

Gregg Krech
Week One, *The Japanese Art of Self-Reflection*
November 2, 2015
“Introducing Naikan”



Hi, I'm Gregg Krech and I'll be conducting our online retreat this month on the theme of the Japanese art of self-reflection, called "Naikan." I will introduce to you a practice that I think is a missing element of practice for many of us. It's something that is very compatible with meditation, with mindfulness practice, even working with the precepts. It has the potential to have a dramatic impact on our relationship with others and a significant effect on our attitude towards life itself. So that practice can open up doors to gratitude, to service, even to faith. It's the practice of self-reflection.

Now, self-reflection is almost universally applauded, but there's only a few methods available that actually provide the structure and the mechanics to make them clear and usable. One of those methods is the fourth step in the twelve-step program where we make a fearless and search moral inventory of ourselves and our lives. A second approach comes from Benjamin Franklin, who developed a personal approach towards his own life that involved daily self-reflection. There's also Saint Ignatius of Loyola, who developed a method called "the examen" that's used in the Christian tradition. I will introduce you to a method called Naikan, which comes from Japan and is grounded in the Pure Land or Shin Buddhist tradition. The timing of our retreat is wonderful, because we're just entering the beginning of the Thanksgiving season and what you might find is that what we'll be covering in these next four weeks in terms of self-reflection and gratitude can enhance your experience during the upcoming holidays. At least, I hope it does.

Naikan is a Japanese word that means something like "looking inside," but I prefer the more poetic translation, which is "seeing oneself with the mind's eye." It was developed by a Japanese Shin Buddhist named Yoshimoto Ishin. He was a very devout Buddhist and his efforts in terms of his own Buddhist practice led him to practice something called *mishirabe*, a very arduous form of meditation that involved meditating without food or water or sleep for many days. As a result of that practice he was able to conclude that some type of personal self-reflection should be part of one's spiritual practice. That's how Naikan was initially developed.



This is how our online retreat is going to work. For the next four weeks, each week I will introduce you to some other theme connected to self-reflection through this video, through our videos on Tricycle’s web page, and then I’ll leave you at the end of the video with an exercise or a practice that you can do in the coming week. I really encourage you to work with the practice during the coming week because the effect-- the influence of self-reflection can really only be understood through the direct practice of it.

Let me start by asking you a very specific question. Can you see yourself? Check yourself out. I can see my legs, I can see my feet, I can see my arms and both sides of my hands. I can see the edges of my shoulder and my stomach, but there’s a point in which my vision just kind of gets blocked as I come up towards my neck. So I can’t really see my upper chest or neck, can’t see my face at all or, really, my head or most of the back of my body. In terms of the external geography of my body there’s a lot still hidden. In terms of the internal landscape—bones and blood vessels and organs—of course, I can’t see anything at all. We have this limitation of what we can see when we try to see ourselves.

Now human beings are very clever, so we invented this technology of reflective glass that we call a mirror. I happen to have a mirror right here. This mirror allows us to see ourselves in away that we wouldn’t be able to do otherwise. I can hold this up and I can now see my face. I actually seem to have more gray in my beard than I did before. Not sure about that. But in any case a mirror is a technology that gives us more opportunity to see ourselves. We’re even more ingenious, because we’ve realized that if we have two mirrors sometimes you can even expand what you can see. Like, when you go to a hair stylist or a barber and they give you one of these hand mirrors and they have a mirror behind you and you hold it up and you can see how the stylist has cut your hair on the back of your head.

But the limitation of a mirror is that we can only see ourselves in the present moment. I can hold this mirror up, I can see myself right now, but I can’t really see myself in terms of what I looked like when I got up this morning or when I walked my dog yesterday. We invented a more



advanced technology: photography. Photos allow us to go back in time. I can see photos of being at the Coliseum in Rome with my daughter this past summer or photos of playing with my dog outside in the yard. I can even look at a photo from my wedding album of 23 years ago. We add a whole dimension of our ability to see ourselves through photography, but the limit of photography is, of course, it's a snapshot. It's a moment in time and it's static.

We move forward now to another technology, which is film or video. You're watching me on video right now. The advantage of film or video is that we see ourselves dynamically. We now can see ourselves interacting with our environment, interacting with other people. It gives us a much better understanding of how we're actually living when we see ourselves in film or on video.

Naikan is also a kind of technology. It allows us to see ourselves in ways that we wouldn't normally. As we do Naikan reflection, we're able to use this technology to see ourselves—for instance, the way that other people might see us. Instead of seeing ourselves from just our own self-centered perspective, we can see ourselves from the perspective of others. You know, there's a great film that I really love that came out in 1991 called *Defending Your Life* with Meryl Streep and Albert Brooks. In that film, Albert Brooks dies instantly in a car accident right in the beginning of the film, and he ends up in this transitional place, a place where he's going to be for a while until it's decided where he's going to go from there. He has an opportunity to watch little film clips of his life from when he was alive.

