of humanity in the name of compassion, the fundamental teaching of Buddhism. This was nothing more than casuistry. Even after the war, many priests and lay Buddhists still blamed everything on "the trend of the times" and so refused to confront their war responsibilities.²

¹ Let me give one example from "Letter to a Soldier Going Off to the Front Lines" by Akegarasu Haya 暁烏敏 (1877–1954): "Before you defeat the enemy country, you must defeat the enemy in your heart: the voice that says 'I want to return alive.' You must consider this voice as the devil's temptation.... Please fight courageously and when you return... come back as white bones." (Akegarasu 1904)

² Ichikawa Hakugen 市川白弦 (1902–1986) is one of the few Japanese Buddhists who have

Therefore, how should we, who wish to live our lives on the basis of a Shin Buddhist faith, understand these past actions perpetrated in its very name? What, after all, is the basis of social action in Shin Buddhism? When we consider these questions, those of us who follow such a faith cannot leave the question concerning social ethics unanswered.

Second, as religion transcends the secular realm, it provides us with a perspective from which everything in this world can be relativized, which makes it possible to perceive various contradictions and conflicts within society with sufficient objectivity. As a result, religion can serve to resolve these problems. A good example is the anti-war peace movement led by Vietnamese Buddhists during the Vietnam War. Though I do not wish to go into details here, suffice it to say that South Vietnam was turned into a battlefield as a result of ideological conflicts, and that Vietnamese Buddhists refused to support either of these ideological positions, and instead, took the sufferings of their fellow human beings upon themselves, treating their pain as their own. By devoting themselves single-heartedly to non-violence and the spirit of compassion, these Buddhists were able to work towards the ending of the war, unlike the politicians.³

What is particularly important to note here is that, through their experience, these Vietnamese Buddhists expanded the idea of *dukkha*, the fundamental principle of Buddhism, to encompass not only personal suffering but also that which has its roots in the structure of society itself. In this way, they attempted to work actively towards the eradication of suffering which arises from social and political problems.⁴ This became the core idea of the socially-engaged Buddhism that subsequently appeared in various parts of Asia, and marks the appearance of a "Buddhist social ethics" which is clearly distinct from that of a civic-oriented one.⁵

Among Japanese Buddhists also, before thinking about social ethics as just concerning citizens or a people of a particular country, there are growing attempts to ask how they, as Buddhists, can participate in society on the basis

consistently pursued the problem of war responsibilities of Japanese Buddhism and Japanese Buddhists since the end of the war in 1945. His works like *The War Responsibilities of Japanese Buddhists* (1970) and *Japanese Religion under Fascism* (1975) are important for Buddhist social ethics.

³ For details, see Thich Nhat Hanh 1967.

⁴ Cf. Thich Nhat Hanh 1987.

⁵ On engaged Buddhism see, for example, Queen and King, eds. 1996.

of their own faith.⁶ In particular, since the 1960s, there has been a move towards democratization within Higashi Honganji (Shinshū Ōtani-ha) and as part of this attempt, there has arisen a need to define an image of an ideal society or form of social participation, based on the teaching of Shin Buddhism.⁷ The recognition that there is a pressing need to construct such a social ethic is spreading among Shin Buddhists.

Let us now turn to the third reason why there is a necessity to address the issue of a Shin Buddhist social ethics. Among Shin priests and lay people, there is a particular reluctance to engage in social problems from the standpoint of their faith. One reason for this may be traced back to the fact that the need for “social ethics” has not yet been fully accepted in Japanese society as a whole. However, I feel that the major reason seems to be the mistaken understanding of the characteristic of the Shin Buddhist doctrine of Other Power, which refers to the power of Amida Buddha’s Vow, guaranteeing the attainment of Buddhahood by ordinary beings. Unfortunately, reliance on Other Power has often been misunderstood to mean that one must refrain from active decision-making, even when confronted with the problems of daily life. The Shin teaching of entrusting oneself to Amida came to be understood, in practical terms, to “leave everything up to others” and hence, instead of working voluntarily to change the actual world, the ideal Shin Buddhist way of life was defined as accepting reality “as it is” and going along with the flow of events. This, however, is a mistaken understanding of Other Power, as even though this is essential in order for ordinary people to become buddhas, we must still do our best to live our daily lives to the utmost. That is what life is all about! The only thing that Other Power guarantees is the attainment of Buddhahood. It will not resolve the contradictions, conflicts and discord in our daily life. Shin Buddhists often fail to see this, and as a result, they are prevented from looking squarely at social suffering and so have remained unable to practice the compassion, required of all Buddhists. Therefore, in order to dispel this mistaken view, we need to clarify the significance of social ethics in Shin Buddhism.

