

# The Dharma Breeze

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## Rev. Manshi Kiyozawa and Epictetus

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### I. Introduction

In this essay I want to discuss the spiritual influence that Rev. Manshi Kiyozawa (1863–1903), a Shin Buddhist teacher, received from Epictetus (A.D. 55?–135?, a Greek philosopher). Kiyozawa is known as the father of modern Shin Buddhism in Japan. Modern Shin Buddhism can hardly be discussed in isolation from Kiyozawa. He was the teacher of such famous Japanese Shin teachers as Ryojin Soga (1875–1971), Haya Akegarasu (1877–1954), and Daiei Kaneko (1881–1976).

Kiyozawa considered Buddhism to be essentially a teaching of self-examination. Shin Buddhism, the teaching of Shinran (1173–1262), was originally a teaching of intense self-examination, but it has devolved over centuries into a dualistic faith that talks only about the salvation of the wretched by a personal savior named Amida Buddha. Kiyozawa set out to restore the original thrust of Shinran’s teaching by making it clear that Shin Buddhism is nothing but a teaching of self-examination.

Born into a poor samurai family, Kiyozawa owed his higher education to financial assistance from the Otani-ha Shin Buddhist sect. One of the earliest graduates of Tokyo University, he majored in religious philosophy and studied Western philosophers such as Spinoza, Kant, and Hegel. Although he was a Buddhist belonging to a Shin sect, he transcended conventional labels such as “Buddhism” and “Shin Buddhism.” He had deep respect for both Eastern and Western thinkers and mined the spiritual ore of both traditions.

When Kiyozawa was thirty-five, he read the *Discourses of Epictetus* and was deeply moved. This book contributed to Kiyozawa’s establishment of his faith.

In order to discuss what Kiyozawa learned from Epictetus, I will first describe Kiyozawa’s existential situation when he first discovered him. Then I will discuss the three specific teachings of Epictetus that influenced Kiyozawa.

### II. Kiyozawa’s Meeting with Epictetus

#### A. Circumstances surrounding Kiyozawa’s meeting with Epictetus

Let me discuss the difficulties Kiyozawa had been experiencing when he encountered the teaching of Epictetus. Those difficulties provided fertile ground for Kiyozawa’s spiritual development and for his encounter with Epictetus.

When Kiyozawa was twenty-five years old, the Otani-ha Shin Buddhist sect asked him to become principal of its high school. Although many friends discouraged him from doing so, he complied with this request because of his obligation to the sect. This meant abandoning his plans to become a professor at Tokyo University.

While Kiyozawa was at the high school, he embarked on an ascetic practice he called “the minimum possible.” He took it up out of his deep respect for Shakyamuni Buddha. Kiyozawa deplored the corruption of the Buddhist world in which he lived. By re-experiencing what Shakyamuni experienced, Kiyozawa wanted to verify the authenticity of Shakyamuni’s awakening experience. But, when Kiyozawa was thirty-one, after four years of rigorous asceticism, he contracted an incurable case of pulmonary tuberculosis.

In spite of his sickness, he actively engaged in activities to reform the Otani-ha Shin organization. The conservative members of the organization persecuted him, calling him a “heretic” and “leader of the destructive socialist party.” When he was thirty-four, the

sectarian headquarters expelled Kiyozawa and several of his sympathizers from the sect. He also lost his teaching position at the high school.

The year 1898, when Kiyozawa was thirty-five, was a very important year for him because it was then that he found the firm religious convictions that guided the remainder of his life. This, however, did not come easily, for Kiyozawa experienced great personal suffering that year. After losing his teaching position and witnessing the dissolution of his reform movement, he returned despondently to his wife and children at the Saihoji temple. But life there was not easy. With no teaching position he faced financial difficulties. He started to work for the temple where his father-in-law was chief minister, but the temple did not need another minister, and Kiyozawa soon became an extraneous burden. To complicate matters further he was not on the best of terms with the temple's followers, many of whom thought his talks too philosophical and difficult to understand. Some even went so far as to refuse his visits to their family memorial services. Others regarded him as a rebel against the Shin tradition and wanted him to leave the temple. If even this was not enough to turn him into a social pariah, he made himself even less appealing by publicly coughing up blood due to his sickness. He received little support from his father who found it necessary to move to Saihoji to live with his son and was not on good terms with his daughter-in-law's family.

