

Rites of incubation in the modern world: The symbolic experience of *death-rebirth- reconnection* in Naikan Therapy

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Abstract. *The present article aims at drawing attention to one of the original Japanese psychotherapeutic approaches, Naikan therapy. The article discusses the method's therapeutic mechanisms and effects as originally interpreted through the prism of the author's personal experience both as a client and an interviewer. Emphasizing the striking similarities between the throughout process of reflection on one's past done during intensive Naikan practice on one hand, and the spontaneous self-reflection that many people do on the verge of death, on the other, we suggest that it is exactly the symbolic death experience which triggers the method's therapeutic mechanisms. According to our interpretation, these mechanisms are (i) mirroring function, which results in improved interpersonal relationships and social awareness; and (ii) existential grounding function, which results in a positive transformation on all levels – social, physical and spiritual.*

To further elucidate the symbolic experience of death and rebirth within the Naikan therapy setting, we briefly relate the intensive Naikan practice to the ancient rites of incubation. In analogy to these rituals practiced in many ancient cultures, Naikan therapy, too, attributes great importance to prolonged seclusion and silence as key factors for evoking transformative experiences, healing included.

Keywords: Naikan therapy; symbolic experience of death; death-rebirth-reconnection process; seclusion and silence.

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INTRODUCTION Often recognized as a unique amalgam of past times palpitating alongside ultra-high technologies, the Land of the Rising Sun has given birth to some cultural phenomena that could hardly be found elsewhere in the world. These phenomena often remain veiled in mystery, and, probably because of this, as Japanese essayist Shūichi Katō (**Note 1**) points out, Japanese scholars readily research and try to adopt Western approaches, but the opposite is rarely the case (as cited in Miki & Kuroki, 1998, p. 5). This tendency seems to be especially valid for the original Japanese psychotherapies like, for example, Morita, Naikan and Dohsa-hou: the knowledge about them and their application remain more or less confined to their native country and to some Asian neighbours. In an attempt to cast more light on the fascinating world of the Japanese psychotherapies, in the present article we introduce and discuss one of the above approaches, the Naikan therapy.

Naikan therapy could be considered one-of-a-kind phenomenon in the contemporary mental healthcare for it was born out of an indigenous religious practice. Moreover, in contrast even to the other Japanese psychotherapies, the method's founder, Ishin Yoshimoto, was not an academic scholar. Deeply-rooted in the Japanese culture, Naikan therapy includes an array of peculiarities unfamiliar to its Western counterparts. For example, (i) secluded and uncluttered physical setting - the client sits quietly on the floor behind a folding screen where he has to explore his past thoroughly; (ii) stringent

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rules and schedule – the practitioner is not allowed to leave the walled-off place, except when he goes to the restroom or takes a bath, neither is he allowed to talk to anyone except the interviewer. The interviewer, in turn, opens/closes the folding screen and bows ritualistically before/after every interview, which takes part every two hours; and (iii) both the introspection process and the subsequent interview are based only on three questions, namely:

- “What have I received from [...]?”
- “What have I given/done for him/her in return?”
- “What troubles and difficulties have I caused him/her?” (**Note 2**).

Having in mind all these specifics of Naikan therapy, we shall discuss here an issue, which we consider related to the method’s key therapeutic mechanisms and effects – this is the symbolic experience of death, and, as a result, of rebirth and reconnection. Referring to the author’s personal experience in Naikan therapy both as a client and an interviewer, we claim that as subtly as they may, these aspects permeate the overall Naikan setting and practice even today, and clearly reflect the method’s origination from the austere religious practice of *mishirabe* (**Note 3**).