⁶ As one such attempt, there is *Āyus* アーユス (The International Buddhist Association Network), a Japanese inter-denominational Buddhist NGO (non-governmental organization). URL: <http://www.ayus.org/>.

⁷ The Constitution of Shinshū Ōtani-ha gives the “actualization” and “realization” of a “society based on Buddhist fellowship” (*dōbō shakai* 同朋社会) as the denomination’s goal.

II. The Problem of the Two Truths

In the previous section, I pointed out that Shin Buddhism has a history of being closely allied to the state—one which was based on the divine right of the emperor. The ideological basis of this attitude towards the state was set forth in the doctrine of the Two Truths (*shin-zoku nitai* 真俗二諦), which, when we think about Shin Buddhist social ethics, is necessary to consider first.

These Two Truths are Absolute Truth (*shintai*) and Worldly Truth (*zoku-tai*). In Shin Buddhism, the former referred to its teaching of attaining Buddhahood by being born in Amida Buddha's Pure Land, while the latter was understood to refer to secular order and morality. However, these Two Truths were turned into a doctrine for regulating Shin Buddhists' activities in society, which, simply put, required the followers to observe social order, cultivate social virtues and become people useful to the state—all in the name of Worldly Truth.

This doctrine developed from the principle that "the king's law is fundamental (*ōhō ihon* 王法為本)," preached by Rennyo 蓮如 (1415–1499), the eighth abbot of Honganji, who required his followers to respect this in order to protect them from the harsh persecution of the daimyō (feudal lords), although he still regarded faith (*shinjin*) as of primary concern.⁸

Under the Tokugawa feudal system, it was not faith but loyalty to the political system that became the main requirement, and the doctrine of the Two Truths was used to inculcate an obedient dutiful way of life useful to the rulers. However, after the collapse of the shogunate in 1868, Buddhism was actively persecuted by the new Meiji government, and as we saw above, this crisis led the Buddhist institutions to adopt a very nationalistic stance. Through this process, this doctrine gradually became the dominant ideology, and eventually came to hold a central place in modern Shin Buddhist doctrinal system. For example, in the Temple Law of the Denomination (*Shūsei jihō* 宗制寺法), compiled by both Higashi and Nishi Honganji as their supreme laws after the Meiji Restoration, it was declared to be their orthodox teaching.

⁸ For example, in his *Ofumi* (Letters), Rennyo states as follows: "You should put priority on the king's law and hide the Buddha's law from sight. In society, you should put priority on benevolence, and refrain from slighting other Buddhist denominations. Moreover, you should not treat the gods rudely." (Kasahara and Inoue, eds. 1972, p. 71)

According to the temple law of Higashi Honganji, having faith in birth in the Pure Land was defined as the Gate of Absolute Truth. The law further stated that:

To revere the emperor, to observe the laws, to refrain from violating the rules of society, to refrain from causing discord in human relations, and by such means applying oneself diligently to one's occupation and helping the nation prosper—this is the Gate of Worldly Truth.

