

## The Beautiful Trap: by John Kain



By Lance Letscher/McMurtry Gallery

I'm sitting for fifteen hours a day in a four-by-four cell behind a shoji screen. Meals are brought three times a day to my enclosure, and apart from a short work period, two brief outdoor walks, bathroom breaks, a daily shower, and sleep time, I never leave my space.

There are only three of us on retreat here; although hardly mainstream, Naikan practice is beginning to catch on in the United States. It is a gracefully simple practice of reflection on your personal relationships—to your mother, father, siblings, lovers, friends—focused on three pointed questions: *What have I received from that person? What have I given that person? What troubles have I caused that person?* Fifty to sixty percent of your time, however, is spent on the third question, an emphasis that ties the ego in knots and tends to awaken a healthy dose of responsibility—and guilt.

The Japanese word *naikan* means “looking inside” or, more poetically, “seeing oneself with the mind’s eye,” an activity that triggers a profound shift in the way you view your relationships. Your responses to Naikan’s three questions, which surface gradually, painfully, joyfully—combined with the imperative to see yourself as others do—force you to renegotiate the boundaries you erect between yourself and others.

While I sit on a zafu, surrounded by the clicking of baseboard heaters and the sound of food being cooked in the kitchen below, it was in a cave that the progenitor of Naikan practice sat, over sixty years ago. A devout Japanese Jodo Shinshu Buddhist (a sect of Pure Land) named Ishin Yoshimoto had an awakening

while practicing an austere form of meditation and self-reflection called *mishirabe*. The essence of that experience, molded by Yoshimoto into a more accessible practice he called *Naikan*, has rippled through the years—and across the ocean—to where I sit now, at the end of winter, in a beautiful old farmhouse in Monkton, Vermont.

Naikan creates—on one level—a very personal, and often painful, existential balance sheet. It gives you the opportunity to see how much support you’ve received from others over the years. It lets you realize your nonrepayable debts, shines a light on what and how you’ve given, and exposes the missteps you’ve made. But Naikan is more than just a personal accounting. Ultimately Naikan practice exists most comfortably in the murky territory between psychotherapy and Buddhism – and between the intellect and the blood-pulse of the body.

As a Zen practitioner, I’m familiar with the routine of long hours on the meditation cushion and the need for sustained attention, but Naikan brings a new flavor to my practice. Zen invites us to empty our minds in order to gain insight into the emptiness of self, and through this emptiness into the nature of the world. Naikan, on the other hand, urges us to fill our minds, through memory and reflection, with the weave of interpersonal connections that we’ve used (both realistically and unrealistically) to define our existence, and through this process it forces us to reconsider what constitutes our “self.” So while both practices are rooted in single-pointed concentration, in traditional Zen practice this concentration creates stillness of mind, sometimes compared to the gradual settling of sediment to the bottom of a glass of muddy water. The three questions of Naikan practice, however, churn up this sediment—of desire, anger, confusion, tenderness—and set it before us, challenging us at once to see through it, and to keep stirring.

I spend the first twenty-four hours of the retreat reflecting on my mother—which is how every Naikan intensive begins. Using Naikan’s three questions, I start by remembering my mother from my birth to age six, and then move forward through memory in three-year increments. Each stage of reflection lasts from two to three hours, after which a Naikan “guide” arrives, opens my shoji screen and, following an exchange of bows, listens to what I’ve recalled. This process is called *mensetsu*, the Japanese word for “interview,” and generally lasts a brief five to ten minutes. It allows the naikansha, or participant, to give voice to all the thoughts that have arisen, which is a powerful component of the process. Yet there are no judgments, no analyses, no offers of absolution. Occasionally the Naikan guide will give gentle advice to keep you focused, or encourage you to be as specific as possible in your recollections—but that’s all.

As I dredge up specific memories of what I received from my mother in early childhood—the German chocolate cake she made for my birthday, the gentle way she taught me to swim—I am filled with a palpable sense of appreciation. I feel more permeable, less armored. The idea of myself as “solitary” no longer plays. I can see my existence as an accumulation of layers, like colorful sedimentary rock, deposited through the acts of others, the acts of nature.

