

Gregg Krech
Week Four, *The Japanese Art of Self-Reflection*
November 23, 2015
“Humility, Transformation, and the Spirit of Thanksgiving”



Welcome to the fourth and final week of our online retreat, *The Japanese Art of Self-Reflection* and the Buddhist Path to Grace, Gratitude and Faith. I've been talking about Naikan, a method of self-reflection from Japan, for the past few weeks.

We're now at a point where we're approaching the Thanksgiving holiday, if you're in the US, which is wonderful. It's a day where we can be inspired to take note of our good fortune and, kind of, reflect on our blessings. But in our society, I think, in modern times, we've fallen into a Thanksgiving celebration that often involves a great overabundance of food and entertainment and sports.

At the end of my talk today, I'm going to give you some suggestions, actually an exercise that you might do to help structure your Thanksgiving in a way that's truer to the spirit of Thanksgiving. When I opened this segment, I put my hands together and bowed. We call this *gassho* in Buddhism, and we do this when we enter the Buddha Hall in a temple or when we approach the shrine. We might do it when we meet somebody and greet them, or even before we take a meal. We put our hands together, lower our head, and bow. It's a sign of respect, but it's also a sign of reverence. By lowering our head like this, we're also indicating humility. In other words, we're lowering ourselves as a way of saying that we put ourselves beneath whatever or whoever it is that we're bowing to. When I do this, I often think of it as lowering my ego. I am conscious of that as I bow and lower my head, that I'm lowering my ego and trying to more humbly put myself out in front of the person I'm in front of and find my place in the world.

The Anishinaabe Indians consider humility to be one of the seven great virtues. They say that when we learn humility, we learn to put ourselves where we should be in the universe, where we belong in the universe. That's their definition of humility.

Let me tell you a little story about a bodhisattva named Jofugio. The name Jofugio can be translated. “Jo” means always. “Fu” means not. “Gio” means to look down on others or to disparage others. Thus, this is the bodhisattva whose name is “not to look down on others or



never to look down on others.” Jofugio wasn't considered especially intelligent or intellectual, but he was very devoted to the Buddhist teachings and he had a very sincere heart. Basically, he just went around and did gassho all the time to everybody. He'd put his hands together and he'd do gassho very reverently. He'd even do this with animals. He would do it with people who were at the lowest stations in life during that time of his life. When he bowed, he would sometimes say, "I offer you my great reverence."

He treated everyone with this idea that everyone is a Buddha. He wasn't eloquent. He didn't study the sutras. He just did gassho all the time to everybody, and he would bow very deeply. People often thought this was curious. Some people would make fun of him. Children would pelt him with stones or pebbles, or adults would verbally abuse him just for the entertainment value. But his response was simply to put his hands together and bow and gassho. N

Many of us vary our greeting when we meet somebody. If we're meeting someone who's very important, like a great Buddhist master, we would bow very deeply and we would present ourselves very humbly. But if we're meeting someone who's a parking lot attendant or a janitor, we might not even smile at them. What does this say about us? When there's somebody present who we want to like us, then we greet them in one way. But if it's someone whose attention we really don't care about, then we might just ignore them.

Jofugio lowered his ego for everybody. He didn't distinguish based on the status of the person or who they were. He recognized that everybody had the Buddha-nature. He recognized that everybody's heart was a heart that came out of the great compassion of the Buddha. Even though he looked foolish, he was actually a very enlightened bodhisattva.

When we reflect on ourselves sincerely and honestly, there's two aspects of Naikan that can humble us. The first aspect is when we compare the first and second questions, the give-and-take in our life. What have I given? What have I received?