Moreover, the two gates were said to support and augment each other.⁹

In Nishi Honganji, Absolute Truth was said to be “hearing the Buddha's Name in faith, and repaying the (Buddha's) great compassion in one's mind,” while Worldly Truth was defined as “treading the human path and observing the king's law.” Here once again, the two gates were said to support and augment each other.¹⁰

There are at least two problems with this doctrine. First, it rejects the supremacy of faith advocated by Hōnen 法然 (1133–1212), Shinran 親鸞 (1173–1262) and their followers, and instead gives priority to observing an ideology of morality which serves to uphold the state. Although both Absolute and Worldly Truths were said to support and augment each other, the relationship between the two was not explained sufficiently. The observance of secular morality proclaimed, for example, in the Imperial Rescript on Education (Worldly Truth), cannot be deduced from the act of uttering the nembutsu with faith in Amida Buddha's Original Vow (Absolute Truth). Nor is there any necessary connection between the Shin Buddhist teaching and acting as loyal subjects. In spite of this, the Shin Buddhist institutions taught their believers the need to become loyal subjects, observing such ordinances as the Imperial Rescript on Education.¹¹

⁹ Shinshū Kyōgaku Kenkyūjo 1975, p. 131.

¹⁰ Honganji Shiryō Kenkyūjo, ed. 1969, p. 181.

¹¹ One section of the Imperial Rescript on Education reads as follows: “Should emergency arise, offer yourself courageously to the State; and thus guard and maintain the prosperity of Our Imperial Throne coeval with heaven and earth. So shall ye not only be Our good and faithful subjects, but render illustrious the best traditions of your forefathers.” (Translation taken from Fairbank, Reischauer and Craig 1965, p. 276.) The Rescript was issued in 1890. Nearly twenty years before that, in 1871, Kōnyo 広如, the then chief abbot of Nishi Honganji, stated as follows in his last testament (*Ikun* 遺訓), “Everyone born in the emperor's land is

Second, there is the problem that Shin Buddhists exhibited little doubts about submitting themselves to the social order and secular morality with which they were confronted, let alone criticize them. While there were people who benefited from maintaining the order, there were also many who were oppressed by it, or were unjustly deprived of their human rights under it. In other words, attempts to maintain or strengthen social order often tend to cover up the contradictions and injustices inherent within it, and the doctrine of the Two Truths assisted in such concealment.

Seen from another angle, it is clear that this doctrine did not arise naturally from the fundamental teachings of Shin Buddhism, but was created in order to muster Shin believers, socially, in a systematic attempt to protect the Shin Buddhist institutions. Moreover, the widespread support of this doctrine by both Shin believers and people in general was made possible by the strong nationalistic sentiment in Japan during this time so that Shin Buddhism failed to protect its autonomy and hence, was swallowed up by nationalism.

III. The Basis of a Shin Buddhist Social Ethics

Let us carry our analysis a little bit further as there is a need to explain why it was possible for the doctrine of the Two Truths to develop in Shin Buddhism, and unless this point is clarified, it is possible that similar misguided attempts to mobilize believers socially, in the name of Shin Buddhism, may recur in the future.

Paradoxically, the answer to the above question lies in the way the nembutsu of the Original Vow was taught. As stated above, Hōnen only emphasized how ordinary beings could attain Buddhahood, without teaching the necessity of adopting a special set of morals distinctive to nembutsu practitioners and hence, the way in which each of them led their life was left up to them. He states, "As for the way in which to lead your life, you should live it by reciting the nembutsu. You should abhor and reject all things that obstruct the nembutsu, and refrain from doing them."¹²

indebted to the emperor.... Do not err concerning the teaching of the Two Truths. In this life, remain loyal to the emperor." Fukuma, Sasaki and Hayashima eds.1983, pp. 197–98.

¹² Hōnen, "Shonin densetsu no kotoba 諸人伝説の詞," in *Wago Tōroku* 和語灯録 (Writings in Japanese) vol. 5. *Shōwa Shinsan kokuyaku daizōkyō* 昭和新聞国訳大蔵經, Jōdoshū seiten 浄土宗聖典) Tōhō Shoin 東方書院, 1928, p. 258.

