

Gregg Krech
Week Two, *The Japanese Art of Self-Reflection*
November 9, 2015
“Cultivating Gratitude and the Shadow of Entitlement”



Welcome back to our retreat on the Japanese art of self-reflection. This month we are studying Naikan, a method of self-reflection from Japan rooted in Buddhist principles and teachings. This online retreat is being sponsored by Tricycle and I'd like to thank all of the wonderful folks at Tricycle for making this possible.

Last week, I introduced you to Naikan and to the three questions which are kind of the core structure of Naikan and I suggested an assignment where you would examine at least one twenty-four hour period of time and reflect on your life for that twenty-four hours using those three questions. If you did that, you may have some interesting information that you've already started to collect on your research project.

This week I'd like to talk about the theme of gratitude: how we cultivate it, some of the obstacles to gratitude and how we might move from a complaint-based life to a life of more genuine appreciation.

To begin, I'd like to offer you a haiku by the Buddhist monk Ho Sen. It's traditional in Japan to write a haiku on New Year's Day every year, and so this is Ho Sen's 17-syllable New Year's Day poem.

"Another year passed.
Empty rice sacks remind me
how lucky I am."

Now, Ho Sen's starting the year with his rice sacks empty. We would expect if they were overflowing that he might actually feel grateful for all the food that he has. If you've got great wealth and a wonderful home and your health is good, it's probably easier to feel grateful at that point, but Ho Sen is reminded of his good fortune by empty rice sacks. The emptiness of those rice sacks actually stimulates him to reflect back on the previous year and think about all the food that he received that helped keep him alive.



It's easy to take for granted our life. It's easy to forget how lucky we are to be alive. We can feel entitled to another year or even another day of life as if it's nothing special, but it *is* something very special. We often get caught up in our own suffering and hope that things will improve. We hope that somehow things will get better. What if we could relax into life just as it is right now? Is it possible to actually feel grateful for our life just as it is with all of the struggles and with all of the joys put together?

I once traveled with a man who had great insight to human nature. He said, "Wherever you go, you can find something to complain about." If we travel, we can complain about lumpy beds and crowded airports; if we stay home, we can complain that we never get to go anywhere and there's never anything good on TV. When I first went to Japan about 30 years ago, I picked up a little Japanese-English phrasebook and as I was going through the book, looking at the hotel section of the book and I was surprised that about one-quarter of all the phrases in that section were basically helping you to learn how to complain in Japanese—how to complain to the hotel or about the hotel—and there wasn't one phrase in that section that basically helped you to express appreciation. The people who wrote that book somehow thought that English-speaking people in Japan have a great desire to complain. Maybe they were right.

Now let's take a moment and go back to the first question on Naikan: What did I receive? If you did some reflection last week then you have a list of some of the things that you received. I have a list so I'm going to share with you a few items from my own list. I received running water, a toothbrush and toothpaste to brush my teeth. I received the use of electricity to have lights in my home and to run my computer. I received heat from the oil furnace downstairs. I received the use of my car to travel. My wife made some vegetable soup for me the other night. I have a lot of other things on the list but I'll go ahead and stop there.

In order to make a list like this or like the one that you wrote, there's something very essential that you have to do first: to pay attention. Not just in general but to pay attention to how the



world is supporting you, to what you're receiving from the world. If you go through your day and you're preoccupied with your problems and your thoughts and feelings, then you're probably not going to be able to make a very long list, because you're not going to notice things.

Let me tell you about a hike that I took in the Blue Ridge Mountains many, many years ago when I was first discovering Naikan. It was in the early spring and I was very excited. I lived in northern Virginia, I took my dog with me and we drove out to a trailhead and we were planning to hike up to this promontory about two or three hours up, where I was hoping to see some beautiful views of the Blue Ridge Mountain peaks and the Shenandoah Valley below.

I start hiking and I immediately notice that there is all kinds of problems in the trail. There are all these trees that are down, branches, sometimes entire trunks. The more I'm hiking, the more I'm starting to get frustrated that I'm constantly having to go around or go over or in some cases trip over these things blocking my way. By the time I'm about halfway up my mind is really now ruminating about the situation. I'm thinking, "Where's the forest service?" and, "Somebody should be out here with a chainsaw clearing up this path." I get to the top of the hike, we get to the end and it is a beautiful view of the Shenandoah Valley but my mind is still focused on all the obstacles that were in the path and how much easier my hike would've been if those had been removed.

But I had this vague recollection of one situation where maybe someone had actually cut a tree with a chainsaw because I thought maybe there was actually the top of the tree on one side and the bottom of the tree on the other and the center part of the tree, where the trail was, had been removed. I wasn't sure, so I decided to do a little research project on the way down, back on that same trail. I decided to count for a period of time how many trees or limbs or branches were in my way, but also to count how many had been cleared or moved off of the trail to make my hike a little bit easier.



