



Greetings, and welcome to the third week of our online retreat on Naikan, the Japanese art of self-reflection.

This week we’re going to talk about the theme of softening your heart. Last week we talked about gratitude, and I’ve been covering the three questions in Naikan over the previous two weeks, the questions which make up the core structure of the Naikan method of self-reflection, and I’ve given you some exercises. One exercise was to do daily Naikan reflection on the day, and the other was to do Naikan on an individual. At the end of our segment today I’ll give you another exercise.

As we age, there’s many facets of our body that become soft; our bellies, our breasts, our buttocks. They tend to soften and sag. Some of us try to resist this process or at least to slow it down, and some of us are basically willing to accept our newfound sponginess. But there’s one part of our body that tends to vacillate back and forth between softness and hardness, and that is our heart.

Most of us would love to have a soft heart, but the reality is that at times we have a hard heart, a hardened heart. We harden our hearts when we’re angry. We harden our hearts when we’re judging someone else from a position of superiority or arrogance or self-righteousness. We harden our hearts when we step into a rigid inflexible position about something. In contrast, soft heartedness is a heart that is open, flexible, compassionate. It’s a heart that tries to put itself in the other person’s shoes.

It’s easy to see the hardened heart of another person but it’s hard to see our own hardened heart, and that’s because a hard heart has no ability to observe its own hardness. In Japanese, the word for softheartedness is *nyunon* or *nyunon shin*. It’s said that when Dogen came back from years of studying Zen in China that he was asked by someone what he learned during all those years, and he said, “Oh, nothing much, just a little bit about softheartedness, *nyunon shin*.”



According to the Zen scholar, D. T. Suzuki, softheartedness is tender-mindedness and means gentleness of spirit. Generally we're too egotistic, too full of hard resisting spirit. We're individualistic and unable to accept things as they are or accept things as they come to us. Many people struggle in their relationships with others—with their spouses, with parents, children, colleagues—because they have a hard heart. So how do we soften a hard heart?

First we start with introspection. We have to be able to look directly into our heart and see the hardness of it. But we don't want to do this. We want to look into the hardened heart of the other person, so we ask questions in our mind. “Why can't this person be more understanding? Why can't they be more sensitive to my own suffering? Why do they have to be so selfish instead of kind to me?”

You see how those questions are a distraction from our own work, which is the examination of ourselves and our own conduct towards others. The questions that are more helpful to us are questions of how we can be more understanding to the other person, more sensitive to the other person's suffering. What are the examples of my own selfishness and ego centeredness in my behavior towards the other person? These are questions that come from a Naikan perspective.

We've looked at these three questions in Naikan, if you remember what they were. The first question is: What have I received from the other person? This question reminds us of the support and the care that they've given to us sometimes over a long period of time, but when our heart is hardened we forget about all the things that we've received from them. We forget about all the ways they've helped us or all the care that we've received because we're so focused on a particular incident that we're very angry about.

The second question—what have I given to others—is a question that allows us to look at what we've given to the other person and to compare that with what they've given us. And when we're angry we often see ourselves as the person who's given so much and the other person has



given little or nothing, but that’s generally not true. In some cases the person has actually given us more than we’ve given to them, but in many other cases we simply aren’t giving credit to them for what they have actually given to us. And so if we’re able to ask these two questions we begin to see that we have received something from this other person, and it begins, again, to soften our heart just a bit.

The third question is where we look at the trouble and difficulties that we’ve caused the other person. If we’re honest, we see the specific ways in which we’ve acted out of self-centeredness or greed or anger or ego-centeredness, not just towards this one individual but towards other people in our lives. This is a humbling encounter with our own karma, and it may be very painful because it goes right up against the self-image that we have of ourselves as a wonderful, kind and loving person. Instead, we now have to see a more realistic image of ourselves as others basically experience us. My wife wrote a wonderful haiku about this that I’d like to share with you. She says:

We do not notice
the wake we leave behind if
we don’t look back.

The process of self-reflection and using these questions when we have a hardened heart is a very difficult one. It’s difficult to have a hard heart and it’s difficult to be humbled by looking at the selfishness in our own life. We can no longer see the other person from a position of arrogance or superiority. Instead, we recognize our own weaknesses, our own mistakes, and it’s easier for us to empathize with the other person.

I’ve been introducing several maxims to you during this retreat. I love maxims because they’re just these short phrases that I think point us towards the essential wisdom of these teachings. I’d like to introduce another maxim to you now, and it is this: We find compassion for others in our own transgressions. We find compassion for others in our own transgressions.