Why, then, did Hōnen refrain from teaching morals and a particular way of life to his followers? To put it briefly, it was because he understood humans as being inextricably bound by their “karmic conditions (*gō-en* 業縁).”¹³ Here “karma (*gō*)” means “actions” while “conditions (*en*)” refer to their “indirect causes,” which humans have no way of completely knowing. While the cause-and-effect relationships that we can understand appear to us as inevitable, “conditions (*en*)” in these relationships can only be seen as “chance,” and such “chances” control human actions. Furthermore, the karmic conditions of each person are different and therefore, even though everyone may be required to follow a uniform way of life, it is impossible to do so in actuality. Even morality may be useless in some cases, as for example, a person who has been taught not to kill, and who in fact would not kill even an insect, would kill enemy soldiers when sent off to the battlefield. It is impossible to foretell what a person may do depending on their karmic conditions, which is why Hōnen taught that we need to ultimately rely upon the nembutsu of the Original Vow. This is truly a penetrating insight into our karmic conditions.

However, it must be said that this insight was lacking in the doctrine of the Two Truths, in which there was no apprehending of sorrow where the world of religion becomes real to us only when we realize our ultimate moral inability. The doctrine was, for all practical purposes, just a moral theory, but was ironically forced upon a way of life which had been left up to each nembutsu practitioner since the time of Hōnen. As well as this, the ethos of submission to authority which had been fermenting since the Tokugawa period, made the people accept the doctrine uncritically, as it was set forth by the chief abbot himself.

In the teaching of the nembutsu of the Original Vow, as Hōnen had taught, the question of how to lead one’s life was left up to the judgement of each individual nembutsu practitioner and therefore, any attempt to create a new Shin Buddhist ethics must start from this point. Basically, each practitioner has to discover their own way to lead their life depending on their situation. At first sight, this may seem passive and vague, but actually it is a way of life in which priority is given to the autonomous decision-making power of each individual, which needs to be regained as it is the basis of, and the prerequisite for, any possible Shin Buddhist social ethics.

As stated above, under the imperial system, the Higashi Honganji institu-

¹³ Concerning the following discussion on karmic conditions, see Ama 1999.

tion sought to muster its believers for nationalistic political purposes by using the doctrine of the Two Truths. Yet we must not forget that there was a person within its ranks who attempted to go beyond all this and tried, like Hōnen and Shinran, to uphold the supremacy of faith. Similarly, the institution also gave birth to a nembutsu practitioner who refused to ignore the sufferings of his fellow believers and stood up fearlessly for the cause of social justice. Although both their activities were far outside the mainstream of Shin Buddhist history, the construction of a Shin Buddhist social ethic must begin by reviving their hopes and visions. These two people are Kiyozawa Manshi 清沢満之 (1863–1903) and Takagi Kenmyō 高木顕明 (1864–1914) and therefore, in the pages below, I should like to briefly discuss their understanding of ethical values in society.

IV. Kiyozawa Manshi and his Faith-centered Religion

Kiyozawa Manshi was a scholar who created, for the first time in Japan, an academic religious philosophy based on the study of western philosophers like Hegel. Also, as a priest in Higashi Honganji, he was influential both in modernizing its institution and in interpreting Shinran's thought in a modern way.

Among Kiyozawa's many achievements, the most noteworthy was the fact that he succeeded in going beyond the doctrine of the Two Truths. In his essay, "The Relationship between Religious Morality and Common Morality," the last work he published before his death, he proclaims religious values to be absolute.¹⁴ According to Kiyozawa, the reason why Worldly Truth is preached alongside Absolute Truth in Shin Buddhism is to demonstrate to nembutsu practitioners how difficult it is to lead a life in accordance with secular morality (that is to say, Worldly Truth). For this reason, even while emphasizing this Truth, it only spoke of the "king's law and benevolence," or "humanity, justice, courtesy, wisdom and sincerity" or secular "codes," without going into details about what each signified. In other words, for those whose minds had not yet settled in faith, Worldly Truth was taught in order to lead them to "religion" by making them realize their inability to live a moral life. Similarly, for those who had already attained unwavering faith, the same Truth served to make them realize even more acutely the impossibility of living a moral life and thereby allowing them to rejoice all the more in having attained faith in the Other Power.