Additionally, the specific therapeutic setting, which includes the interviewer’s ritual-like behaviour and which requires the client to spend almost 16 hours a day being enclosed by a folding screen, allows us to relate, albeit superficially, Naikan therapy with the ancient rites of incubation – *incubatio*. These rituals refer to prehistoric caves and megalithic monuments where one should remain secluded for a certain period of time in order to receive, usually in a dream, some sort of revelation, inspiration or healing (Benozzo, *in press*). Practiced also in many ancient cultures and religions at shrines and sanctuaries, these rituals, Reed suggests, actually externalize a psychological fact – a projection that mirrors natural inner processes of self-regulation, healing or transformation (Reed, 1976, p. 55). In other words, by aligning the practitioner with the symbolic structure of a ritual that occurs within non-daily setting, a certain inner condition, which otherwise cannot be produced directly, is allowed to arise. This inner condition is often related to profound transformation that puts the man to test, since he has to symbolically die for his old self. Only then could the positive outcomes the practitioner seeks after – be it a revelation, inspiration or healing – be expected.

In the present article we use *incubatio* only as a metaphor that, we claim, appropriately depicts the very essence of Naikan therapy and helps us better explain what actually is therapeutic about it. To put it in other words, what is therapeutic about secluding oneself in the prolonged silence, and how experiencing death on a symbolic level helps us affirm the infinite Life and thus improve our finite lives.

WHY NAIKAN THERAPY AND DEATH? Apart from some particular articles (**Note 4**), the theme of death and its role within the Naikan setting is rarely mentioned in the Naikan-related studies and, to the best of our knowledge, no in-depth research has been carried out in the field so far. The issue is present in articles on Naikan’s introduction and application in the terminal care practice (Maeshiro, 2005, pp. 213-223), but predominantly from the perspective of the approaching death, which results from an incurable disease.

It is therefore well-justified to begin with what Takahiro Takemoto, Naikan-specialist and head of Ibusuki Takemoto Hospital in Kagoshima, has observed in his capacity of a medical doctor. When attending many patients at their deathbeds, Takemoto has noticed that when patients realize they are about to die, they often start sincerely reflecting on their past and try to explore what life they have led, i.e. whether they have hurt somebody, or whether they regret about something. When their clock strikes, many of the patients being surrounded by their families, say final words like “Thank you very much for everything” and “Take care for those after me”.

However, Takemoto points out, it is too late for deathbed repentances and reflections. Rather, we should do them at least once in the midst of life, and this kind of reflection is what every Naikan practitioner actually does. He thoroughly explores his life (Takemoto, 1994, p. 1).

And indeed, if we consider only the physical atmosphere required for an intensive Naikan practice, we will notice some striking similarities between it and deathbed experiences: as already mentioned above, the Naikan client sits quietly on the floor behind a folding screen, usually in the corner of the room. He is not allowed to leave the walled-off place, except when he goes to the restroom or takes a bath, neither is he allowed to talk to anyone except the interviewer. The practitioner even takes his meals behind the screen. Any external stimuli and unnecessary physical movements are thus blocked, allowing the client to duly explore his inner world.

Such a specific setting provides quite a favourable ground for transformative experiences to take place: the practitioner is literally taken out of the flow of his daily grind and the narrow space behind the folding screen becomes his whole world over one whole week. It is there where he should recollect his past carefully and in detail. However, and this is very important about Naikan, the practitioner is not simply recollecting his past and telling random pieces of his life story, but he has to do this through the prism of the three Naikan questions alone: “What have I received from [...]?” “What have I given/done for him/her in return?”, and “What troubles and difficulties have I caused him/her?”

Reflecting on one’s past in such a way provides a solid structure that helps the practitioner acknowledge two existential conditions pertinent to all human beings. These conditions form the very essence of the Naikanistic philosophy: (i) human beings are fundamentally selfish and guilty, (ii) yet at the same time they are rendered incommensurate benevolence from others (Murase, 1974, p. 388). If put in psychoanalytical terms, this would mean the practitioner simultaneously realizes his *guilty self* and his *beloved self* (Kusano, 2001a, p. 7).