If we come to the conclusion that we've received more, or a lot more, than we've given, then that can be a very humbling experience. For me, personally, that was a real eye opener when I began to reflect on my life using the Naikan questions. There's a myth in our culture about the self-made man and the self-made woman: that we start with nothing. Then, we work very hard and our efforts are tremendous and persistent, and we build ourselves a life, and maybe we start a business that's successful and we are able to get a nice home to live in and a nice car and a family, and maybe an investment portfolio. This idea of actualization through hard work and effort is what we sometimes call *Jarecki*, or “self-power,” in Japanese.

One of the things that we do during a Naikan retreat is we ask people to pick an accomplishment of theirs, something that's important to them, and we ask them to reflect on that accomplishment using Naikan's three questions.

The first question becomes, "What did I receive in order to make this accomplishment possible?" It's a situation where, we've gotten our PhD or written a book or recovered from a very serious illness. But now, we step back and we reflect on all the things that we received in order to make that accomplishment possible. The Japanese also have a concept called *Tarecki*, and *Tarecki* means “other power.” When we reflect on this accomplishment, we come to see this accomplishment from a different perspective as we consider the vast array of forces and people and energy that, basically, have been part of the effort to make that accomplishment possible.

For example, I wrote a book on Naikan, and I might think of that initially as *my* book. But as I reflect on it, what I'm able to see by using this question of, “What did I receive in order to write it?” is that I start with the idea that when I was born, I didn't know anything about Naikan. Everything that I know about Naikan that I was able to write about is because of my teachers, my colleagues, books, and all the opportunities that were created for me to practice and train, in terms of this method. Also, when I was born, I didn't know how to write. So I wouldn't be able to even write one sentence of that entire book if someone hadn't taught me how to write. So let me



take a moment and thank Mrs. Myers, who was my first grade teacher, who was really very instrumental in teaching me how to write.

There were other forces that made this book possible, as I went through a reflection on this: my publisher, my laptop computer, the Internet, and my wife who reviewed and edited my manuscript early on.

When I step back and I look at an accomplishment this way, what I realize is that this book was really created through the efforts of many different people and many different forces, and I was just a member of this large team that came together to bring this book to life. When I look at things that way, I'm very humbled and grateful for all the support that I received in order to work on this book. It gives me a very different perspective on this book.

Now, to see something from a standpoint of Tarecki is not just a conceptual idea. It means that we actually see something grounded in the support that we've reflected on. Tarecki becomes real to us because we see it in our own personal story, not just as a concept.

The second aspect of Naikan that can really humble us and soften our hearts is the third question, where we look at the difficulties and troubles that we've caused others. This is often a very difficult question to look at but it's very important for us to look at.

When we look at this question, we come face to face with our self-centeredness and the ego-centeredness of the way that we've conducted ourselves in relation with other people. Most of us aspire to love other people in our lives and that aspiration to love other people is a very noble aspiration. But we may spend a tremendous amount of energy, in fact more energy, trying to fix other people than we spend actually trying to love those people.

There's a story I'd like to share with you about the Zen monk, Ikkyu, who lived in the 15th century in Japan. I think it exemplifies this comment about fixing and loving other people.



The governor of the province where Ikkyu lived had selected a particular tree that was out in nature, a pine tree that was very gnarled and crooked. He posted a sign in front of the tree and the sign said, "Whoever can see this crooked tree as straight will receive a prize."

So people were wandering along and they would see this tree and they would see the sign, and they would stop and glance up at the tree and look at it. Some people would walk around it. Some people would actually even lay down under the tree and look at it from below. A few people actually climbed up the tree and one person actually brought a ladder so that they could get above the tree and actually see it from above the crown looking down. But with all of these different angles, nobody could actually answer the question of "How do you see this crooked tree as straight?"

Word spread about this challenge and the prize that was being offered, and one day, Ikkyu happened to be walking by. He sees the tree and he sees the sign, and he goes over and he looks at the tree. Then, he immediately goes over to the governor's residence and he walks in and he meets with the governor and he says, "I've answered the riddle. I would like my prize."