¹⁴ This article is found in Kiyozawa 1903. For an English translation, see Blum tr. 1989.

To sum up, for Kiyozawa, the doctrine of the Two Truths serves merely to demonstrate the following points: (1) that, once one has attained faith, there is no need to be dismayed even if one cannot live morally and (2) that, once one realizes that one cannot live a moral life, one becomes even more grateful for having attained faith (in Amida Buddha, who specifically promises to save even the most degenerate human being). Therefore, Kiyozawa argues that, even though one may have to cast morality aside in order to lead one's life in faith, it cannot be helped. This statement, which signifies his abandonment of morality, shows his success in stating that religious values are absolute. It is identical, in content, to the proclamation made by Hōnen and Shinran in the 13th century, concerning the supremacy of the nembutsu of the Original Vow.

As mentioned before, this essay was published in 1903. We may add that the Imperial Rescript on Education had already been promulgated in 1890 and that greater stress was being placed on the inculcation of the need to become good subjects of the emperor by leading moral lives. When we understand the historical context, we can see how critical Kiyozawa was of the Japanese society of his time:

. . . the Shinshū worldly truth teaching is not something which sets out to impose prescriptions on human behavior. . . . For that reason it is a great misperception to think the worldly truth teaching exists in order to compel people to uphold standards of human behavior or by extension to benefit society and the nation. If the worldly truth teaching were expounded in connection with the laws of the king or the precepts of benevolence and humanity, as a matter of course it would be conducive to the performance of [these duties] to some degree. In fact [such concerns] are an appendant phenomenon. The essential point of the teaching is to show that one is unable to carry out [these duties]. . . . Despite the fact that the essential thrust of the doctrine is religious, it is its appended moral elements that seem to be valued most highly; a strange set of circumstances indeed!¹⁵

In this way, Kiyozawa politely consigned the orthodox Shin Buddhist doctrine of the Two Truths to oblivion.

Several years earlier in 1892, he attempted to construct the foundations of

¹⁵ Blum tr. 1989, pp. 106–108, slightly modified.

a Shin Buddhist social ethics in his *Skeleton of a Philosophy of Religion*, where he defines religion as a faculty, found within finite human beings, which seeks for the Infinite. Furthermore, Kiyozawa distinguishes two ways in which the finite can attain to the Infinite. The first is the method of developing the Infinite which resides within the finite, while the second is through the Infinite reaching out and embracing the finite and bringing it into itself. Kiyozawa called the former the “Self-exertion Gate” and the latter the “Other-power Gate.”

I should like to note the following point that Kiyozawa makes here. In the Other-power Gate, as the difference between the finite and the Infinite becomes apparent, not only do people revere the Infinite, but they also show greater concern for the ethical relationships among finite beings themselves, and as a result, strive to put into practice the “right path of the human world (*jinsei no seidō* 人世の正道).” As he says:

(In the Other-power Gate), when one attains the Settled Mind (*anjin* 安心), the distinction between the finite and the Infinite becomes vividly clear. It becomes truly clear that the finite exists within the realm of the Infinite. At that point, one realizes for the first time that the finite is truly finite. For this reason one apprehends, on the one hand, one’s religious connection to the Infinite, and, on the other hand, one’s moral connection with other finite beings, and recognizes the distinction between so-called “religion” and “morality.” One then comes to exert oneself in the practice of the right path of the human world in the ethical realm.¹⁶

The distinction between religion and morality is clearly recognized for the first time when one gains faith in the Other-power Gate, and as a result, the freedom to put the “right path of the human world” into practice without fear or anxiety about the consequences. This must be the starting point of the social ethics we are considering here. It may be noted that the term “right path of the human world” is rendered as “the progress and improvement of the world” in the English translation of the *Skeleton*.¹⁷ Although the term

¹⁶ Kiyozawa 1892, p. 100.

