

Naikan: Japanese Psychotherapy

People commonly think of psychology as a Western cultural activity. However, psychology has increasingly been used in non-Western countries to address modern problems that traditional means of therapy have difficulty with. India, for example, has an active psychology sector that is the largest outside of the Western world. Japan also has developed some of its own psychological therapies. One of these Japanese therapies is “Naikan” (内観), which means “looking within” or “introspection.”

When engaging non-Western psychotherapies it is helpful if a person is open to ideas and practices that are based in non-Western cultural values and understandings about psychological disease and healing. An “experience first, evaluate afterwards” orientation is the basic Asian methodology. This orientation uses mind as attention rather than thinking. This is a use of mind that Westerners often need training in as thinking is the usual basis of a Western education. Rather than focusing on changing a person’s environment, the Eastern focus is on changing the person and adjusting to one’s environment. While many Western psychologies are based on the belief that human development necessarily includes in some way separating from one’s family of origin and becoming one’s own person, East Asian psychologies are generally oriented to the belief that healthy development occurs only within strong relationships with one’s family.

Naikan therapy in many ways reflects this Eastern approach. A good example is the three basic questions that form the nucleus of the Naikan method. These questions are asked in the context of a person being asked to examine their relationship to someone (or something). They are, (1) What have you received from ...? (2) What have you returned to ...? (3) What difficulties have you caused to ...? On the average 20% of one’s time is spent on each of the first two questions and 60% is spent on the third question. The Naikan belief is that psychological illness comes from selfishness and a lack of gratitude for what has been received from others. Healing in Naikan comes from not from the disappearance of one’s psychological difficulties, but from character development that enables a person to handle their difficulties. In particular a person needs to confront their own realistic guilt for errors made, acknowledge having been loved and cared for, and develop a new self-image based on responsibility, courage, and humility.

A person begins Naikan practice by examining these questions in relationship to their mother. This relationship is considered to be a person’s foundational relationship and the symbol of all other relationships. The examination is generally done in three year periods, beginning from birth up to the present. When this examination is finished, one’s relationship to their father is next examined in the same way, then other family members, and then other significant people.

This examination is conducted very much like a meditative exercise. Naikan takes much, both theoretically and practically, from the Jodo Shinshu sect of Buddhism. A person isolates themselves and explores each question in relationship to whom (or what) they are focusing on. When practicing at a Naikan center, a person stays the whole time in a corner of a room behind a screen, only leaving to go to the bathroom. Meals are brought to the participant. Every hour or so a Naikan guide comes to the participant and

asks them what are the results of their introspection. This guide does not interpret, only listens and tries to assist the participant to focus. A full Naikan session lasts a week, but after a person has learned the technique, they can use it during their daily life in short periods.

A Naikan experience, as can be imagined, is an intense psychological adventure. It is a particular style of “consciousness surfing,” a concentrated period of self-introspection that may lead to potential life-changing views and experiences of oneself. In Japan it has been used very successfully with people who have social problems, such as prison inmates. When used regularly during daily life many people report that it helps them participate more fully and healthily in daily life. In my own one week experience I was able, after some years of fighting, to finally understand the perspective of a business partner.

One of the main problems that Westerners have with Naikan is its political implications. People ask, for example, how they can have gratitude for a parent who abused them. This is a legitimate question and perhaps a limitation of Naikan. While acknowledging this limitation, the Naikan approach is still that human beings tend not to have gratitude for others and it is this tendency that people must focus on in order to grow.

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