Now, the governor is surprised and he's also a little bit suspicious. So he says to Ikkyu, "So how did you see the crooked tree as straight?" And Ikkyu looked at him and said, "It's crooked." That's all he said, "It's crooked." To see a crooked tree as straight is to see it just as it is, and if we see the crooked tree just as it is, we can see it as straight.

Now, what can we learn from the story about our human relationships with others?

We go through life and we develop relationships with other people, people we work with, our family members, our parents, our partners, our friends, and over time as we get to know them, we begin to see them as a little bit crooked.



The term crooked has a connotation, which is kind of negative, and it actually implies dishonesty. Dishonesty is actually one way you can be crooked, but there's lots of other ways you can be crooked. You can be crooked because you spend too much time talking about yourself. You can be crooked because you are too assertive. Or you can be crooked because you're too shy. Maybe you're crooked because you seem to give off a sense of great self-importance or maybe your political views are too conservative. Or you're crooked because your political views are too liberal.

All of these ways are ways we begin to see people as crooked. They can be too critical. They can be too defensive. Probably you don't know anybody who isn't crooked in some way or another. The challenge that each of us face is the same one that Ikkyu had, which is, "How can we see this crooked tree as straight?" Or, "How can we see this crooked person as straight?" But we don't often respond to that question or that riddle. We've taken on a different question to respond to, and the riddle that we're responding to is, "How do we straighten out this crooked tree?"

I know a woman by the name of Dana, who has made this the central mission of her life. When she was growing up, she took it upon herself to try to straighten out her younger brother who was having trouble in school, and she also tried to straighten out her father, who was an alcoholic. Then, she got married and she tried to fix her husband, and she had several children, and she tried to fix them and now, they have grandchildren, and so her job is to try to fix them, as well. The riddle that she's taken on with all these people in her life is, "How do we straighten out a crooked tree?" Or "How do we straighten out a crooked person?" Now, Dana's a very intelligent woman and I think she's very genuine being concerned about the happiness and welfare of the people around her. But she's taken on the mission of noticing where people are crooked, and then making unsolicited suggestions, about how they can be fixed or straightened out. Unfortunately, she hasn't had much success because crooked people don't take to constructive advice and they don't usually make constructive changes as a result.



Like Dana, I've spent too much wasted time trying to fix the crooked trees in my own little forest. When we're trying to do this, imagine what it looks like from a distance. We're up on top of a hill and here we are with this crooked tree, trying to bend the trunk and trying to bend the branches to see if we can straighten it out. It's quite an amusing sight, if we can step back and see ourselves doing that. While we're busy trying to straighten out all these crooked trees in our life, what we're not noticing is that, actually, we're one of those crooked trees our self.

Let's get back to the story about Ikkyu. I think the governor has done a great service by posting this sign, "How can you see this crooked tree as straight?" Because it's prompted people to read the sign and look at the tree and, potentially, learn a very important lesson about life. Ikkyu, of course, had the answer to this, "How can you see this crooked tree as straight?" But nobody knew the answer, except for Ikkyu. Now, what would it mean if you could see your mother, your aging, always complaining, never satisfied mother, as straight? What would that mean? Or the person at work, who is such a pain in the butt? Or your partner, who you love very much, but you'd love them a little bit more if they were just a little bit less like this and a little bit more like that? What would it mean to see those people in your life as straight?

Ikkyu's already given you the answer in words, which is, "They're crooked." But Ikkyu solved the riddle not because he knew the words. He was able to look at this crooked, bent, gnarly pine tree, and actually saw it as straight. Can you do that? Now, if you want to know what Ikkyu knows, then you have to stop trying to straighten out the crooked trees in your life; right? You have to start working with the right question. You have to recognize that you are one of those crooked trees. I'm one of those crooked trees. We all are. It makes for a funny image. To see this forest of all these crooked trees, and we're all marching around trying to straighten each other out.