¹⁷ An English translation of the *Skeleton* was prepared by Noguchi Zenshirō 野口善四郎 on the occasion of the World Parliament of Religion held in Chicago in 1893. See Kiyozawa 1893. As Kiyozawa himself apparently made numerous corrections to Noguchi’s draft translation, the English translation can be seen as reflecting Kiyozawa’s views quite faithfully. The translation “the progress and improvement of the world” is found on p.75.

“social ethics” is not used here, this rendering clearly indicates the nature and direction of social engagement based on a Shin Buddhist faith, which becomes even clearer when considering how Kiyozawa himself subsequently participated actively in the movement to reform the Higashi Honganji institution.¹⁸

For example, in his essay entitled “The Present Benefits of Buddhism” published in 1896, he writes that finite beings, even while remaining in the finite state, can apply themselves in the world “actively and vigorously.”¹⁹ Furthermore, he unequivocally states that an active and vigorous life is a “great source of welfare in the human world” and that only those who have faith in the Other-power Gate are able to devote themselves wholeheartedly to it.

Kiyozawa’s movement to reform Higashi Honganji was forced to disband soon after it created a nationwide organization. One may say it was a setback and defeat, but from Kiyozawa’s point of view, it provided an opportunity to appeal for the necessity of reform beyond the boundary of Higashi Honganji and to society as a whole, which was a development and enrichment of the social ethics of Other-power Buddhism. This is clearly indicated in the editorial placed at the beginning of Issue 14 of the journal, *Kyōkai jigen* 教界時言 (Timely Words for the Buddhist World), which Kiyozawa published with his colleagues in the reform movement. Here, he went beyond calling for the reform of Higashi Honganji, and proclaimed his intention to embark on such a movement encompassing all of Japanese society.

To begin with, to reform the administration of Ōtani-ha [i.e. Higashi Honganji] is not our only goal. As ordinary Buddhists, we wish to engage in discussion worthy of Buddhists. As ordinary men of religion, we wish to set forth views worthy of such people. As ordinary citizens, we wish to set forth intentions worthy of citizens and serve to promote the culture of the Japanese empire. We have already proclaimed this in the first issue of this journal. In the ten-odd months since we began publication, the situation, both within and outside Higashi Honganji, has undergone rapid change. It is now impossible to limit our journal solely to matters pertaining to the reform of its administration. Therefore, from this issue

¹⁸ On the relationship between the movement to reform Higashi Honganji and the development of Kiyozawa’s thought, see Moriya 1996.

¹⁹ Kiyozawa 1896.

on, the *Kyōkai jigen* will work for the reform of the Buddhist world in general along with that of the Ōtani-ha administration. As well as this, we shall call for improvements in the political, legal, educational and academic realms, and we hope that, while doing this, we shall not be remiss in reviewing anything connected with religion.²⁰

In the subsequent issue of *Kyōkai jigen*, Kiyozawa published an essay titled “Buddhists, Why Do You Lack Self-Esteem?”²¹ in which he emphasized that a Buddhist must simultaneously live in two worlds, namely the religious and the secular. Religious people tend to concentrate on giving themselves up to the transcendent world beyond daily life. However important though this might be, they must not forget the existence of the everyday world—a world of human relationships dominated by “unmistakable distinctions of self and others, intimate and distant relationships.” Kiyozawa argues that, being confronted with such a world, religious people need to involve themselves in it in a practical way, and stresses the necessity of living resolutely in the everyday world on the basis of Other-power faith.