Let me give you an example. Let's say someone has lied to you and maybe you've had this experience with your children, or maybe you've had this experience in work or in a business environment. When somebody lies to you and you find out, often we get very angry, very upset. We feel betrayed. We think: How could this person have lied to me? How could they have deceived me like this? But if we begin to reflect on ourselves we may find that there were times in our life when we actually lied. Maybe there was a situation where we had a brief relationship outside of our marriage and we deceived our partner. Maybe it's a situation where the clerk at the store gave us change for a \$20 bill but we had only given them a \$10 bill and we didn't say anything. Or maybe we just lied in a small way by a year or two about our son or daughter's age so that we can get them into an event at a lower price. There are so many ways that we fail to tell the truth.

When we reflect on ourselves, in this case on lying, which is one of the Buddhist precepts, what we may find is that we aren't free from the violation of that precept: we ourselves have lied. We may find that as a result of that, our hearts can soften to this other person. I'm not suggesting that we condone the other person's behavior, but that by reflecting on ourselves we may be able to have more compassion for them. It simply means that we don't come from a place of self-righteousness. We see in ourselves the same kind of self-centeredness in our thoughts and in our actions that the other person's manifesting in their behavior at this point in time.

The third question really holds the key to understanding and empathy. It gives us the opportunity to put ourselves in the other person's shoes to see what is it like for them. What is their experience, particularly their experience in trying to deal with me? It's an opportunity to awaken to the heart of the other person.

Generally there are two reasons that we don't understand another person, and one reason is that we're so caught up in our own perspective that we don't consider things from their perspective. A second reason is that we're so close to the other person that we begin to assume that they are



us, and we begin to assume that their perspective and their likes and dislikes are or should be the same as ours. When we have this experience, we can't really understand the other person. There's a gap that we have to relinquish in terms of our own perspective in order to connect with the other person and really understand them.

There's a Buddhist scholar and teacher, Shigaraki, who has a wonderful description of this kind of intimate connection that he writes about between a person and a flower in his book *A Life of Awakening*, and I want to read that to you. He says:

“When we deeply look into the thing the eye that looks becomes the thing that is seen. As we see the tulip we enter the life of the flower. Becoming one with the life of the tulip we come to know the tulip and to see the tulip. Conversely stated, the life of the tulip reaches our lives and into the deepest parts of our hearts and minds, and there we ourselves come to know that tulip's heart and mind as well as its life and the meaning of its existence, and this way of seeing is called awakening.”

Shigaraki describes this experience as a connection between a person and a flower, but the same type of awakening is essential in intimate connection between two people. I'd like to share with you a very personal example that comes from my own Naikan reflection.

When I was about eight years old, my grandmother was in a nursing home. She had diabetes and ultimately both her legs were amputated, and she didn't live much longer after that. My mother, of course, would want to go visit her regularly in the nursing home when she was there. My mom had two children, my brother and I, and she would bring us along, but I hated going to the nursing home. I hated the smell of it. I didn't like being around old people and sick people, and I had friends I wanted to be with. I wanted to be out with my friends playing basketball and playing baseball.



When she would announce that we’re going to the nursing home, I would have a very strong reaction. I would create havoc. I would pout or sometimes even cry. I would plead with her to go another day or could we at least go later, or at least could she just leave me at home and go without me? I would create all kinds of suffering for her. But at the time I could only see it from my own perspective, which was that I didn’t want to go to the nursing home. I didn’t like it. When I acted this way as a child I had no idea what the experience was like for her.

It wasn’t until 25 years later when I was doing Naikan at a center in Japan that I realized how painful it must’ve been for her to have this experience. From her standpoint, she was already dealing with a mother who was in a nursing home, a mother who was ill and who had a very serious illness, and she was trying to raise two sons and trying to maintain a household, and she was working part time. She wanted to deal with her responsibilities as a mother and at the same time attend to her own mother who was very sick. For the first time, I actually felt like I can understand what that experience must’ve been like for her. I felt a very sharp pain in my heart at that moment. Perhaps it was a sample of the pain that my mother had felt all those times when I created such havoc and difficulty for her when she wanted to visit her own mother.