If we gave that up, just think about all the extra time that we'd have. When you look at life and you realize how magnificent life is and how it manifests itself in so many different ways, with trees and frogs and butterflies and whales and ants and all kinds of different people, and within



each form, each entity is unique, each blade of grass is unique, what a magnificent mosaic of life that we live in. If we see a daffodil, we should be able to appreciate the daffodil just as it is, without wishing that it were a rose. If we see a rose, we should be able to appreciate the rose just as it is, without wishing that it didn't have any thorns. To be able to appreciate this, what we have to do is we have to stop trying to impose our will and our expectations on other people.

Ikkyu's ability to see the tree as straight meant that he was not asserting his own will. He was not comparing that tree to some ideal he had. He could rejoice in the crookedness of that tree just as it was, without adding his own designs to try to make it straight.

So which riddle are you interested in taking on? The riddle of, "How do you see a crooked tree as straight?" Or "How do you straighten up a crooked tree?" The question of which riddle you work with is very important and it will have a dramatic effect on every relationship in your life, from this point on.

Each week, we've been discussing Naikan's three questions. Those questions are, "What have I received from the other person?" "What have I given to the other person?" and "What troubles and difficulties have I caused?" Logically, you would think that there should be a fourth question. Something like, "What troubles and difficulties has the other person caused me?" But that question isn't actually part of Naikan. We refer to that question as the fourth question, or Gaikan. It's what we're doing when we're judging somebody, when we're criticizing them, when we're looking at how they're crooked and how they need to be fixed. We call that Gaikan.

I think the best example of Gaikan actually comes from a story by the Sufi poet, Rumi. He tells a wonderful story about these four Indians who enter a mosque, and they get down on their knees and they begin the process of deep sincere praying. The head of the mosque walks by and the first Indian, not thinking, looks up and says, "Oh, are you going to make the call for prayers now? Is it time, yet?" In the next moment, the person who's next to him nudges him and says, "Why did you say that? Why did you speak? Now, your prayers will be invalid."



Then, the person next to him nudges him and says, "Hey, Uncle, you just made the same mistake. You shouldn't have said anything." And then, the fourth Indian, basically, just kind of looks up and says out loud, "Thank goodness that I haven't made the same mistake as these three."

Rumi comments on the story and I want to read you his own comment on the story. He says, "So all four prayers are interrupted with the three fault finders more at fault than the original speaker. Blessed is the one who sees his weakness and blessed is one who, when he sees a flaw in someone else, takes responsibility for it."

It's both humorous and unfortunate that whenever I give a workshop on Naikan, almost every time at the end, at least one person will walk up to me and they'll say very nicely, you know, "I really loved your talk and I'm going to buy your book. Because I want to give it to my wife because she really needs this stuff." Or "my husband." As we hear this material, we can watch our mind immediately thinking about all the people who need to be doing this, and of course, we may be leaving ourselves out of that club.

I'd like to shift gears and talk a little bit about Thanksgiving. It's wonderful to have this holiday coming up that's set aside for the theme of reflection and thankfulness, and I'd like to tell you a little bit about what the family tradition that we've had in our own family for many, many years, and offer you an exercise that you might want to do during the Thanksgiving holiday. S

First let me say that when we get together for dinner at Thanksgiving, nobody in the family is allowed to bring a cell phone or any kind of digital device. In fact, that's our rule for any meal, not just the Thanksgiving holiday meal. But we do a particular Thanksgiving reflection in the morning on Thanksgiving Day, and what we do is we have everybody find a spot in the house where there's some quiet and there's some privacy and they have a paper and they have a little



booklet and a pen or pencil. We ask people to reflect on their blessings for about 45 or 60 minutes, and to write them down.

We've been doing this since before my daughters were born. So when they were young, they couldn't write. So we made a little form and drew boxes and said, "Draw pictures of the things that you're thankful for." They might draw a picture of our house or they might draw a picture of their grandfather or our dog or even one of their toys, and that was the way that they could express kind of their thankfulness for those things. But as they got older, we kind of made the process a little bit more structured and formal, and we developed these booklets, and now, everybody gets one of these booklets that they can use for their Thanksgiving reflection, and I'm going to show you a couple of these, just to show you how it works. We've saved a number of them.