At a more profound perspective, however, the very practice of thoroughly recollecting the past in order to strike a balance of one’s deeds is, as we mentioned above, exactly what many people do on their deathbeds or, as Becker reports, also when near-death experiences occur (1992, p. 20). Again, we need to discuss the deathbed experiences as unique existential situations abound in retrospection, introspection, and focus on determining “the things that really matter”.

Scarre further elucidates these situations by pointing out that near-death time is the time when people can finally afford to be honest with themselves, having no further need of self-deception or for casting a blind eye upon uncomfortable facts. On the verge of death, people can play their own critics, stepping temporarily out of the protagonist’s role and examining their own motives, acts, achievements and failures with more or less objectivity. In a sense, the knowledge that the sands of life are running out puts dying people in a privileged position to grasp truths that are obscure to others (2009, pp. 158-160).

This description is somewhat akin to the deathbed *haiku*-poem of 18th century Zen Buddhist monk Ryōkan:

Now it reveals its hidden side
And now the other – thus it falls
An autumn leaf (**Note 5**)

On the verge of death, not only do we all become equal like falling autumn leaves, but, Ryōkan seems to suggest, this is the time when everything is revealed, there is nothing left for us to hide.

Going back to Naikan therapy, we notice that this is what every Naikan practitioner does, too. There is nothing left for him to hide in the silent emptiness behind the folding screen. He faces everything he has received, given in return, and all the troubles he has ever caused simply the way they are, not the way he subjectively interprets them. After the prolonged birth pangs of honest retrospection, the practitioner is being born to the naked truth about himself and the way he relates to the other people and to the world. And this truth makes him, as it is the case with many dying people, more humble, forgiving and grateful.

Needless to say, death is the only life event we cannot experience by ourselves amidst our lives, i.e., the only experience we have is the one of our own being alive. As Nishimuta points out, we know about death only from the perspective of side observes of others’ death and this fact most likely reinforces our fond delusion that death is by no means related to us (Nishimuta, 2009, p. 17). Therefore, experiencing

death while alive could teach us to be careful how to spend the limited time we are given and to refrain from everything that threatens to poison it. In this case, the specific behaviour observed among many death row inmates might be an appropriate illustration: death row inmates lead extremely fulfilling lives in the prison – they write poetry, draw pictures and participate in various activities, in sharp contrast to their life-long banished counterparts who tend to be apathetic and indifferent (Kusano, 2001a, p. 6; Ishii, 1999, pp. 193-194).

This implies that the constant recalling of our transient nature have the potential to add meaning to life as a one-time unique chance, and inspire us to make the most out of it. In other words, as Fleischman puts it, the task is to live as if death were our daily guide so that we live fully and well (1989, p. 241). Such a point of view on death does not degrade, but, on the contrary, further augments the value of life. In a sense, it replaces the fear of death by will for life.

If interpreted in this vein, the intensive Naikan practice could then be defined as *a unique opportunity for symbolically experiencing our own death in the midst of life*. That is, a unique opportunity to be honest with ourselves and reconsider our behaviour, rearrange our interpersonal relationships, and reset our whole lives before it is too late. Albeit figurative and symbolic, the presence of death within the Naikan setting seems to function exactly in this direction – it disarms our ceaseless desire for justifying ourselves and our past deeds, and makes our firm pre-conceived self-images flake away. For it is exactly these desires and self-images that often invisibly entangle us in illusions and dazzle truths that otherwise can help us live in a more constructive and humane way.

This actually explains to a great extent as to why the third Naikan question, i.e. “What troubles/difficulties have I caused to...?” becomes central to the entire practice. Naikan’s founder Ishin Yoshimoto often advised the ratio of the time spent on reflecting upon each of the three questions should be 20:20:60, respectively, with a special emphasis on the third question. Referring to the philosophy of *Jōdo Shinshū* Buddhism and to his own experience with the austere religious practice of *mishirabe* (see **Note 3**), Yoshimoto explained that sin actually has no substance in itself, neither does it have its own reality, but it stems from the darkness of our own ignorance and narrow-mindedness (Yoshimoto, 1977, pp.7-12). In other words, not the sin (trouble) itself is what matters, but it is the effect that sin would cause upon the people and the world around us (Chervenkova, 2012, p.78).