Yet my expanded sense of appreciation is hard to accept. I struggle to reconcile all of these wonderful memories with my long-held idea that I’ve suffered in the past; I want to be able to feel simply grateful. I stare at the light coming through the shoji screen two feet in front of my face, feel its elemental warmth. I stand up, stretch, and sit back down on the zafu, adjust my legs, take a few breaths. I move on to the second question: What did I give to my mother? Blank. I can’t stop the incoming memories of what I received. Eventually, I manage to dredge up a memory of making her a small table in wood shop, a couple of homemade birthday cards; I once wrote her a poem . . . the self-centeredness of childhood rolls right into my adult years. I move on to the third question: the troubles I caused. Once again, a deluge of memories. When I take my bathroom break I find, taped above the toilet on a fresh sheet of white paper, a written account of a previous participant’s reflection on his mother. He, too, felt he had given so little and caused much pain. I am somewhat reassured, yet when I return to my zafu it seems I can almost see the memories of my selfishness hovering above it, like a swarm of mosquitoes buzzing around a favorite camping spot. I sigh and settle back down. Any conceit I might have come with is rapidly deflating; even flushing the toilet seemed a symbolic act.

In Japan Naikan moved quickly away from its religious roots as its memory-dredging effect and deep reflection proved it to be a successful therapy technique in prisons, hospitals, psychiatric wards, and addiction clinics. Although Naikan was still practiced in Buddhist temples, for lay practitioners the traditional weeklong intensive retreat was more popularly supplemented or replaced by outpatient Naikan practices such as journal writing, daily reflections, and counseling sessions.

Naikan was introduced to America through a man named David Reynolds, an American schooled in cultural anthropology. Reynolds began studying Naikan and Morita techniques in the 1960s (developed in the early 1900s, Morita therapy is a Zen-based awareness practice focused on changing behavior by acknowledging and accepting emotions). In 1981 Reynolds conducted the first weeklong Naikan intensive in America at a Jodo Shinshu Temple in San Luis Obispo, California.

Eventually Reynolds de-emphasized the religious aspects of both practices and placed them under one umbrella that he called Constructive Living. The ToDo Institute in Middlebury, Vermont, run by Gregg Krech and his wife, Linda Anderson Krech, is the only center in the country that offers traditional Naikan. Krech was introduced to Naikan through Reynolds, yet he also practiced with a number of Japanese Naikan teachers and was a student of Pure Land Buddhism for over ten years. To Krech, Naikan's religious lineage seemed entirely compatible with its use as a therapy. This holistic perspective was one of the primary reasons Naikan appealed to me as a Zen practitioner. I wanted to be able to explore the "blind spots" in my spiritual practice as I gained a more secular insight into my personal relationships. When you're in the midst of intense self-examination, however, the question of whether Naikan is closer to a religious practice or psychotherapy seems irrelevant.

Yet a concern for that distinction still hovers around Naikan's proponents and practitioners. Krech tells me that he doesn't consider the Naikan retreat to be "religious," per se. "Some people attend Naikan retreats solely because they have psychological or emotional problems," he explains. "Others come for spiritual practice. And still others just because they are seeking something to help them move forward with their life in a very practical way. Naikan will accommodate you at any, or all, of these levels."

Back on my cushion after a short walk, I hear a tapping sound and see, through the crack in my shoji screen, a cardinal pecking at the windowpane. The red is like a flame against the frozen landscape that stretches beyond the frost-laced glass. I imagine it must be tapping at its own reflection, perhaps frightened of it, and I empathize. In the face of all the self-deprecation the morning has unearthed, I find myself wanting to answer a conspicuously absent fourth question: How about all the troubles my mother and father caused me?

But Naikan is a beautiful trap; it leaves little room for the ego to wriggle. No matter what happened in the past, the practice tells us, we are now solely responsible for our own freedom—or our own bondage. Blame can find no purchase.

When a Naikan guide arrives to hear my reflection, my words feel forced and phony as I try to summon feelings of gratefulness to compensate for the raw guilt that gnaws at my center. I confess this to Krech later, and he advises me to focus on remembering as much detail as possible—the colors, the smells, the textures of things—and, most of all, to stop analyzing. "That's not a part of Naikan," he

reminds me. His guidance helps, yet I continue to swing back and forth between what I feel is “real” and what I feel is forced by my desire to be a “good” Naikan student, filled with newfound humility. A couple of times I actually invent memories, telling them to the guide to complete some requirement I’ve made up in my head: “Be good, be humble.”