This is from about eight years ago and it's a Thanksgiving booklet that my younger daughter did. You can see there's little boxes still on that and some of the things that she's thankful for is the rain because it waters our plants, and she actually mentioned that she was thankful for tofu. Which she really liked when she was young, and now, she's actually become a great Asian cuisine cook. So she cooks with tofu. She also mentioned that she's thankful for the light because it helps us to see. So she, basically-- you can imagine that, you know, here's this eight-year old girl and she's sitting upstairs in the corner of a room and she's filling in these boxes with all the things that she feels are the blessings in her life.

From the same year, this is her sister's booklet, who was about 10, about 2 years older almost, and some of the things she's thankful for is the piano that we have, because both girls took Suzuki Method piano lessons for about six years, and so at that time, they were both playing and they enjoyed being able to play music. She's thankful for our dog, Barley, our golden retriever. She spent a little bit more time, focusing on the people in our extended family. Everybody would get one of these booklets and we'd get together after that 45 or 60 minute period, in the living

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room and we'd share what we've been reflecting on. We don't share every detail. But we have our booklets and we share some of these things with each other, as a family.

This is a more recent booklet from just two years ago, and it's gotten a little more formal. There's a graphic on the front and there's a poem. There's actually a little introductory exercise in here, and what we've done is I've created categories now to help all of us think, maybe more precisely about some of the things that we're reflecting on. There are categories about people who are blessings in your life right now and people who've been blessings in the past. There's a category for forms of energy. There's a category for objects, like a car, for example. There's a category for animals, like our dog, Barley. A category for friends, a category for things about your body, like my ability to see clearly or to be able to walk.

Now, the pages are divided into these categories and it makes it, I think, a little bit easier to reflect on your blessings that way. And one of the things that I've found, as we use this system, is that when we get together as a family, some of the things that we're thankful for that we consider blessings have to do with other people in the family. So it's also an opportunity for us to, basically, recognize other people in the family who have done something for us. So there might be recognition of my wife who has been driving my daughters to school or to practice of some sort. I might have recognition of my older daughter, who just started driving, and be thankful to her for stopping on the way home and picking up food for dinner, periodically. It's a wonderful way in that setting on Thanksgiving Day to actually share some of that with each other.

This is your assignment for next week, which is to do a Thanksgiving Day reflection. Now, if you're in the U.S., you can do this on Thanksgiving Day, or any day. If you're not in the U.S., you can just simply designate a day as a day of thankfulness. I'm going to post a link for this little booklet, so that you can go online and download it, if you want to use it, and then, you can set aside 45 or 60 minutes of time, and just step back from your life and reflect on the way that your life has been blessed from the time you were born until now.



Related to the theme of Thanksgiving, I'd like to talk for a moment about grace and faith. Let me start by saying something about grace. You know, when we step back and do this kind of reflection on our life, we can see the abundance of things we've received and we can actually feel an authentic sense of thankfulness or gratitude for those things.

That's gratitude, but it's not really grace. So how does grace differ from gratitude? To be in a state of grace is not just to recognize that our life is blessed or that we've received these things. It's also to recognize that we haven't earned them and that, in fact, we don't deserve them. The blessings in our life are not being given to us because of how we've lived. They're being given to us in spite of how we've lived. That's how I see grace. When we're aware of grace at the same time that we're aware of our ego-centeredness and our self-centeredness, then we have a fertile ground for faith.

We don't talk about faith very much in Buddhism, and in Shin Buddhism, there's a term called Shinjō, which sometimes is translated as “faith.” More often, it's translated with the phrase “true and trusting.” And in our culture, we hear a lot about having faith in ourselves, self-confidence or trusting ourselves. But I'd like to suggest that when you are the primary focus of your own faith and your own confidence and your own trust, there's no room for faith in anything else. There's no space available for something else to occupy your faith.

