

One of the factors that seems to influence how we feel is our attitude toward the world. If we are constantly concerned with getting our share, with making sure we aren't left out, if we are extremely self-focused and self-conscious, then we are likely to have a lot of miserable feelings. The world just never seems to send us green lights and lottery prizes and kind words when we want them. And we want them nearly all the time.

Have you ever stopped to think about how much of you is truly yours? Your name was given to you by your parents. So was your body. The words you use were taught to you by parents and peers and teachers. Your body has grown and is sustained by food that people you don't even know produced and processed for you. The clothes you wear were created and sewn by others, bought with money given to you by someone else. Even the ideas you have seem to bubble to the surface of your mind, coming out of nowhere and passing along to be replaced by other thoughts from nowhere. There's nothing that is truly yours; it is all borrowed. Of course, it is the same for all of us.

You may say, of course, that you bought your clothes with your own money. But who gave you the money? Who taught you to do the work you do that earned the money? Who hired you? Who gave you the basic educational skills to learn the trade you ply? The point is that when we trace back our achievements far enough, we see the fruits of others' efforts in our behalf, inevitably. We have done nothing on our own.

Strange, then, that we should have the notion that we are self-made. We believe that we got where we are by our own efforts. With just a little bit of reflection we can see that such notions of having come this far on our own are laughable. Deeper reflection allows us to see in even greater detail how we have been, and continue to be, supported on all sides in all sorts of ways by people and things and energies (such as electricity and the sun's heat and light).

One result of sorting out the specific, concrete ways in which the world supports us (just as you are supporting me now by loaning me your eyes to read this chapter) is a feeling of gratitude. I don't deserve all this help from you and this paper and the electricity that powers this word processor (and the people who worked to generate this electricity) and the editor and publisher of

this book and the manufacturers of this printer's ink, book designers, and the people who taught me these lifeways, and so forth. But through Naikan, we can come to notice and appreciate the surrounding nurturance from the world and to offer words of thanks. Before I underwent a week of Naikan training in Japan, I thought all this was my due. I took it for granted, and drift back into that attitude sometimes still. But whether I recognize it or not, whether I accept it or not, whether I feel gratitude or not, whether I try to return the favors or not, reality keeps on being what it is. It keeps on giving to me, not in some abstract sense, but concretely, through Jim and Frank and Lynn and this keyboard and so forth.

So the natural response to realizing what is really going on is the desire to repay, and a sort of guilt when we see that we haven't been doing much repaying right along. Starting with our parents, our attitude shifts from how little we have received from them and how much more they owe us to one of how much we have received from them and how important it is to start working on giving back something to them. I'm not suggesting that all parents are perfect and that they have done a perfect job in raising us. But I am asserting that there were some adults in our lives who fed and clothed us and nurtured us when we were small. They did it whether they were in the mood or not, over and over again, whether we felt appreciative or showed them gratitude or not—or we wouldn't have survived to be here today.

The gratitude and desire to repay apply to the people in your life today, as well, and to objects in your world. What have you done for your shoes lately, for your car, for electricity, for your toothbrush and stereo set? If you take a moment to consider what they have done for you, it seems not quite so odd to think of what you might do for them in return.

I've never met a suffering neurotic person who was filled with gratitude. Isn't that something? Gratitude and neurotic suffering seem to be antagonistic. If there is anything characteristic of neurosis it is a self-centeredness. Gratitude, on the other hand, is other-centered. It carries with it the desire to serve others in repayment, even if it causes some inconvenience to oneself.

The most joyful people I have known have all been people who gave themselves away to others. The most miserable people I have known have all been concerned with looking out for themselves. Check with your own experience, look around. Despite commercials to the contrary, looking out for number one is a sure path to torment.



QUESTIONS TO BE ANSWERED  
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