Over the course of the week, I reflect on my father, my brother, my ex-wife, my best friend, and my girlfriend, Kathryn . . . it’s like seeing myself from countless vantage points. The key is just to watch the memories, the emotions, and the body sensations. It is not punishment and it is not an attempt to heal. As in Zen, at its core is the persistent probing into the nature of self. But instead of returning to the breath or to a koan or to “just sitting,” the Naikan participant continually returns to one of the three questions and the reflections it gives rise to, asking, Where in all of this enmeshed exchange of giving and taking do I stop and others begin? Miso soup, salad, and two slices of homemade bread with melted cheese are brought to my “cave”—and, surprisingly, it is this simple offering that finally causes me to break down and weep. I walk outside and look at the Green Mountains, to the south. I see bobcat prints in the snow. Confronted by the presence of the still white landscape, a chill wind flushing my cheeks, I find the momentum of the morning’s practice penetrates even here, that somehow it has broken into my mind, limned my thoughts. I remember that my sister once paid for my flight home for Christmas when I was broke. I remember screaming at my mother, calling her terrible names. I remember helping to pay for and organize my parents’ fiftieth wedding anniversary. I remember how little affection I’ve given to Kathryn over the last month. Later that day, a gift arrives from a friend and another from a Naikan participant whom I’ve never met (a not-uncommon occurrence at these retreats), and I experience a flood of emotions, from unworthiness to tender gratitude to a more open awareness of how I’m supported every day by ten thousand different acts of giving.

I think of how different this process is from Zen meditation—one looking inward, one looking outward—yet how they both ultimately point to the emptiness of self. I find that Naikan repopulates my Zen practice, which has a tendency to drift into abstraction, with the specificity of my personal relationships. The treasure of sangha (one of the more difficult—because least controllable—aspects of my Buddhist practice) is revealed. Community nourishes humility, a trait that I tend to forget in my recurring myopic vision of enlightenment. Which is to say, Naikan makes me a better Zen student. Most importantly it helps me (as does Zen) to forget myself by shifting focus onto others. This makes me more aware of how I treat the people I love, and more aware of how much grace is involved in my

existence. On my return I express my newfound appreciation to my mother, and it opens a door that had been shut for years. We still have our usual problems, but there's more trust involved, more honesty. I also tell Kathryn how bad I've felt about being so distant. She smiles and says I should go on more of these retreats.

Driving home at the end of the retreat, I take the route through Middlebury and stop at a pottery shop to buy Kathryn a gift, but I find nothing she'd like. I decide to get her some flowers at the florist closer to home. On the road, I admire the late-winter sun's glow against the fading snow banks. Large patches of dark earth, a red silo, and a string of horses slip by the car window. Suddenly, a strange thought enters my mind: "Naikan has nothing to do with me." I say it out loud: "Naikan has nothing to do with me." Tears well up in my eyes, and the landscape blurs. It makes no sense. When I get to the florist near home, it is closed. At first I think I'm returning empty-handed. But then it hits me.



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### **How to do Naikan Practice at Home**

**What and Why:** Naikan practice offers us an opportunity to see ourselves through the eyes of others, cultivate gratitude, and develop a realistic awareness of the interconnectedness of all life. It is a wonderful complement to other methods of Buddhist practice.

**Where:** Choose a quiet place with few distractions. Sit on a meditation cushion or comfortable chair.

**When:** Daily Naikan reflection is focused on everyone who has played a role in your life during the previous day. It is best done just before bedtime, for twenty to thirty minutes. Traditional Naikan reflection, which focuses on a specific person, can be done any time, for forty-five minutes to an hour.

**How:** Three questions provide the structure for Naikan practice. For traditional Naikan, the object of your reflection can be anyone who has played a meaningful role in your life: your mother, father, sibling, spouse, teacher, colleague, child, friend, and so on. For daily practice, the object is more general. The three questions are:

1. What have I received from others?
2. What have I given to others?
3. What troubles and difficulties have I caused others?

Avoid reflecting on the entire duration of your relationship with someone, unless you've only known that person for a few months. Instead, reflect on your relationship in increments of months or years. The time frame for your practice must be established before beginning. Spend half the time on the first two questions and half the time on the third question.

“Many people choose to write about their Naikan reflection, or share it with someone else. Writing can help you stay focused and provides a useful written record of your reflections. Sharing your Naikan reflection with someone else is called mensetsu in Japanese. The listener should simply be attentive, and should not offer any comments or advice. Mensetsu should conclude with an offering of thanks for the privilege of listening.”—Gregg Krech, founder of the ToDo Institute

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