There was a great Chinese master in the Seventh Century, named Zendo. When he discussed Shin Buddhism, he talked about the essence of Shin Buddhism relating to two important awakenings. One was awakening to the great compassion of Amida Buddha. The second was awakening to our blind self, to our constant ego-centeredness. When those two things came together, that awakening to the great compassion in the universe and the awakening to our great self-centeredness and ego-centeredness, we open up the possibility and the prospect of having an experience of faith.



One of my teachers in Japan who I studied Naikan with, Reverend Shua Usami, used to say that Naikan isn't religious, but it can open up a doorway to religious experience. When we're able to look at these Naikan questions, it's like a window into the karma of our lives, and when we look through that window, it opens up the possibility that we can give up on ourselves. That sounds like a bad thing, but spiritually, it's really not. Because when we give up on ourselves, we open up a space for something else to step in. Whether we call it Buddha or whether we call it God or whether we call it higher power, by giving up on ourselves, we open up the possibility that we can have faith in something beyond our self. What is that something beyond our self? That is something that each of us have to discover for ourselves.

How can we sum up some of the important principles or teachings of this retreat, during this past month? There's a Buddhist teacher, Reverend Hiakirasu, who said that the first thing that we have to do is to understand ourselves, and the second is to understand other people. When we understand ourselves and we understand other people, we cannot help but to open up a new road to our lives. So how do we find this new road? How do we understand ourselves and our lives in a way that opens up this new road, a road of spiritual awakening, a road to grace, a road to gratitude, a road to faith, a road to a life of authentic appreciation, instead of a complaint-based life?

We have to start with self-reflection. We have to start with introspection. You can think about your karma, and your karma is simply how you've lived your whole life. If you were able to see a movie of how you lived your whole life, you would be able to see your karma revealed in that film. But most of us aren't interested in that film because we feel we already know what's in that film. But because we experience life primarily from a self-centered perspective, we only know ourselves from a self-centered perspective.

If I have a stain on my shirt collar, I really can't see that unless I have a mirror. That's the only way I can see that stain. When we reflect on ourselves, what we're doing is we're using relationships with others as that mirror for our self-reflection. We attempt to see ourselves as

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we're seen by others. We attempt to put ourselves in another person's shoes. We attempt to see the unfolding of our lives from a perspective that isn't just self-centered.

This sounds easy but it's actually quite difficult. It's difficult because it's very challenging to set aside this self-centered perspective that we've become so accustomed to. Now, this month of self-reflection has been an opportunity for you to do a research project, and what's the subject of the research project? Your life. Your life is the subject of your research. You can continue to reflect on yourself and you can continue to study your life. To do your research properly, you have to study the details of your life. Someone hung up your coat. Someone poured you a cup of tea. Someone opened the door for you at the restaurant. There's light in the room and that light allows you to see and your eyeglasses allow you to find the light switch. So those are the details. Without those details, all of this is just abstract concepts. If you're sincere in your research project, you have to be open to all possibilities. You don't try to manipulate them. You don't try to feel grateful. You just try to see things clearly. And if you can do this, I think that you'll find that your research project can be very revealing and very meaningful.

I'd like to end with a wonderful quote by the Monsiue Koshen Otani:

"If you never question what you are doing, the process of spiritual rebirth cannot begin. This also goes for self-reflection and inner development, as well as cultivating a true sense of contentment. The most frightening proposition is that a person can somehow lose the ability or the heart to reflect upon themselves. Always carry that mirror wherein you can peek into your heart. In that mirror, you can see reflected thoughts and images long submerged. To do something about the emptiness and hollowness that afflicts you, look into yourself. It's important to see that everything starts from there."

Thank you very much.