In order to find this connection with my mother when I was reflecting on her, first I had to see her as somebody who was separate from my self. A mother with a young child in particular, there’s such a connection between the two that it’s sometimes hard to see us as separate human beings with our own karma, our own desires, our own preferences. This can be true of a husband and wife as well. For many years they sleep together, they eat together, they spend every day together, and they begin to think of themselves not as separate people but basically as a couple.

Ironically, once we’re able to see the other person as separate that we can really then move to the next stage of having this connection with them because we begin to see that they don’t necessarily think the same way. They don’t necessarily have the same likes and preferences. Then we have this opportunity for intimate connection that Shigaraki talks about: to be able to set aside our own self-centered perspective and kind of step into their perspective.



This isn't a question of absorbing them into our own viewpoint. It's allowing ourselves to be absorbed into their viewpoint. We enter their world instead of trying to force them to enter our own world.

I'd like to share with you a story of personal and spiritual transformation called “Kaijudo and the Samurai.” This story came to me by a wonderful Buddhist teacher and scholar named Nobuo Haneda. I'll share this story with you and then I'm going to offer some comments about the story.

In 17th century Japan, there was a very powerful samurai general whose name was Masamune. But many years before, before he was so powerful and well known, when he was younger, there was an incident that occurred. It was a cold winter day and he went to visit a friend's house, and he took with him his servant called Kaijudo. When he got to his friend's house he took off his shoes, as is traditional in Japan, and he entered into his friend's house, as Kaijudo, his servant, waited outside for him. Now Kaijudo looked at these shoes, realized it was cold and thought, “I'll keep his shoes warm by putting them under my kimono,” which he did.

When Masamune came out and he put on his shoes he felt the warmth of his shoes, and he thought Kaijudo had been sitting on his shoes. So he got very, very angry and he picked up one of the shoes and he slapped Kaijudo across the face. He slapped him so hard that there was blood gushing from his nose. Now Kaijudo was very upset by this incident. He felt that he had tried to do something nice but he had been mistreated and misunderstood by Masamune. He was angry. He wanted revenge against Masamune. So the next day he left Masamune's place and he took with him one shoe. He took with him the shoe that had been used to hit him across the face. He wanted to have that shoe as a reminder of his anger and his desire for vengeance against Masamune.



Thirty years pass. Now we're in northern Japan. Masamune has become a very powerful samurai general. One day he decides that he wants to have a spiritual mentor, so he asked people around him, "Who would be a good person for a spiritual mentor?" They suggest this Buddhist monk from Kyoto named the Venerable Yoben. Masamune writes to Yoben and he says, "I'd like to request that you be my spiritual mentor," and Yoben agrees.

Yoben shows up at Masamune's castle after a period of time, and when he first meets Masamune he hands him a box and he says, "Here. I have a souvenir for you." And Masamune opens this box, and in this box is this old decrepit shoe. Masamune is confused. He says, "What is this? I don't really understand."

And so, Kaijudo says to Masamune, bowing to him, he bows to "I'm giving you this shoe as a gift. This shoe is a symbol of my gratitude towards you. This shoe allowed me to become a Buddhist monk. This shoe allowed me to study in Kyoto, so I want you to have this shoe as a symbol of my gratitude."

Now Masamune is really confused and he says to Yoben, he says, "I just don't understand. Can you please explain to me what this is all about?"

I want to read to you Yoben's answer because his words are a wonderful indication of the personal transformation that he had. This is what he said to Masamune at that moment. He said:

"Don't you remember me? Thirty years ago my name was Kaijudo. I was your servant at the time. Don't you remember you hit me hard in the face with this shoe? When you hit me I was disgusted and I was angry, and I vowed to get revenge. I thought your action was unreasonable. At that time I decided to avenge what you did to me. I was so disgusted and so angry. I thought I had to get an education first so that I can have vengeance against you, so I left you and I went to Kyoto and I studied, and I was burning with a desire to get revenge on you. I looked at the shoe and it reminded me of the



humiliation that you put me through. That’s how I studied. But in the course of my learning I happened to meet a Buddhist teacher and I started to study Buddhism, and when I studied Buddhism I gradually recognized the foolishness of this idea of vengeance and anger. And now I am a Buddhist monk, and now I truly appreciate my good karma in becoming a Buddhist. So when I reflect upon my past I feel that I owe a lot to you. I’m grateful for all the past karmic conditions I had with you. Because you hit me I felt a strong anger and I started to study and I eventually became a Buddhist monk. So to express my gratitude to you I have today brought you this shoe as a souvenir. This shoe initially was a symbol of my anger, but now it has turned into a symbol of my gratitude. If you had not hit me with this, if I had not gotten angry with you I would not have become a Buddhist monk.”