If you're watching a film clip of something where you acted kindly or generously to somebody or maybe very courageously—like you ran into a burning house and rescued a little puppy—then it can be a very pleasant experience. But in the film Albert Brooks has to watch a lot of clips where he acted selfishly or even mean or in a cowardly kind of way. So it upsets him, it bothers him. He doesn't really like the idea that he has to see these clips from his life. But, actually, the clips are simply a fairly accurate representation of these segments of his life. It's kind of the karmic residue of the life that he left behind before he died.



We're going to move forward and study this self-reflection with this technology called Naikan. It involves three simple questions, which I will introduce you to today. In the years that I've been working with Naikan, I've come to see it as kind of a research project. It's a research project where you study your life. You start, like many research projects, with data collection. So, these three questions will help you collect and organize your data, so that at some point you can analyze it and decide whether there's some conclusions that you might be able to draw.

There's one thing that you're probably going to need to sacrifice in order for this process to be really meaningful to you, something that you will have to give up. I'll tell you what that is: It's your story. Most of us have a story, or several stories, that we've been carrying around for a long time. In order to make this a meaningful process, you're going to have to recognize that story, and you will have to open up to that story being modified in some way. So, that story might have to do with your first marriage; that story might have to do with your childhood; it may even be a story just how hard your life is or how unfair your life is. I'm not suggesting that there isn't any truth to those stories. There probably is some truth to those stories. What I am suggesting is that they're not complete. Naikan gives you an opportunity to, essentially, create a story that's more complete and more accurate, reflecting on what actually happened in your life. If you're willing to let go of that story, or set it aside temporarily, you may find out that you'll come out with a very different story, or maybe not. We'll see.

Let's start with the first question in Naikan. The three questions, by the way, are: “1) What have I received from this other person that I'm reflecting on? 2) What have I given? 3) What troubles and difficulties have I caused?” So those are the three core questions of Naikan.

Let's look at the first question: “What did I receive from this other person?”

The simplest form of Naikan is called “daily Naikan,” where we just reflect on the past 24 hours of our life and our relationship to the world, to everything around us: people, objects, even forms



of energy. For example, if I'm looking for something I received, I could say, "I received the use of my car in order to drive to the supermarket yesterday." A car, of course, is an object, but there was gas and oil in that car that helped to make it run; there were forms of energy involved in it; and my older daughter actually put gas in the car a few days before so there was even a person involved. Just in looking at that one item, it turns out that there's an object, there's a person, and there's forms of energy. If I'm doing Naikan as a reflection on a person and I'm looking at what I received, I'm really looking at that one-on-one relationship.

Let's say I'm doing Naikan on my wife and I was saying, "Well, what did I receive from my wife in the past 24 hours?" Let me think. She made me some fresh orange juice this morning in our juicer and she washed my clothes so I'd have clean socks to wear. She gave me a shoulder massage when I came home from the gym the other day—so those are just a few of the things that I can remember that I received from her. When we look at this first question—"What have I received?"—we're looking for anything in which we've had some type of benefit from a service or an effort that somebody else provided.

It can even be a small thing. For example, it could even be as simple as somebody held a door open for me at a restaurant when I was coming in. That's something I might put on my list. Many of our encounters with the world are encounters that also involve our emotions. In other words, we have an interaction with someone, but there's also something emotional going on at the time. We're angry, we're tired, we're bored, we're frustrated. One of the curious things about Naikan is that it asks us to set aside what I call the emotional colorings of those interactions, so that, for the moment at least, we're looking objectively at the facts of the situation. For example, let's say that you have a conflict with your roommate the night before and there's an argument and some tension; the next morning there's still some tension in the air, but your roommate makes a pot of coffee and gives you a cup of coffee to drink.

We're only looking at the fact that you received a cup of coffee from your roommate. We're not looking at issues of motivation or any of the other feelings that might be going on, resentment or



leftover anger. We're really just saying, "What I received from my roommate was a cup of hot coffee." Through the first question in Naikan, we become aware of how we're cared for and loved and supported from a time even prior to our birth. As we reflect on our past, what we find is that our attention to the present actually starts to shift. In other words, as we're looking at our past for how we've been supported, we actually start doing that more and more in the present moment of our life. As I'm sitting here, I'm more aware of receiving the support of this chair or the camera that is taking the video or the lighting from the sun, the heat that's in this house, since it's chilly out today—those are all things that are supporting me and that I can become aware of.