To realize the effect of our behaviour and become aware of the deep interconnectedness between all phenomena, however, we need to leave the narrow shell of our Ego. This tough process seems to be possible only if we first become fully aware of our own finitude. As we will try to explain below, exactly the symbolic death of the Ego and the subsequent rebirth for organic reconnection with the world is what Naikan therapy is grounded on.

Symbolic experience of death-rebirth-reconnection as a healing tool in Naikan therapy

Now we have understood how the Naikan therapeutic setting provides a favourable opportunity for the client to internalize in a healthy and constructive way the idea of his own mortality (**Note 6**). Spending almost 16 hours a day in a self-reflection without almost any physical motions, the Naikan practitioner resembles by all means a person on his deathbed. At the same time, the silent walled-off space behind the folding screen with the client sitting motionlessly inside resembles mother’s womb. Again, the symbolism of the Naikan therapeutic setting is reminiscent of the ancient rites of incubation. Similarly to them, in Naikan therapy it seems the client is mentally “incubated” so as to be reborn to a new state of consciousness and, as a result, be able to reorder and reset his life (Chervenkova, 2013, p. 74).

In Naikan therapy, this new state of consciousness is manifested in shifting one’s understanding from the Ego-biased perspective to the *sub specie aeternitatis* perspective, where man is born again to oneness and, as Faber points out in a different context, his isolation, his sense of being “stranger” in this world is once and for all being terminated (1998, p. 93). That is how the Naikan practitioner is reconnected, but not in some cultural or social sense alone, but also in the sense of very basic and primal oneness. Metaphysically, he experiences his own existence, his own being alive not as something alien to that of the whole humankind and the Universe, but, quite the contrary, as an intrinsic part of it.

But how is the Naikan practitioner given a chance for subsequent symbolic rebirth and reconnection in practice, so as to achieve the above-mentioned sense of primal oneness? What if during a week of tough practice, the narrow space behind the folding screen turns symbolically into the practitioner's coffin instead of a womb? In search for an answer, we will discuss more details of the specific process of Naikanistic self-reflection.

As we mentioned above, the Naikan practice is abound in stringent rules regarding both practitioner's and interviewer's behaviour. In addition, the retrospective process unfolds within a firm preliminary-set structure. One of the keystones of this structure stipulates the client should start reflecting on his past always with his mother (or, if that is the case, with his caregiver) by answering the questions "What have I received from my mother", "What have I given/done for her in return", and "What troubles and difficulties have I caused her?" (**Note 7**).

The successful accomplishment of Naikan for one's mother is usually considered good sign for the entire practice since, to no surprise, the mother image is representative of the whole world and reconciliation with her would be tantamount to reconciliation with the world. There are many examples of practitioners intensively experiencing their own sinfulness and the other people's love while doing Naikan for their mothers. And indeed, doing Naikan for one's mother may facilitate the way universal implications of maternity like unconditional love and care, and forgiveness manifest through other people, too (Miki, 1976, p. 275). As Ozawa-de Silva points out, from the Naikan perspective, even a person abandoned from his birth would still have something to feel grateful for to his mother just for the fact that he was taken care of in the womb and protected until birth; for that alone, such a person would still owe a debt impossible to pay back – this is his life (Ozawa-de Silva, 2006, p.133).

