

# Self-Reflection

by Gregg Krech

I was fortunate to discover a method of self-reflection called Naikan originally developed in Japan. The concept of self-reflection is one that is endorsed by nearly everyone: religious leaders, therapists, educators, scientists, and others. Most people would say that self-reflection is a good idea, just as most people support the good ideas of love, peace, justice, and healthy living. But it is in method and practice that ideas become realities, and it is here that we must define and evaluate self-reflection. How do you actually reflect on yourself? What is the best method for examining your life?

The practice of self-reflection goes back many centuries and is rooted in the world's great spiritual traditions. Early adherents of such practice include the Christian desert hermits and Japanese samurai. More contemporary proponents include Albert Schweitzer, Benjamin Franklin, and Bishop Fulton J. Sheen. Franklin, in particular, had a rather comprehensive and systematic approach to self-reflection. He developed a list of thirteen virtues, and each day he would evaluate his conduct relative to particular virtue. Daily self-reflection was a fundamental aspect of Franklin's life.

The type of self-reflection I am discussing involves certain basic characteristics. First, there is the requirement of time set aside exclusively for the purpose of self-reflection. Second, use of a space, preferably with some degree of isolation that limits external distraction. And third the application of questions or a structure that helps us examine our lives with an emphasis on our conduct in relation to other people, creatures, and objects. A sincere examination of ourselves is not an easy task. It requires attention to what has not been attended to. It involves a willingness to squarely face our mistakes, failures, and weaknesses. It requires us to acknowledge our transgressions and actions that have caused difficulty to others.

The fourth step of the Alcoholics Anonymous twelve-step program asks us to make a *searching and fearless moral inventory*. Albert Schweitzer's suggestion was to "make a secret account of what you have neglected in thoughtlessness or in meanness in consideration of some other person's existence." Such self-reflection leaves little room for blaming others or complaining about how we have been treated. Instead we are stripped naked of our excuses, rationalizations, and self-

justification, leaving us to view our life as we have lived it. There is great power in reality as it is.

As human beings we possess the heartfelt desire to know ourselves and find meaning in our lives. And we have the capacity to do so. We may be the only creatures in the universe who can reflect on ourselves. We can observe our own thoughts and feelings and recall the actions and events of the past as if observing ourselves in a mirror. This capacity for self-reflection holds the key to our freedom while, at the same time, emerging from the roots of our own suffering.

Yet it is our suffering that awakens our desire for truth. It nudges, pricks, and pokes us with difficult questions and discontent. We can no longer be pacified by the accumulation of “stuff”. We become exhausted by a mind that constantly complains, criticizes, and judges others. Our dissatisfaction with ourselves and our lives spawns a sincere examination of that life.

So please join me on a journey of attention and self-reflection. Let's examine reality in a cup of tea. Let's study attention using our attention. Let's explore freshness in a candy wrapper and discover who taught us ancient ritual of tying our shoes. Let's watch the film of our life to see how we have lived and how life lives through us. On this journey we'll destroy false myths, do battle with ego-centered dragons, get snared in traps of pride, and get stuck in the quicksand of selfishness. Yet even as we travel, our courage and effort are gifts, and limited faith we have in ourselves is replaced by greater faith in life itself.

Reprinted from **Naikan: Gratitude, Grace and the Japanese Art of Self-Reflection** (2002, Stonebridge Press) by Gregg Krech.