These difficulties made Kiyozawa look upon himself as a *rosen* ("December fan," i.e., good-for-nothing), the pen name he adopted during this period. It was in this period that he encountered the teaching of Epictetus.

### **B. Kiyozawa's Meeting with Epictetus**

In September of that same year when Kiyozawa was experiencing all these difficulties, he visited his friend's house in Tokyo, where he found a book in English entitled *The Discourses of Epictetus* (henceforth abbreviated as *Discourses*). He borrowed the book and read it. It moved him so deeply that he called it "The best book in the West." Epictetus was a Greek Stoic philosopher belonging to the Kunikos tradition that transmitted the wisdom of Socrates. In ancient Rome many philosophers were Greek slaves and Epictetus was one of them.

In August of that year, one month before Kiyozawa read the *Discourses*, he started his diary, entitled *December Fan Diary*. As soon as he read the *Discourses*, he began to quote the philosopher's words in the diary. Since he was so deeply impressed by the philosopher, he started to read passages from the *Discourses* as part of his Buddhist morning service that included the chanting of the *Shoshin-ge*.

Before Kiyozawa read the *Discourses*, he considered two books the most important for him: the *Tannisho* (a record of Shinran's words by his contemporary disciple Yuien) and the *Agama Sutras* (records of Shakyamuni's words by his disciples). Now having added the *Discourses* to the list, he formulated the idea of "my three most important sutras (*waga sambu-kyo*)." Kiyozawa owed a great deal to Epictetus for being one of the three legs of the tripod of his faith.

In 1901, three years after Kiyozawa first read the Greek philosopher and experienced the establishment of his faith, he, together with his students, started to publish the journal *Spiritual World*. In the two years that remained before his death in 1903, Kiyozawa wrote forty-three articles for the journal in which he described his Buddhist ideas that became known as the teaching of *Seishin-shugi* (Spirit-centeredness). In these articles the powerful influence of Epictetus on Kiyozawa is most evident.

### **III. The Three Teachings of Epictetus That Influenced Kiyozawa**

It was Epictetus's teachings about perfect contentment and freedom that most strongly influenced Kiyozawa. In his article entitled "Spirit-centeredness (*Seishin-shugi*)," the first article he wrote for the journal *Spiritual World*, Kiyozawa says, "Spirit-centeredness refers to finding contentment wholly within the realm of the spirit." (*December Fan*, p. 15.)

Epictetus and Kiyozawa shared similar existential predicaments. Epictetus was a slave whose life was full of physical restraints and difficulties such as fear of death and persecution. But in spite of these difficulties, the philosopher lived his life in perfect contentment and freedom. Having read the words that showed Epictetus's life of perfect contentment and freedom amidst physical constraints and suffering, Kiyozawa could easily identify and was deeply moved.

Now let me discuss Epictetus's three specific teachings concerning perfect contentment and freedom. They are (1) the teaching about making a clear distinction between "things in our power (or the controllable)" and "things not in our power (or the

uncontrollable)”; (2) the teaching of free will—of freedom of interpretation; and (3) the teaching that how one views the self determines whether one suffers or not.

#### A. Making a clear distinction between “the controllable” and “the uncontrollable”

In a letter sent to his friend, dated October 10, 1898, Kiyozawa quotes the following passage from the *Discourses* in its original English:

Of things some are our own power, and others are not. In our power are opinion, movement towards a thing, desire, aversion; and in a word, whatever are our *own* acts; not in our power are the body, property, reputation, offices, and in a word, whatever are not our own acts. And the things in our power are by nature free, not subject to restraint nor hindrance; but the things not in our power are weak, slavish, subject to restraint, in the power of others.

(*Kiyozawa Manshi Zenshu* [Complete Works of Manshi Kiyozawa], published by Iwanami-shoten, vol. 8, p. 176. Emphasis is Kiyozawa’s.)

Here Epictetus talks about the difference between “in our power (or controllable)” and “not in our power (uncontrollable).” He says that the former refers to things such as opinion, movement towards a thing, desire, and aversion; and the latter to things such as the body, property, reputation, and offices.

Kiyozawa discusses these words of Epictetus in his *December Fan Diary* as follows:

There are two categories, the controllable and the uncontrollable. The controllable means things, such as opinion, movement towards a thing, desire, and aversion. The uncontrollable means things, such as the body, inheritance, fame, and social ranks. The former belongs to what I can do. The latter does not belong to it.