Towards the end of his life, Kiyozawa gave the name *seishin shugi* 精神主義 (literally “spirit-ism”) to this way of life which stressed, above all, the need to establish one’s life on a “perfectly firm ground,” sustained by the Absolute/Infinite.²²

Kiyozawa further explains this way of life as the “logical path by which the ‘spirit’ (*seishin*, or the Other-power faith) develops,” which cannot be ignored when thinking about a Shin Buddhist social ethics. According to this passage, the *seishin* develops throughout life in stages, a process that can be clearly seen. Kiyozawa, above all, emphasized doing this by establishing oneself in the Other Power in the everyday world which is, to repeat his words above, dominated by “unmistakable distinctions of self and others, intimate and distant relationships.” He did not consider faith as just having peace within one’s own mind which merely keeps oneself locked up in a narrow, fixed world, but rather spiritual awareness only comes alive in “practical actions (*jikkō* 実行)” based on Other-power faith, which must also include social ethics.

Then, of what does such a social ethics consist? Though Kiyozawa has

²⁰ Kiyozawa 1897.

²¹ Kiyozawa 1898.

²² Kiyozawa 1901.

already provided us with several suggestions, it was Takagi Kenmyō who actually put them into practice.

V. The Social Ethics of Takagi Kenmyō

As is well known, the Meiji Constitution contained a clause which stated that the emperor was “sacred and inviolable” and in order to back up such a claim, the government incorporated the crime of High Treason (*taigyaku-zai* 大逆罪) into the criminal law in 1908, which held that anyone who harmed, or attempted to harm, the emperor or his direct descendents would be put to death. It just so happened that in May 1910, some workers in a lumber mill in Nagano prefecture were arrested for the illegal possession of explosives. In the course of interrogation, it was discovered that they had been planning to assassinate the emperor, and because of this, they were tried for the above crime. Yamagata Aritomo, who held the reins of government in those days, decided to use this opportunity to eradicate socialists and anarchists whose influence had been growing in Japanese society. The prosecution concocted a story about their plotting to assassinate the emperor with the prominent socialist Kōtoku Shūsui 幸徳秋水 (1871–1911) as their ringleader. This government fabrication became known as the “High Treason Incident,”²³ in which Takagi Kenmyō was implicated.

Takagi, himself, was born on May 21, 1864, as the son of a confectioner in Aichi prefecture, and after graduating from a school in Nagoya belonging to Higashi Honganji, he became a priest. In 1897, he was sent to Jōsenji 浄泉寺 in Wakayama prefecture, and two years later became its head priest. Many of the members of this temple lived in *hisabetsu buraku* 被差別部落 (socially discriminated communities), and suffered from poverty and discrimination. Deeply moved by their plight, Takagi became a leader of their liberation movement. He also worked actively for the abolition of state prostitution, and bitterly opposed the Russo-Japanese War when it broke out. As can be clearly seen from his essay entitled “My Socialism (*Yo ga Shakaishugi* 余が社会主義),”²⁴ Takagi’s actions were a form of social practice based on his Shin Buddhist faith. However, because he was on close terms with the socialists, he was unfortunately drawn into this “High Treason Incident.”

²³ Wagatsuma 1969 is a useful reference for understanding the general outline of the “High Treason Incident.” On its relationship to Buddhism, see Ama 1994.

²⁴ See Appendix.

For this reason, on January 18, 1911, Takagi was sentenced to death along with twenty-three other people. Among them, twelve were actually put to death, while the rest, including Takagi, had their sentences commuted to life imprisonment. He was sent to a prison in Akita prefecture, where he hanged himself on June 24, 1914, at the age of 51. Shinshū Ōtani-ha (Higashi Honganji) defrocked Takagi on the very day of his sentencing. However, with the spread of the Dōbōkai movement (同朋会, Association of Fellow Believers) within the denomination in the 1960s, Takagi's importance was re-evaluated and finally, on April 1, 1996, the denomination officially reversed their previous decision, and thereafter he was fully reinstated.²⁵ Higashi Honganji not only restored Takagi but also declared it would do its utmost to carry on his work, which bodes well for the future of Shin Buddhism, since an important guiding principle for its ethics is clearly revealed in Takagi's deeds.