There's no direct charge in Naikan that we feel grateful, right? Gratitude is actually a by-product of our awareness. So, we don't try to make ourselves grateful. It's more like gratitude itself is a gift.

Most of us have trained our minds to notice problems. Ironically, we may be better at noticing things that don't exist than we are at noticing things that do exist. For example, when I'm anxious or worried about something that hasn't happened yet but might happen in the future, that doesn't actually exist yet, my attention is on that and, instead of on what I'm receiving right now: the air that I'm breathing, the use of my eyeglasses so that I can see more clearly. Those are things that are actually present in my life right now, whereas my anxieties and worries about the future haven't happened yet and actually may never happen. The way we use our attention in Naikan helps us to kind of strengthen this practice and, ultimately, cultivate a more authentic sense of gratitude and appreciation for our lives and for things around us.

Naikan really is simple, in a sense: It points us towards the grounded reality of how we're living. And, on the other hand, there's something that's mysterious about Naikan that seems to kind of transcend our traditional, Western, logical minds. So, the first question we're looking at "What have I received from this other person or from others?" just the specifics of how we're supported and cared for very concretely.



Let's look at the second question: “What did I give to others?” In that question I'm just flipping the positions around. I'm looking at what I did for the world. What I gave to the world. The key to answering this question—and the first as well—is specific, concrete detail. We want to avoid generalities and abstract concepts like “I was supportive,” or “I was very generous,” or “I was very loving.” If you find yourself thinking, “Oh, I was really very supportive,” then you should try to go further and say, “Well, how was I supportive?” What did you actually do that was supportive? Maybe you stayed on the phone until two in the morning with your friend, because she was so upset, because she broke up with her boyfriend. That's what you would actually capture in a film clip, whereas the idea of being supportive is just a concept. We're trying to work with details, with concrete realities of your life, in the first and second questions.

Let's look at the third question. If Naikan was a popularity contest, the third question—addressing how we've caused trouble and difficulty to others—would probably come in last place. People think, “Why do I want to think of how I caused trouble? That's depressing,” or, “That makes me feel bad.” You may struggle even with that question just to find anything. Someone might say, “Well, the only thing I can think of is I drove to the store yesterday, so, I guess I polluted the air, but that's about the only trouble I can think of.”

But the third question is more like the prince who only appears to be a frog. It has incredible potential to kind of put ourselves in the shoes of the other person: What is it like for them? What is their experience? That's the question we're really asking when we're looking at the third question. It helps us understand what it's like for the other person to deal with us. For instance, as I go through my normal day, I'm very aware of what it's like for me to deal with my wife; I'm aware of the things that she does and doesn't do that agitate me or perturb me; I'm aware of what it's like to deal with my daughters or my colleagues.

But when I do the third question it turns my mind upside down: What is it like for my wife to deal with me? What is it like for my daughter to have me as a father? What is it like for my colleagues to deal with me with my lack of responsiveness or inattention to emails that they're



sending me. As I turn that around, I'm starting to see what my life is like not from my own perspective, but from the perspective of others. When we do Naikan, we, maybe for the first time, begin to see what it is like for other people and how they see us. That can be very different from how we see ourselves.

The third question's really important. It has an adventurous spirit, and I'd encourage you not to avoid it just because it feels uncomfortable. Yoshimoto, the founder of Naikan, actually considered this question very important. Even though he placed it third in line, he placed it first in *time*, because he suggested that we spend fifty to sixty percent of our reflective time exclusively on the third question. It's an important question to give attention to.

Pema Chodron, a well-known Buddhist teacher, said, “It's painful to face how we harm others and it takes a while, yet it's a journey that happens because of our commitment to gentleness and to honesty, our commitment to staying awake and to being mindful.” As hard as it is to look at this third question of how we cause suffering and how we cause problems, it's extremely important.

Let me give you your assignment for the coming week: do daily Naikan on a 24-hour period of time, the previous 24 hours. Some evening—many people like to do this in the evening before they go to bed, but you can do it early in the morning or any time—look at the prior 24-hour period and ask these three questions: What did I receive during that time? What did I give during that time? What troubles and difficulties did I cause?

Write your answers down. You should end up with three lists, one list for each of the three questions. In general, the process should take about, 25 to 30 minutes to look back on the previous day. If you can do this three days in a row that would be wonderful. If you can do more, that's even better. But at least do it one time during the week so you have the experience of looking at one day of your life using this structure of self-reflection that we call Naikan.

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Until next week, I hope you have a wonderful week. Thank you for coming.