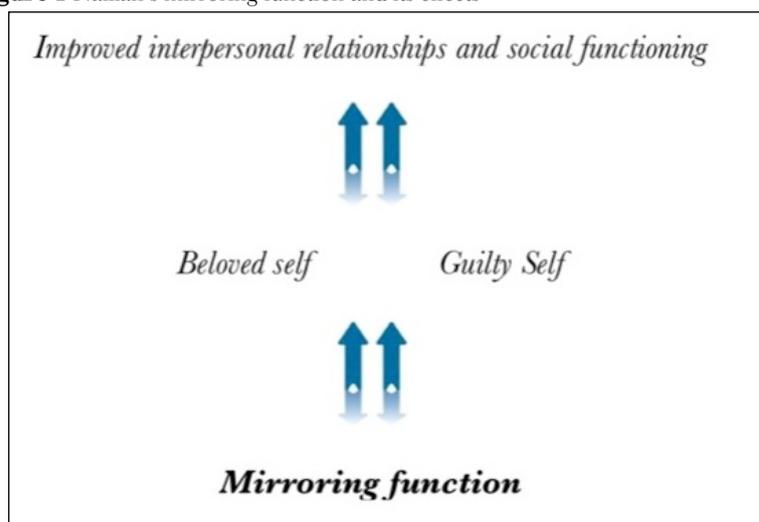
Once the practitioner realizes that (i) his mother gave him the inestimable gift of life and (ii) his whole life up to now was possible thanks to all the people he received care and support from, the practitioner's Ego-biased perspective transforms into a flexible understanding of the mutual interconnectedness this world exists upon.

From such a perspective, the client's perception, too, undergoes certain changes, which we will call here *Naikan change dimensions*, namely:

- altered perception of the self (as part of the whole) (**Note 8**)
- altered perception of the problem/illness
- altered perception of the others
- altered perception of the surroundings and the world.

In our understanding, each of these dimensions or all of them in their integrity could be expressed on two levels – the personal and interpersonal (social) level, and the transpersonal level. The first level refers to the personal well-being and social compatibility – with the Naikanistic understanding at hand, one can become more humble, more careful and respectful towards others and Nature, and lead a non-conflict life based on mutual understanding and healthy interpersonal relationships. In this sense, we can more or less agree with Lebra's definition of Naikan as a moral rehabilitation (1976, p. 201) and acknowledge the method's efficacy in the field of school truancy, juvenile delinquency, marital and professional conflicts, and drug, alcohol and hazard addictions.

This is the level where, we suggest, the Naikan's *mirroring function* manifests itself, i.e. mirroring himself in the relationship with others, primarily in that with the mother, the practitioner understands he has been constantly taken care of despite the problems he has caused. In other words, as it was mentioned above, he recognizes his guilty self and his beloved self. This process is very likely to lead to improved interpersonal relationships and social functioning (**Figure 1**).

Figure 1 Naikan's mirroring function and its effects

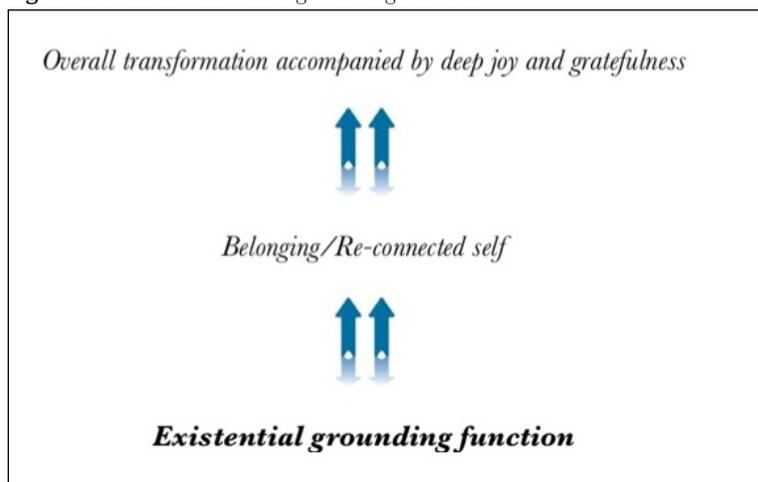
The second level, however, refers to the idea about mutual interconnectedness that surpasses the individual-society and time-space dichotomies. It would not be exaggerated to say that Naikan lures the practitioner to go beyond the intellectual grasp and common sense morality to a *lived experience* of the world as one of pure fluidity and constant interfusion where no act can have but an effect on the whole (**Note 9**). Attaining such a holistic view of the world where everything counts may evoke deep feelings of joy and gratefulness. And these are not triggered by some external stimuli, but inner joy and gratefulness stemming from giving up the Ego and *realizing* (i.e., *making real* on a daily basis) ourselves as integral parts of the miracle of Life. In other words, we die symbolically for our past and our old selves to be reborn in a world of interdependence where we can recognize ourselves as *belonging* (*re-connected*) selves.