Basically, Shin Buddhist social ethics is not anything that can be expressed through general plans or slogans, but rather something that those who have attained *shinjin* will undertake, based on their own decision in accordance with the particular circumstances in which they find themselves. As noted above, each human being is distinct as each carries karmic conditions peculiar to that particular person and therefore, they cannot be lumped together, as it were, and treated as if they are all the same. However, should there be a common element in Shin Buddhist social ethics, it is that it accords with Amida Buddha's compassion. In this respect, Takagi practiced compassion with a pure heart.

In "My Socialism," he relates how he attained peace and happiness upon receiving Amida Buddha's compassion, whereupon his life was completely transformed, enabling him to abide in the desire to "do what the Buddha wishes me to do, to practice what he wishes me to practice, and make the Buddha's will my own will." The Other-power faith transformed all of his previous thoughts and prompted in him "great determination." In this way, Takagi "opened himself up (*tainin* 体認)" to Amida Buddha's mind of compassion, and became very determined to put it into practice, which he did by embarking on a movement to bring about "progress (*kōjō shinpo* 向上進歩)"

²⁵ I must add here that the re-evaluation of Takagi's deeds and official reinstatement are due largely to the research of Prof. Izumi Shigeki 泉恵機 of Ōtani University, who has put much effort into rediscovering Takagi's life and work for the present generation. Prof. Izumi's published works are listed in the bibliography below.

and “community (*kyōdō seikatsu* 共同生活),” sustained by “compassion directed equally towards everyone.” In Takagi’s words, our desire is neither to receive medals nor to become generals or nobles. We wish to bring about “progress” and “community” through energy and labor sustained by faith.²⁶

Then, what exactly are “progress” and “community”? The former consists of realizing peace through thoroughgoing opposition to war and elimination of social inequality and discrimination, while the latter refers to life free from the “struggle for existence,” where labor is used only for producing sustenance so that the cultivation of one’s spiritual life can be actualized without any problems. What Takagi expressed is profound, all the more so as he stated what he believed simply. What is worthy of being called “progress” and “community” still remain weighty questions, even after passing through the dark history of the modern world. What choices should we, who lead our lives on the basis of Other-power faith, make in order to bring about these two ideals? This is indeed the problem of a modern Shin Buddhist social ethics.

Conclusion

Seen in this way, it can be said that both Kiyozawa Manshi and Takagi Kenmyō unflinchingly directed their gaze on the problems of modernity and sought to express compassion, the life-force of Buddhism, in new forms. As their examples illustrate, compassion in modern society cannot simply remain a personal virtue, but rather, it needs to become the guiding principle within laws and institutions to be truly effective.²⁷

Whether an individual can be compassionate or not depends on circumstances; some people may become so upon gaining *shinjin*, while others may remain selfish as before. It basically depends upon that individual’s karmic conditions. However, to repeat the point again, it is inevitable in this modern world that a person’s life is profoundly affected by laws and institutions and

²⁶ See Appendix, p. 59 below.

²⁷ Although I was not able to treat him in this paper due to the limitation of space, Imamura Yemyō 今村恵猛 (1867–1932), the second chief missionary of the Honpa Hongwanji (commonly known as Nishi Honganji) also worked to incorporate compassion into laws and institutions. He is an important example of a person who practiced Shin Buddhist social ethics. Imamura lived around the same time as Kiyozawa and Takagi, and for this reason, too, his work needs to be considered in detail. On Imamura’s work, see Moriya 1999, Moriya 2000, and Moriya 2001.

therefore, compassion, too, must not be limited to being merely a personal virtue but rather become a potent force for transforming society. It may take various forms, but Takagi's goals of "progress" and "community" provide us with important guidelines when thinking about any Shin Buddhist social ethics.

As long as Buddhism is a religion of compassion, I believe that there can be no such thing as Shin Buddhist faith indifferent towards what is happening in the actual world. Faith, sustained by compassion, is naturally sensitive to the contradictions and absurdities in contemporary society and hence, by placing greater importance on the cultivation of such sensibilities, we shall surely be able to enrich this Other-power faith.

(Translated by Robert F. Rhodes)

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