Concerning the controllable, I am free; I am not restrained or hindered by others. Concerning the uncontrollable, I am powerless and slavish; I am within the hands of others. When I confuse these two categories, I will meet obstacles and experience grief and agony. I will blame others and curse gods.

When I clearly understand the distinctions between the two, I will not be restrained. I will not receive obstructions. I will not blame others, nor curse gods. Others will not hurt me, nor do I hurt them. I will not have enemies in this world.

(*Kiyozawa Manshi Zenshu*, vol. 8, p. 356. Trans. by N. Haneda)

Epictetus taught Kiyozawa the importance of clearly seeing the difference between the two categories, the controllable and the uncontrollable. He taught him the importance of knowing the “limits” of human existence. He also taught that if people confused the two categories, they had to suffer; and that if they do not confuse the two, they will have a peaceful life.

When Kiyozawa encountered this teaching of Epictetus, he was experiencing a tremendous amount of distress and frustration. This teaching taught Kiyozawa the uselessness of attempting to control the uncontrollable; he clearly understood the limits of his abilities and accepted the uncontrollable as uncontrollable. Thus, he was able to establish peace in his life.

#### B. Freedom of will (or opinion, or interpretation)

In the above two categories, the controllable and the uncontrollable, Kiyozawa, like Epictetus, considered “opinion” the most important. “Opinion” means free will (or freedom of interpretation). Kiyozawa quotes the following words of Epictetus in his *December Fan Diary*. This is his first quote from the *Discourses*. In this passage Epictetus talks about “free will” or “opinion.”

You have a *free will* by nature from hindrance and compulsion. But, you object, “If you place before me the *fear of death*, you do compel me.” No, it is not what is placed before you that compels, but your *opinion* that it is better to do so-and-so than to die. In this matter, then, it is your opinion that compelled you: that is, *will compelled will*.

(*Kiyozawa Manshi Zenshu*, vol. 8, pp. 350-351. Emphasis is Kiyozawa’s.)

Since this English translation of the Greek text is not well done, it is not easy to understand what Epictetus meant. Here the Greek philosopher says that one’s opinion (free will—freedom of interpretation) is the most important thing in human life. He says that external things, such as intimidation by the threat of death, are not the ultimate conditions that determine human actions; it is one’s opinion, or free will, that determines them. Immediately after the above quote, Kiyozawa quotes the following words of Epictetus:

But the tyrant will chain—what? the leg. He will take away—what? the neck. What then will he not chain and not take away? the will. This is why the ancients taught the maxim, *Know thyself*.

(Emphasis is Kiyozawa's.)

Epictetus says that the tyrant can chain our legs and take away our heads. But there is one thing that he cannot take away. That is our wills. The tyrant can bind, restrain, and control our bodies, but he cannot control our minds. Even if our bodies are restrained, our minds, our wills, are free. Epictetus talks about the freedom of our minds or wills—freedom of interpretation. He says that although we cannot do anything to the uncontrollable, such as the bodies (i.e., birth, sickness, and death), and externally imposed conditions, we have freedom of interpretation and we can freely reinterpret the meaning of the uncontrollable.

By underscoring the words “Know thyself,” Kiyozawa seems to indicate that the true self that we must discover is the self that has free will—the self that freely discovers new meaning in all things. He believes that we can freely discover new meaning in all things without being restrained by the fixed and standard meanings that people assign to them. Things themselves do not have any inherent meanings as positive or negative; it is our minds that determine their meaning. Having discovered the true self, free will, as the basis of his being, Kiyozawa could live his life in contentment and freedom.

### C. How we view ourselves determines whether we suffer or not

Another important teaching that Kiyozawa received from Epictetus was that how we view ourselves determines whether we suffer or not. Although we generally blame others for difficulties, Epictetus teaches us that it is not others who torture us but how we view ourselves that engenders our self-torment. He teaches that how we view ourselves determines whether we suffer or not. As an illustration of this idea, Epictetus says,

For remember this general truth, that it is we who squeeze ourselves, who put ourselves in straits; that is, our opinions squeeze us and put us in straits. For what is it to be reviled? Stand by a stone and revile it; and what will you gain? If then a man *listens like a stone*, what profit is there to the reviler?

(*Kiyozawa Manshi Zenshu*, vol. 8, p. 353. Emphasis is

Kiyozawa's.)