Thus, if the first level could more or less be referred to as a moral and social rehabilitation, the second one is the level of overall transformation – social, physical and spiritual, which is triggered by a profound process of symbolical death and subsequent rebirth. And while the transformation that occurs on the first level may lead to an improved social functioning, the deeper death-and-rebirth-like transformation, we suggest, could be “held responsible” for the improvement or even complete cure of an array of diseases, as an impressive number of both Naikan practitioners and interviewers report (**Note 10**).

However, we should emphasize that Naikan hardly considers healing as an end in itself. Healing, as the Naikanistic philosophy assumes, is much too limited a concept, and symptoms and diseases are therefore never directly addressed in its context. Rather, Naikan therapy tries to take its clients beyond the health-sickness dichotomy while helping them polish their skills in reversing roles with others so as to understand the multifaceted wonder of this world. Once this task has been completed, healing occurs as a natural effect of the newly-acquired holistic point of view and this awareness is aspired after, rather than self-centred mental and physical health as ends in themselves.

On this second level of overall transformation, a function that we call *existential grounding* is manifested (**Figure 2**).

Figure 2 Naikan’s existential grounding function



We have elucidated so far how the transformative and healing efficacy of Naikan therapy could be interpreted in the light of the symbolic *death-rebirth-reconnection* experience. However, we should not forget that the stringent rules and the overall physical setting required for the intensive Naikan practice are *sine qua non* for this symbolic process to successfully unfold. The first step, no doubt, is stepping across the threshold of the world of daily life and its “busyness” to that of seclusion and silence. Exactly this step reflects Naikan’s evolvment out of *mishirabe* and corresponds to the practice’s essence, as Ozawa-de Silva defines it, as a preparation for death (Ozawa-de Silva, 2006, pp. 27-28): the practitioner is left all alone not only in the physical sense of the word – he may wish for deep human communication and connection, but all he finds is more and more of his own solitude. Even the only possible communication at that time – that with the Naikan interviewer, is being more or less cut off and limited only to reporting the answers to the tree questions. With the interviewer not responding, but just bowing ritualistically, the entire communication is being taken out of the human world’s “ordinariness” to a new state where “extraordinary” healing is very likely to occur.

CONCLUSION Along with Morita therapy, Naikan therapy is probably one of the most popular original Japanese psychotherapies outside Japan, yet some of its key aspects most likely remain obscure to the non-Japanese researchers. In the present article we introduced a novel interpretation of the method’s therapeutic mechanisms and effects by emphasizing its strong relationship with the symbolism of death and rebirth. It goes without saying that every psychotherapeutic approach is more or less committed to such a relationship as far as any inner transformation could be interpreted as a process of “dying” for the old and “being born” for the new. However, in Naikan therapy this relationship permeates the entire practice – from the method’s origination from the extremely austere religious practice of *mishirabe* to the overall setting as it is seen nowadays in the Naikan training centres across Japan.

Just as in the ancient rituals of incubation, in Naikan therapy too, we first need to seclude from this world both physically and metaphorically; to break up our old ignorance-based ties with it and pass through the hard process of symbolically experiencing our own death so as to reconnect with the world in a new, more constructive and humane way. And what is specific to Naikan therapy is that, in contrast to all talking psychotherapies, we do this job by ourselves. There is no one to analyse and interpret our past experiences or advise us for our future. The reconnection that we symbolically do deep inside us is actually the healing.

