

Just Say Thanks

Set aside 30 minutes, preferably at the end of the day, to try this Naikan practice. *By Frank Jude Boccio*

Sitting comfortably, with eyes closed, take a few moments to bring attention to your breath, mantra, or any other technique that you normally use to center yourself. When you feel settled, ask yourself this series of questions:

What have I received today?

Be specific and reflect on as many things as you can recall. It can be something as simple as your partner's smile, the sound of a bird singing at dawn, the driver who let you merge into the crowded freeway. Remember, the motivation or attitude of those who gave you something is not the issue. Maybe you were offered lunch because you showed up at lunchtime, not because your friend made a personal effort to make you lunch. The fact is, you were fed, and you can feel gratitude for that. The mere fact that you benefited from someone's actions is all that is needed to cultivate gratitude.

Notice which of these things you did not appreciate as they happened. Can you recall what was taking your attention when one of these acts of grace occurred? Were you stuck in problem-solving mode, thinking of your to-do list, or making judgments?

We often live as if the world owes us. As you reflect on what you have been given today, you will likely see that, if anything, you owe the world an insurmountable debt. This insight is more than merely humbling; you may find yourself feeling a deeper sense of gratitude and a natural desire to be generous in serving others.

What have I given today?

Go through the day's events in the same way, but this time notice what you have given to others. Be as specific and concrete as possible. As above, your motivation is irrelevant. What did you actually do? It may have been as simple as feeding your cats, washing the breakfast dishes, or sending a friend a birthday card. You may find that without great fanfare you contribute to the well-being of many people and animals—you make a positive difference to the planet.

What difficulties and troubles did I cause today?

Again, be specific. Don't overlook the seemingly insignificant. Your list may include things like "I backed up traffic while looking for a place to park" or "I chased the cats off the lounge chair so I could sit there." This question is often the hardest, but its importance cannot be overstated. It may bring up feelings of remorse, but its primary purpose is to provide a more realistic view of your life.

In general, we are all too aware of how others cause us inconvenience or difficulty, but rarely do we notice when we are the source of inconvenience. And if we do, we usually brush it aside as an accident, not that big a deal, or simply something we didn't mean to do. We cut ourselves a huge length of slack! But seeing how you cause others difficulty can deflate your ego while reminding you again of the grace by which you live.

These questions provide the framework for reflecting on all your relationships, including those with family, friends, co-workers, partners, pets, and even objects. You can reflect on the events of one day, a specific person over the course of your relationship, or a holiday visit with family.

Remember, what makes this a meditative practice is that you are not analyzing your motivations or intentions; you are not interpreting or judging. You are simply shifting your attention from self-centered thinking to seeing things as they are, and as all yoga traditions point out, in seeing, there is wisdom and liberation.