Here Epictetus talks about reviling. If we view ourselves as important, then we are offended by a reviler and suffer. But if we view ourselves as useless as a stone, then a reviler does not offend us and we do not suffer. Our “opinion” of ourselves (or how we see ourselves) makes a tremendous difference when others revile us.

Kiyozawa talks about this teaching of Epictetus in his own words as follows,

In a sense, the person who has entered the gate of religion greatly despises himself and greatly slights himself. To use a stronger expression, the person who has entered the gate of religion sees “zero” value in himself. Far from slighting or respecting the self, he does not recognize any value in the self. Generally speaking, our anguish and grief exist because of our sense of self-importance. *If we have already lost our sense of self-importance, we do not feel anguish and grief*. If we have already lost it, we do not mind whether others despise or honor us, or whether they slight or respect us. We can do all things calmly, leaving others to respect or despise us as they like.

(*Kiyozawa Manshi Zenshu*, vol. 6, pp. 125-126. Emphasis is Kiyozawa's. Trans. by N.

Haneda)

Here Kiyozawa says that if a person sees “zero” value in himself, if he has already lost his sense of self-importance, he does not feel anguish and grief. If he has already lost this, he does not mind whether others despise or honor him, or whether they slight or respect him.

If a person identifies himself as a stone, both despising and honoring have no effect on him. But if a person considers his self overly important, he is susceptible to the contempt of others and suffers from it. This explains the rationale underlying Kiyozawa's identification of himself as “a fan in December”—a totally good-for-nothing thing. When he saw himself as totally useless and unimportant, all the reviling and criticism of him by the conservative members of the Shin sect and by his temple members ceased to have any impact on him.

Epictetus enabled Kiyozawa to experience liberation from difficulties—the difficulties that were caused by a wrong view of the self. The words of Epictetus and Kiyozawa that we have just studied teach us how we should view ourselves. If we can learn to share their view of the self, we will be liberated from all the difficulties that come from the overestimation of the self. This, I believe, is one of the answers to the question of “What

am I?” that Kiyozawa learned from Epictetus. Whether we are liberated from difficulties or not depends on how we come to view ourselves.

#### IV. Conclusion

Kiyozawa considered Buddhism a teaching of self-examination. He devoted his entire life to asking, “What am I?” For him the teachers who gave an answer to this question were all his teachers regardless of their religious, denominational, or sectarian affiliations. He regarded Epictetus as one of the most important teachers in his life. He particularly honored the philosopher’s teaching of free will—freedom of interpretation.

In Buddhism we can find the same teaching Kiyozawa found in Epictetus. We can say that the following two Buddhist teachings have much in common with the thought of Epictetus.

The first is the Buddhist teaching called Mind-Only, which teaches us that things do not have any inherent meanings and that the mind determines the meaning of all things that exist in the world. The second is the Shin Buddhist teaching of Amida Buddha, a personal symbol of the Buddha’s wisdom. The original Sanskrit term for Amida is *amitabha* (limitless light). Limitless light is a symbol of limitless wisdom, or the Buddha’s wisdom. The Buddha’s wisdom means “the wisdom that transforms the negative into the positive.” Shin Buddhism teaches us that if we receive the Buddha’s wisdom, we discover meaning not only in positive things (such as health, life, wealth, and happiness) but also in negative things (such as sickness, death, poverty, and hardship). Things do not have inherent meanings. Amida, the Buddha’s wisdom, makes us freely discover new “positive” meaning in all things.

Thus we can say that all these teachings—Epictetus’s “free will,” Kiyozawa’s “spirit-centeredness,” the Mind-Only teaching, and the Shin concept of Amida (that symbolizes the wisdom that transforms the negative into the positive)—refer to the same teaching.

An awakening experience can be compared to a fruit’s falling down from a branch of a tree. When Kiyozawa met Epictetus, he was a mature fruit on a branch and was about to fall down. The only thing needed was a shaking of the branch. Then, a bird happened to perch on the branch. It shook the branch and the fruit fell from the tree down. The bird was Epictetus.

## Perfect Wisdom Is Our Ideal

Manshi Kiyozawa

Last month when I visited Kyoto, I happened to meet an old Buddhist monk at someone’s house. He said, “The resident ministers of major temples do not need academic learning. They do not have to chant sutras. They do not have to give sermons, either. If they just quietly chant the *nembutsu*, that’s good enough.” If I tell you just this, you, young people, may immediately think, “What an unreasonable old monk he is to say that Buddhist ministers do not have to give sermons and do not need academic learning!”