Exactly this opportunity for reconnection is what makes Naikan therapy quite a universal approach: despite its apparently strong cultural determinants, Naikan’s therapeutic implications in fact extend

beyond any cultural, social and racial boundaries, and refer to issues common to all mankind. In addition, it is the opportunity for reconnection that could be “held responsible” for the Naikan’s unquestionable beneficial effects in cases of psychological and/or physiological disturbances.

And last but not least, the Naikanistic approach is firmly rooted in the faith in man *per se*. For that reason, the therapy’s silent efforts seem to be aimed much less at “cutting off” what is problematic and negative, and much more at transforming it. In other words, Naikan therapy aims at restoring man’s ignorance-blurred image back to its intrinsic beauty and at “incubating” his further spiritual growth – a hard, but much needed task in the modern world.

NOTES

1. When using Japanese names, we adhere to the Western tradition of placing the personal name first, followed by the surname. As for the transliteration of Japanese terms, we use the Hepburn Romanization system (as we do with the personal names), and present them in Italics. In some cases, the original Japanese words are parenthesized immediately after.
2. For further details on the history and specifics of Naikan therapy, see Teruaki Maeshiro’s article in *World Cultural Psychiatry Research Review* “Naikan Therapy in Japan: Introspection as a Way of Healing-Introduction of Naikan Therapy” (Maeshiro, 2009).
3. *Mishirabe* (身調べ—to explore oneself; self-examination) has been an extremely austere esoteric practice in the ranks of *Jōdo Shinshū* (浄土真宗), a sect of the Japanese Pure Land Buddhism. In its original form, *mishirabe* has been intended to help one reflect thoroughly his past in an attempt to realize which deeds have prevailed so far - the good ones, referred in Japanese to as “seeds of virtue”, or the bad ones, also called “seeds of evil”. Therefore, besides not being allowed to eat and sleep, the practitioner has to answer every two hours one and only one question, namely “If you die right now, where you [your spirit] will go?” (Yoshimoto, 1983, p. 21) tantamount to “Which deeds you have done up to now prevail – those that would bind you for Heaven or those that would bind you for Hell?”
The purpose of *mishirabe* is therefore realizing the help and support one has had received since his birth till the present day from all the people, living creatures and even the Nature, and, while trying to compare his past deeds to this enormous support, to realize his self-centeredness and sinfulness. Apparently, a *mishirabe* practitioner should be the one who is not afraid of death and has the courage to readily part with his life in the name of spiritual transformation. Also, prevention from food and sleep as basic survival needs seems to be aimed at destroying the Ego and its desires.
4. These include “Naikan as Mourning Work” (Takino, 1980), “Naikan and Medicine” (Takemoto, 1994), “Thanatology and Naikan” (Kusano, 2001a) and “The Theme of Death and Rebirth in the Naikan Process” (Kusano, 2001b), all of them in Japanese.
5. 「裏を見せ 表を見せて 散る紅葉」 (translated by Yoel Hoffmann; Hoffmann, 1986, p. 268)
6. This might be referred to the Japanese cultural value of *mujōkan* (無常観・無常感), which literally means “sense of mortality”. It is perhaps nowhere more truly than in Japan, where death and mortality have given rise to cultural values and traditions. Despite how much attention the apparent relation between Naikan therapy and the Japanese cultural tradition may deserve, we do not have time and space to discuss it in-depth here.
7. Picking up real facts from one’s past is strongly encouraged in contrast to abstract answers such as, for example, “My mother loved me”.
8. It is worth mentioning that the Japanese word for “self, oneself” is *jibun* (自分), which literally means “my part (of the whole)”.
9. This Oriental worldview is symbolically referred to as the jewel net of Indra - a wonderful net hung in the heavenly abode of the Hindu god Indra. Each of the jewels the net is made of actually reflects all the other jewels, infinite in number (Cook, 1989, p. 214).
10. Improvement or even complete cure through intensive Naikan therapy has been reported for somatic diseases such as chronic asthma, atopic dermatitis, and even alopecia.

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