For the former it was very easy to identify them because if I didn't notice them I would trip over them but for the latter I had to really use my attention in a different kind of way. I had to scan the sides of the path kind of looking for limbs that were parallel or trees that looked like they had been sawed. So it took much more mindful concentration and energy to notice the trees that had been moved. When I finished my period of research, I was completely surprised because it turned out that the number of trees and limbs and branches that were in the way was 42 but the number that had been moved was 47, so that actually on the way up in reality more had been done to make my hike easier to clear the path than was in my way. However, my experience of that hike going up was completely dominated by the frustration and resentment of everything that was basically in my way: all of the things that were in my way on the path. If we go through life and only notice the problems and the obstacles, it's quite likely that we're going to develop a sense of resentment, frustration, even anger.

As we discuss the theme of gratitude, I'm going to introduce several maxims or slogans. These are wonderful ways of remembering some of these principles that come from this Naikan tradition.

The first maxim I want introduce is: "Your experience of life is not based on your life but what you pay attention to."

That's a maxim I developed as a result of this hike. As we begin to train our minds to notice essentially how the world is supporting and caring for us, we'll have a different experience of life but most of us have had a lot of practice kind of noticing problems, noticing difficulties and that's what we notice and that's what we think about and often that's what we talk about. So here's a classic dialogue of a couple coming home after a long day of work, the husband comes home first, the wife comes in a few minutes later, he goes up, he greets her, he gives her a hug and he says, "How was your day, honey?" And the wife says, "Oh, you wouldn't believe the kind of day I had, what a crazy day. I'm running late, I basically get on the expressway and there's a traffic jam and then there's this construction on the bridge which is backing up traffic so I end up



arriving late, my normal parking place wasn't available so I had to drive around for a while, I'm late to my meeting, I had to make a copy and the copier wasn't working so had to go up to the fifth floor and make a copy and then at lunch we go out to this great restaurant, I order my favorite dish and they're out of it. And I come back after lunch and there is like a dozen voicemails waiting for me that I have to answer, so I am just exhausted. This was just a really, really difficult day."

Then as she's kind of taking her breath, she says to her husband, "So, how about you, honey, how was your day?" And he says, "Oh you think you had a bad day? Wait 'til you hear about my day," and then he proceeds to go through the litany of problems and difficulties and frustrations in an effort to achieve the status of having suffered more than his wife.

Let's change the scenario a little bit. Let's imagine that he asked her how her day was and instead she reports something like this, "Well, I went out this morning to start the car and I turned the key and guess what, the car started on the first try: the very first try. Then I get on the expressway and someone had painted these lines to make these lanes so everybody knew how to stay in their lane and not crash into each other and I drove all the way to work and nobody crashed into me. And there was this construction crew on the bridge and they were fixing the bridge so that it's safer so I don't have to worry about falling into the water or the bridge crumbling. I get to work, I find a parking place, I go to this meeting and then I come back from the meeting and I have this great system where people can call me, leave messages, and I know who they are and I know what to talk to them about and when to call them back. It's really an amazing piece of technology."

Now suppose she went on and on like that. If she did this with her husband or if it was at work, if she did it with her colleagues at work, probably people would start to think that this woman is a little bit weird, right, because complaining about life is considered acceptable and normal but recognizing and expressing gratitude for how the world is supporting and caring for us, risks being considered out of the ordinary.



There's something even riskier, and that's something else you will have to give up in order to cultivate a genuine sense of gratitude. You have to give up the drama that comes with complaining. We complain about our work life, our families, our finances and we create a lot of drama with those complaints. With that drama often comes this desire for sympathy. We put all these complaints out there hoping that we'll get some sympathy back. Now if you give up complaining and you basically start talking about how the world is supporting you, you're probably not going to have a lot of drama talking about how your flights were exactly on time and how your computer booted up and worked fine this morning. You're also not gonna get a lot of sympathy for those events so you have to be willing to trade some drama and in exchange you get a little bit more joy and I think that's actually a pretty good tradeoff.