Masamune was so touched by Yoben’s response that he paid very good attention as his student for many years to come and they became very close in terms of his spiritual relationship with Yoben, who used to be Kaijudo.

So that’s the story, and I’d now like to consider this story from the standpoint of Kaijudo’s transformation. He’s transformed from a person who is angry to a person who is grateful. The original incident hasn’t changed at all. It still involves this incident where Kaijudo is struck in the face by Masamune with his shoe. The only thing that’s changed is Kaijudo’s perspective on the situation.

Kaijudo feels humiliated. He’s angry and he leaves. Many people might feel just as Kaijudo did. They would want vengeance. They would want to do something to cause suffering to the other person who caused suffering to them. They would want to seek some revenge and express their anger. But when we do this, it usually just makes the situation worse. When we create suffering for the other person, what do they do? They often respond in the same kind of way, so the suffering escalates and the anger in this situation escalates.



Another outcome at some point might involve, after at least a period of time has passed, the person who was hurt might say, “I just need to let this go. I just need to let the whole incident go. It’s in the past, so why dwell on it?” We try to forget about it, but we can’t always forget about these things. We often don’t have the ability to just block them out. They arise in our thoughts. Sometimes they haunt us. Letting go of the past and something in which we felt betrayed can’t necessarily be accomplished with self-will.

Another possible outcome could be forgiveness—that the person who is harmed could say, “I’m going to forgive the person who did this to me.” But forgiveness can also be problematic. It can be characterized by the idea, “I was right, the other person is wrong, but because I’m so enlightened I’m going to forgive that person. I’m the superior enlightened person so I’ll forgive them.” Too often forgiveness comes from a place of superiority or even arrogance. It often fails to acknowledge the complicity of the person doing the forgiving in the incident, and it doesn’t necessarily involve reconciliation between the parties, and it doesn’t necessarily involve the person understanding or having some spiritual understanding of what happened.

Kaijudo’s remarkable transformation to be able to experience authentic gratitude from something that initially provoked anger and humiliation, let’s look at that. How did that actually happen? Well, the story only tells us that he studied Buddhism, right? But as we listen to his explanation, his response to Masamune, it’s clear that he’s engaged in personal self-reflection. He’s looked back at this incident. He’s seen how his karma has unfolded and he’s seen how this incident was an essential element of the way his karma unfolded, leading him to study Buddhism and ultimately to become a Buddhist monk. And so I think that self-reflection in this case and I think in most cases is really essential for personal transformation. It provided a foundation for Kaijudo’s transformation from hard heartedness to soft heartedness.

If we examine our own lives closely, we’ll probably find examples where we’ve actually been transformed from hard heartedness to soft heartedness, where we’ve been in an argument or a conflict with someone and then somehow in a moment we’ve been able to see that we were



complicit, that we contributed to the problem. We feel some remorse. We feel some sense of apology, and we can feel that hardness in our heart melting and we can feel the softness in our heart beginning. So we've had this experience. It's not something that's often new for many of us. But unfortunately we don't have it often enough, and so too often we maintain that hard heartedness towards the other person sometimes for years, sometimes until one of us dies.

As you get older many of you may want to pay attention to trying to kind of keep your body fit and strong and not letting it get too soft, but also I encourage you to pay attention to the needs of your heart. This is a heart that has served you well from the time before you were born, and so we can feed that softened heart with our own sincere and honest personal self-reflection.

I want to leave you with an assignment for the coming week. Last week I asked you to do Naikan reflection on some individual person in your life, someone with whom you had a close and relatively good relationship.

Today I ask you to also do Naikan reflection on somebody, but this time I want you to pick someone with whom there's some tension or conflict in your relationship, someone where there's some difficulty in the relationship. And what I want you to do is the same process. Go through the three questions. Look at what have you received from this other person, what have you given, and spend at least half of your time reflecting on what troubles and difficulties have you caused this other person.

This isn't easy, particularly when you're angry at someone. We don't want to look at those questions. For your own sake as well as the sake of people around you I think it's important because it can help to soften your heart. If you're ready to make a sincere examination of yourself in relation to this person and the situation you're in with them, I encourage you to take that on as your exercise for this coming week. Spend about 50 to 60 minutes doing Naikan reflection. Good luck and have a wonderful week. Thank you.