

Practicing Naikan: Self-Discovery Through Gratitude

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Naikan is a Japanese word that translates roughly to “introspection.” It refers to a system of self-reflection that was developed by a Jodo-Shinshu Buddhist, Yoshimoto Ishin, who began establishing Naikan centers in Japan during the 1950s. Today, there are 40 Naikan centers in Japan, and the practice has spread through Europe and into the US.

Naikan practice is based on ourselves three questions:

What have I received?

What have I given?

What troubles and difficulties have I caused?

During a traditional retreat at a Naikan center, we would systematically contemplate these questions relative to specific people who play important roles in our lives, giving us a way to reflect on our relationships with parents, relatives, teachers, children, partners and others. The process gives us a broader, more complete view of our lives by shifting our focus from ourselves to others and the world in which we live.

For our purposes here, we won't be doing a highly detailed a person-by-person analysis of our relationships. However, we will use the same approach to gain a new, more realistic perspective on our relationship to the world in which we live, including the people around us.

When we examine our lives through the lens of Naikan, we start by looking at what we have received. For example, here's what I see if I spend just a few minutes looking back over the past week: another chaplain designed an order of service for me; I received an honorarium from a temple for giving a dharma talk; I served a nice cup of coffee at a place downtown; I got to hear a new recording from an artist I like on a streaming service.

Notice, these are just simple descriptions of things that made my life a little better or easier. The other people's motives don't matter—the important thing is that I received the benefit of their efforts.

We tend to take these gifts for granted or to minimize their impact by feeling “entitled” to them. Consequently, we end up not noticing all the ways we are supported by our world. And this is unfortunate, because our experience of life and whether it is “good” or “bad” has very little to do with what happens to us and almost everything to do with where we put our attention.

There is a Japanese saying, “When you are enlightened, the grass and trees also become enlightened.” This enlightenment of grass and trees does not happen because the grass and trees do some special practice that leads them toward some special mystical experience. Rather, their enlightenment happens as a result of our intention—we realize that we live in a compassionate world that supports us in countless ways.

What do we receive from grass and trees? We get shade from the sun and cooling cushioning for our feet, we get lovely green scenery to view, and we get oxygen, which is essential to our survival. We owe life itself to the grass and trees, and to countless other animate and inanimate beings and objects. Naikan helps us begin to recognize the extent of that truth.

When we start to list these things, we are often surprised by how much support we receive. When we look at the other side of the relationship—at what we give versus what troubles we cause—we often see an imbalance.

As we go through the process, a clearer picture of our life begins to emerge. We may realize how often we notice every detail of every inconvenience, every occasion in which someone gets in our way or fails to live up to our expectation while we overlook the ways in which we inconvenience others and create problems in our environment.

Daily Naikan

If you want to work with Naikan, a good place to start is by doing the Daily Naikan regularly. Considering the past 24 hours, reflect on these three questions:

1. What have I received?
2. What have I given?
3. What troubles have I caused?

Mindful Thank-You

Saying thanks can easily become routine and mindless, requiring little attention to the moment. To deepen your awareness of what has been done on your behalf, specify the gift or service you received: For example, “Thank you for holding the door for me.” This brings more attention to the moment. For one day, say “thank you” mindfully 20 times. Thanks for giving this exercise a try.

Who Cares?

Who cared for you this past week? We generally think of caring as having an emotional element. But for this exercise we’re simply looking at care as some act of support. It could be someone who served you food. Maybe someone put gas in your car or helped you check out a book at the library. There may be people whose faces you know but whose names you don’t, even are completely invisible – you see their handiwork, but not their faces. Reflect on your week and list the people who have provided you with help, care and support in very real or practical ways.

Not “I have to, but I get to.”

Negative mental chatter is common and we give birth to it in our speech. “Now I have to go to class.” “Now I’ve got to go the post office.” We can put a negative spin on whatever needs to be done. Try changing your speech for a day, changing “I have to” to “I get to.” Reflect on the activity and think about why it might be a gift to do the dishes or study for a class.

Support from what you cannot see:

Throughout the day we receive benefits from things we don’t actually see. The simplest example is air—without it, we would die. We don’t see it, but it keeps us alive. Or we see a faucet, but when you turn on the water, a network of unseen pipes and pumps brings that water to you. For a day, notice and make a list of how you are supported specifically by things you cannot see.

Garbage Naikan

Be mindful, throughout the day, of anything you throw away. Take a moment before discarding each item to thank it for whatever role it has played in your life. Did a sealed wrapper keep an item of food fresh for you? Did a tissue wipe a tear from your eye? What opportunity or benefit did these objects provide? How would your life have been different without them? Also, consider the impact of throwing this item away on the world around you.

For More Information

If you like these exercises and want to dig deeper into this practice, there are resources available. For more information, contact the Office of Religious and Spiritual Life at Stetson University or email Chaplain Sullivan at msullivan1@stetson.edu.