I'd like to read a quote from a Zen teacher, John Daido Looi Roshi, who is the Zen teacher at the Zen Mountain Monastery:

"Expressing gratitude is transformative: just as transformative as expressing complaint. Imagine an experiment involving two people. One is asked to spend ten minutes each morning and each evening expressing gratitude. I mean, there's always something to be grateful for while the other is asked to spend the same amount of time practicing complaining. By the way, there's always something to complain about. One of the subjects is saying things like, 'I hate my job, I can't stand my apartment, why can't I make enough money, my spouse doesn't get along with me, the dog next door is always barking, I just can't stand this neighborhood.' And the other person is saying things like, 'I'm really grateful for the opportunity to work, there's a lot of people out there who can't find a job right now and I'm really grateful for my health and what a gorgeous day, I really love the fall breeze.' So they do this experiment for a year and guaranteed at the end of the year the person practicing complaining will have deeply reaffirmed all his negative stuff rather than having let it go, while the one practicing gratitude will be a very grateful person. What you practice is what you are. Practice and the goal of practice are identical. Cause and



effect are one reality. Expressing gratitude can indeed change our way of seeing ourselves and the world."

Thank you, Roshi.

Cultivating a true sense of gratitude is challenging. The first question in Naikan, as simple as it is, gets us on the right track because it addresses a lot of these obstacles. But, in my opinion it's not enough. Just listing what we're grateful for or what we're receiving isn't enough.

Let's go onto the second question: “What did I give to others?”

If you did some Naikan reflection last week, you also probably have a list of things that you gave, so let me take a moment and share with you some of the things on my list. For instance, I fed the dog one day and walked him in the evening. I picked up my younger daughter from work, I brought some petunias in from the deck because we were expecting a frost and I didn't want them to die. I gave two small cookies to the people who work at the recycling center. As I'm looking at my list, I'm starting to compare it with the list of what I received. I have this list of what I gave and this list of what I received; I'd like you to take a moment and compare your two lists.

Of course, one aspect is the length of those lists as you put them next to each other. One might be longer or shorter than the other, but let's also look at the nature of the items that are on that list. You may only have one item on the list of things that you gave, but maybe that item was that you gave CPR to somebody who had a stroke and you saved their life. If that was true you get extra points for that. I want to take a little informal survey, and I've been doing this kind of survey every time I do a presentation on Naikan for the past 25 years. It's a survey about comparing your two lists.



In this survey there's three possible options. Option 1 is that you actually received more than you gave at least during this 24-hour period. Option 2 is that you actually gave more than you received during that day. Option 3 is that it comes out exactly equal. Look at your lists: where do you stand?

I can't tell where you stand, but I can tell you where I stand. In all the years of doing Naikan reflection, I virtually have always come out behind. That is to say, I've always come out as having received more than I gave in virtually every situation. That's true for a vast majority of the people when I do this survey at a workshop, where I can kind of see the hands go up. By looking at these first two questions we can kind of see the give-and-take, or the debit-and-credit nature of Naikan. Naikan comes from Yoshimoto's view as a very devout Buddhist, but he also ran a family business and so he would send out statements to his customers that would show how much product they had shipped out and how much payment they had received and what the balance was or what the credit was.

We get the same kind of statement for our checking account from the bank. That's how we ultimately know what our outstanding balance is in our checking account, so the first two questions in Naikan act as a spiritual reconciliation of our lives. We reflect on the giving and receiving nature of our lives and we examine this exchange of giving and taking. We end up asking: "Does the world owe me or am I in debt to the world?"

We often live our lives as if the world owes us. "Why didn't I get that raise, why don't I get more recognition for my work, how come this pizza is so late." So where do you stand? Does the world owe you or do you owe the world? Is it more appropriate to go through life trying to collect what is owed to you or is it more important to go through life trying to repay the debt that you owe to others.

In my first presentation last week, I talked about having a story and one of my stories had to do with my self-image. I had an image of myself as a very giving person and I had a lot of evidence



to support that. For instance, when I was young I worked in Appalachia, helping to set up and fund legal aid programs for poor people. Years later I basically worked with orphans and orphan children in refugee camps on the borders of Laos and Cambodia. When I went to Japan to do my first retreat there, I had this image of myself as a giving person, but then I spent about 200 hours reflecting on my life including this question of what have I given, what have I received. By the time I came out I had a different story, a different image of myself.

The image of myself that I have now is as a receiving person because I have received so much more than I have given, so the world doesn't owe me anything. In fact, I have a debt to the world.

Earlier I offered you a maxim that your experience of life is not based on your life, but on what you pay attention to. I'd like to offer you a second maxim now: "Gratitude disappears in the shadow of entitlement."

What's the meaning of this maxim? When we feel entitled to something it means we feel like we deserve it, we have a right to it. When we don't feel like we deserve something, we're much more likely to see it as a gift. We're much more likely to feel an authentic sense of gratitude in response. Let me give you an example.

Suppose I meet an old friend, someone I haven't seen for years on the street, and we decide to have a quick lunch. At the end of lunch he says, "You know, I know you work for a nonprofit so I'd like to give you a hundred dollars to help support your work." I'm completely surprised, and I offer him a very heartfelt, "Thank you," but I also feel this very natural response of gratitude towards his generosity.