Until about ten years ago sentiments like this very much disturbed me and I attributed Buddhism’s decline in Japan to just such lax behavior. But, when I listen to the same kind of words nowadays, I am neither surprised nor perturbed. In fact I find myself rather agreeing with them. “Yesterday’s right could be today’s wrong. Yesterday’s wrong could be today’s right.” What we thought good last year could turn out to be bad this year and what we thought bad last year could turn out to be good this year. Isn’t that the reality of our mind? When I listened to the old monk’s words, I thought it quite interesting that my ideas go through such a transformation.

When I was a small boy, I really hated carrots. I did not eat other foods if I knew that they were boiled with carrots. But as I grew up, I was told that carrots were good for my body. I started to eat other foods that were boiled with carrots, although I still did not eat carrots. Now I do not dislike carrots; I rather love them. From this, too, I learn that human tastes are not fixed, but constantly go through transformation.

When I was young, I felt that composing *waka* poems (consisting of 31 syllables) or *haiku* poems (consisting of 17 syllables) was a degenerate hobby. Whenever I saw people enjoying composing those poems, I felt that they were doing something meaningless. But as I have become more informed about *waka* poems, I understand why they are so intriguing. I now realize that they are nothing to be despised. Furthermore, as I learned from my friends how to judge the merit of *haiku* poems, I have come to think that *haiku*

poems are quite amusing. A person told me, “*Haiku* enables us to see beauty in all things in the world and human life. For example, we can purify a dirty thing like horse manure by incorporating it into a *haiku* poem. We could hang a scroll of the poem in an alcove in the house of a dignitary.” As an illustration he gave me the following two *haiku* poems composed by Buson (1716–83, a famous Japanese *haiku* poet):

- |                   |                        |
|-------------------|------------------------|
| (1) A man         | (2) A blossoming iris. |
| Excreting         | Splash!                |
| In a dreary field | A kite excretes.       |

When I heard his explanation, I started to think there is nothing wrong with a person getting interested in *haiku* poems. I am by nature not interested in the fine arts and music. But as things change, I may become interested in them in my old age. I actually used to think that stage plays and *yoruri* plays were something like “snakes and scorpions.” Although I do not exactly love them now, I have at least come to think that there is nothing bad about them. It seems to me that our ideas about good and evil and our artistic tastes about beauty and ugliness change year after year, month after month, day after day, moment after moment. Thus, I feel that the older I get, the fewer evil, ugly, detestable, and unpleasant things I perceive.

If I think carefully, we can say the following. *It is because we lack wisdom that we are able to talk about evil, ugliness, detestable, and unpleasant things. That is, if we do not understand things clearly, we think that some things are evil and we feel that some things are ugly.* I do not enjoy viewing paintings today, because I do not understand the charms of paintings. I do not enjoy listening to music, because I do not understand the charms of music. That is, if we do not have real knowledge about something, we cannot love and appreciate that thing. Thus it is correct to say that a person who hates and detests many things has shallow wisdom. Seen this way, we could say this. The person who says, “That is evil. This is ugly. I hate that. I detest this,” is demonstrating that he still lacks wisdom and is manifesting immature thinking.

The Tathagata that we entrust does not hate or detest even one thing in this world. Seen from the Tathagata’s eye, there is no evil and no ugliness. He likes good persons. He loves evil persons. He calls wise persons. He invites foolish persons. Thus we revere him as “a parent who embodies Limitless Great Compassion.” This Limitless Great Compassion did not simply arise from the Tathagata; it arose from Limitless Wisdom. If one sees things from a shallow perspective, one thinks that things possess beauty and ugliness, or that they are good and evil. But if one sees things with the sharp eye of wisdom and gains deep insight into the reality of this world, one thinks that all things in this world are lovable and dear. It was from this wisdom that the Tathagata we entrust generated the Primal Vow (Hongan), the Great Compassion, in which he sees all sentient beings as equal without any discrimination. “His wisdom is perfect and it is like a huge ocean”—this is the expression Shinran uses to praise the Tathagata. *We consider the Tathagata our ideal, who is perfect wisdom like a huge ocean.*

While we are young, we tend to have occasional conflicts with people. This is because we do not appreciate this perfect wisdom. If we attain this perfect wisdom, we can actually reach the spiritual realm of oneness and harmony where we do not become entangled in antagonism and conflict. There is something called “a please-all policy” in this world. [Although this policy usually means something negative,] if this policy means the motto of one who does not have fights or conflicts with anyone in this world, and who loves all people, I think it is a really wonderful thing. We could say that we who view as an ideal the Tathagata who is perfect wisdom are advocates of “a genuine please-all policy.”