Here's a different scenario. I meet an old friend on the street, we decide to have a quick lunch. This person borrowed a hundred dollars from me about ten years ago and he never paid me back, and the issue of his debt comes up while we're having lunch. So he offers to pay me the hundred dollars on the spot and he does and so I take his hundred dollars and I say, "Thank you," but am I



grateful? I'm pleased to have an extra hundred dollars—I really didn't count on that—but I probably don't feel particularly grateful because he actually owed me the money. I feel entitled to that money, not grateful. The more we feel entitled to what we're getting, the less likely we are to feel grateful for what we've received. Gratitude disappears in the shadow of entitlement.

I'd like to finish my talk today with a discussion of waking up. Imagine that experience in the morning when, after your alarm goes off, you start becoming aware that you're awake and your mind starts to “turn on,” like the way you turn on your computer. You begin thinking about the day or your appointments and all of your chores and all the errands that you have to do. There's phone calls that you need to make, there's bills that you need to pay. Your mind starts creating this to-do list that magically appears on the screen of your mind, with little blips here and there where your mind sends you messages, like, “Why did I stay up so late watching that stupid TV show last night?” When you finally get out of the bed you have all this energy to start your day.

But what kind of fuel are you using for the beginning of your day? It's the fuel of anxiety and stress because there's so much to do. It's the fuel of depression because you're really concerned that you're not going to be able to handle everything that life throws at you. It's the fuel of absorption and anticipation of what's going to happen later. Is this really the fuel that you want to use to help yourself get started at the beginning of the day?

I'm going to offer you an alternative, more mindful way to anchor yourself in the morning when you first become aware that you're awake. I discovered this after spending way too many mornings going through that same script that I just shared with you. One morning I realized that everything that was going on in my mind to get organized for the day had nothing to do with what was going on in my life in the present moment while I was lying in bed. I decided to use that time to try to notice what was going on in my life particularly from a Naikan standpoint of looking at what I was receiving.

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I captured this kind of on paper and I'd like to share with you some of what goes on in my mind when I'm doing this practice. I'm lying next to my beautiful sleeping wife and enjoying the warmth emanating from her body. The temperature outside is chilly but I'm kept warm by this cozy, thick blanket and the furnace and the fuel coming from the basement of this house. My two sweet daughters, the blessings of my life, are sleeping quietly and safely in the next room. My sweet dog Barley, our family's golden retriever, is sleeping quietly on this little futon next to me and I reach down to caress his soft coat and it's the first awareness I have of my sense of touch today. I wiggle my toes and they all work fine. I stretch and jiggle my fingers and they all work fine. I'm safe and my safety has been preserved throughout the night even though I slept and had no awareness of my surroundings.

My eyes are now adjusting to the dim light and I can see. I'm able to begin the day by seeing these extraordinary silhouettes and shapes in the room that surrounds me. I take a deep breath and fill my lungs with air. My body has been doing this for me all night without my conscious attention but for a moment I take the lead and I bring my attention to this amazing process of breathing which sustains my body and spirit. I listen. For a moment, there is complete silence. I listen to the silence. What a gift silence is. Then I hear a sound, I think it's a crow and now more crow sounds. These sounds are vibrating against my body. There is life outside my home, the world is waking up.. I can hear the world waking up. What a gift it is to hear the sounds of the world. My mind is yearning to make a to-do list, to remind me of all the details and tasks and work that lies ahead but I will make that list soon, not now. First I have to feel the fabric of the firm carpet against the soles of my feet as my body emerges stiffly, awkwardly, imperfectly into verticality and I am blessed with the beginning of a new day.

You may want to try this kind of waking up practice when you wake up some morning this weekend and just see what your experience is. So here's your assignment for the coming week. I'd like you to select one person to reflect on. It can be a parent or a partner, a teacher, somebody that you work with, as long as you have a reasonably good relationship with that person. Once you've selected the person then you have to select a timeframe, a period of no more than three

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years. Now if it's somebody that you live with, like your partner or that you work with on a daily basis, it could be as little as six months or a year but pick a person and pick a time period and then during the week I'd like you to spend one period of self reflection reflecting on this person for about 50 to 60 minutes.

You're going to use those same three Naikan questions. You're going to look at: "During this time what did I receive from this person, during the time what did I give to them and during this time what troubles and difficulties did I cause them?" Write things down to help keep you focused. Then you can see how things go in terms of reflecting on an individual rather than just the previous day.

Next week I'm going to be talking about the theme softening your heart. I hope you'll join me and until then I hope you have a great week. Thank you.