(Kiyozawa Manshi *Zenshu*, vol. 6, pp. 45-47. Trans. by N. Haneda)

## Distant Beauty and Near Ugliness

Manshi Kiyozawa

Any traveler on the Tokaido Highway admires the beauty of Mt. Fuji. Its shape rises brilliantly toward the sky like a white upside-down fan. The clouds around its distant hazy

peak appear like white robed goddesses playing gracefully. But such beauty exists only when we look at the mountain from a distant place. If we climb up the mountain, we are all surprised because the mountain is not beautiful. The only things we see there are things like lava rocks and iron refuse. Thus, although the mountain looks beautiful when seen from a great distance, it seems ugly when we approach it and see it clearly. I call this “distant beauty and near ugliness.”

Mt. Fuji is not the only thing to which the idea of “distant beauty and near ugliness” applies. We can find this phenomenon in all aspects of our lives. Things such as oil paintings are quite beautiful when seen from some distance. The painted people, mountains, rivers, flowers, and birds look as if they were alive. But when we get close, we just see paint thickly covering a canvas. We can no longer see the beauty that we saw earlier. This is another example of “distant beauty and near ugliness.”

When we live in a country town, Tokyo looks like a really beautiful place. Particularly when we hear about the Ginza Area in Tokyo, we imagine that it is a town adorned with gold, silver, and the seven jewels. But when we actually visit the place, it is not so beautiful. No matter how long we may search the Ginza streets, we cannot find any gold, any silver, or the seven jewels. Instead we see dirty things such as trash and garbage. Anyone who comes from a country town is surprised to see this. This is another example of “distant beauty and near ugliness.”

We can say the same thing about the city of Nara. Before we visit Nara, we think it is an extremely beautiful ancient capital. Since we have heard a *haiku* poem, “Nara has the seven story pagodas, seven Buddhist monasteries, and double cherry blossoms,” we think that a cloud of beautiful flowers surround the halls that are adorned with shining gold and jewels. We think that the beauty of the place is beyond description. But when we visit Nara, it is not as beautiful as we have expected. All we see there are a lot of old halls and Buddhist statues. This is another example of “distant beauty and near ugliness.”

Further, in the human world we can see many examples of “distant beauty and near ugliness.” Before we meet so-called famous people, when we hear about their good reputation from a distance and read about their ideas and opinions in newspapers, journals, or their writings, we think that they are extremely great individuals. But when we actually meet them, we discover that their ideas and opinions are not so great and that their characters and personalities are not so outstanding. Because of this, it sometimes happens that we get discouraged in our learning.

We can say the same thing about schools. When we live in a country town and learn about the reputation of a school in Tokyo in a newspaper or journal, we think that the school is very wonderful. When we receive admission materials from the school and read them, we think that the facilities, curriculum, and lecturers of the school are perfect. But when we actually go to Tokyo and enter the school, we discover that its facilities are not perfect at all, its curriculum is not adequate, and its lecturers are not so excellent. We may feel that the school is worse than some nameless schools in country towns. Many students who have come to Tokyo for the first time from provincial places have had this feeling.

Thus the fact of “distant beauty and near ugliness” can be seen everywhere in this world. Since it is a common experience, people generally do not consider it a serious matter. But if we think carefully, we realize that it is an extremely serious matter. *“Distant beauty and near ugliness” is one of the main things that lead human beings astray.* Because of it many students in Tokyo fail in their academic endeavors. Tokyo has many schools whose academic level is about the same and many similar types of schools. Some students first enter one of those schools. Before they enter it, it has looked like a perfect place to study. But after having entered it, they discover that it is quite imperfect. They get frustrated. When they look at other schools, they look much better than their own. Thus they quit that school and enter another school. Then, although the school that they have just entered looked great before they entered it, they find it unsatisfactory. Since other schools look better again, they desire to be transferred to another school. This way, they keep moving from one school to another. In the process they waste time and money. Their minds having been distracted, they eventually lag behind in their learning and in extreme cases lose interest. Many students have become academic failures, having achieved nothing. It is precisely because of “distant beauty and near ugliness” that they are led astray.

Also in the field of business people often experience the same thing. A person considers other people’s jobs interesting and his own job uninteresting. It is not only others people’s jobs but also future projects which he intends to do that look quite interesting. He cannot consider his present job interesting. Thus he quits his job and takes up another one. But once he takes up a new job, the job again becomes uninteresting.

Then he takes up another job. Since it is not interesting, another job is taken up. This way he constantly changes his job and wastes his entire life. We often witness this type of thing. This is another example of how a person is led astray because of “distant beauty and near ugliness.”

Hence, “distant beauty and near ugliness” makes our minds distracted; it makes us fail to concentrate on one thing. Consequently we cannot succeed in any of our endeavors. Further, since it always makes us feel discontented with our present selves, it constantly gives rise to complaints. Since it always makes us think that some other people are superior to us, it constantly gives rise to envy. Thus our minds are distracted and tortured by it. It makes us unable to be settled in the contented state of mind. We must be careful not to be led astray by the delusion of “distant beauty and near ugliness.” In order not to be led astray, we must first clearly understand the cause of the delusion.

*We always entertain the view that beauty and ugliness are inherent attributes of things that exist outside ourselves.* This view is the basic cause of our being led astray by “distant beauty and near ugliness.” We must revise this view. *In actuality, things themselves do not have inherent attributes such as beauty and ugliness.* The thing that we think beautiful does not have beauty in itself. The thing that we think ugly does not have ugliness in itself. Things themselves are far separated from distinctions such as beauty and ugliness. If beauty and ugliness are inherent attributes of external things, then many people must share the same opinion of the beauty or ugliness of an external thing. Any given person must always maintain the same ideas about the beauty or ugliness of a thing. That, however, is not the case. Concerning the same thing, people do not necessarily share the same view of the beauty or ugliness. One person will say that Japanese paintings are beautiful but Western paintings are not. Another person will say that Western paintings are beautiful but Japanese paintings are not. Yet another person will say that both Japanese and Western paintings are beautiful. Yet another person will say that neither is beautiful. Further, in loving the same object of beauty, people differ in the depth and manner of appreciating it.

Talking about individuals’ tastes, too, a person who initially considered only cherry blossoms and peony flowers beautiful and violet and *gogyo* flowers not beautiful may later come to consider violet and *gogyo* flowers beautiful. Further, a person who has never paid any attention to the moss at the corner of his garden may start to appreciate the beauty even in the moss. Eventually he may recognize as beautiful the very things that are usually seen as ugly.

Thus, if we understand the fact that different people have different ideas concerning the beauty and ugliness of the same thing and that there is a gradual transformation in the taste of each individual, it is clear that beauty and ugliness are not inherent attributes of things. If beauty and ugliness do not exist in things themselves, where do they exist? If we examine their origin, *they exist entirely in our individual minds.* If our mind is beautiful, then we feel that external things are also beautiful. If our mind is ugly, then we feel that external things are also ugly. Not only beauty and ugliness but also good and evil, and truth and falsehood, are not inherent attributes of external things at all. They are distinctions that exist in our minds. But, if we forget this fact and believe that attributes such as beauty and ugliness actually exist in external things and try to accept or reject external things, it must be said that we have a totally wrong view. What we should reject is not the external thing that we consider ugly; it is our own mind that sees ugliness in the external thing. What we should accept is not the external thing that we consider beautiful; it is our own mind that sees beauty in the external thing. *Accepting and rejecting should not be directed at the things outside us; they should be directed at our own minds. We must take the beauty in our minds and reject the ugliness in our own minds. Deepening our minds this way, we must fill our minds with perfect beauty. Beauty is not the only issue here. We must fill our minds with true good and perfect truth.*

If we clearly understand that distinctions such as beauty and ugliness exist only in our own minds, we will never be led astray by “distant beauty and near ugliness.” Consequently we will be able to always settle in the contented state of mind without feelings of envy and complaint, and without suffering and struggling.

*(Kiyozawa Manshi Zenshu, vol. 6, pp. 37-41. Trans. by N. Haneda)*

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## Notes:

We will hold the 2015 Maida Center summer retreat July 24 (Fri.)–26 (Sun.) at the Jodo Shinshu Center. We held this year’s summer retreat July 25–27 at the Jodo Shinshu



Center in Berkeley. Thirty-nine people attended it. We held our Japanese Dharma seminar Nov. 17-19 at the Maida Center. Nineteen people attended it.

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