

# Thirty Thousand Days

A JOURNAL FOR PURPOSEFUL LIVING

## Softening the Heart

GREGG KRECH

**A**s we age, many facets of our body—bellies, breasts, buttocks—tend to soften and sag. Some of us strive to resist this process or at least slow it down. Others succumb to their newfound sponginess with reluctant acceptance. Yet there is one part of the body that tends to vacillate between softness and hardness... that is our heart. Most of us hope that our hearts will soften, but too often they are as hard as granite. They harden when we are angry and resentful and when we stiffen into a rigid, inflexible view. They harden when we condemn someone for some inappropriate act—condemn them from a position of arrogance, superiority or self-righteousness.

In contrast, soft-heartedness is a heart which is open, flexible and compassionate. A heart which tries to understand. A heart which puts itself in the other person's shoes. It is easy to see the hardened heart of another person. But it is difficult to see our own hardened heart.

*That's because a hard heart has no ability to observe its own hardness.*

In Japanese, the word for a softened heart is *nyunan* or *nyunan-shin*. When Dogen (1200-1253) came back from China after many years of studying Zen, he was asked what he had learned. He said, "Not much except soft-heartedness (*nyunan-shin*).

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**Attention**

**Self-Reflection**

**Morita Therapy**

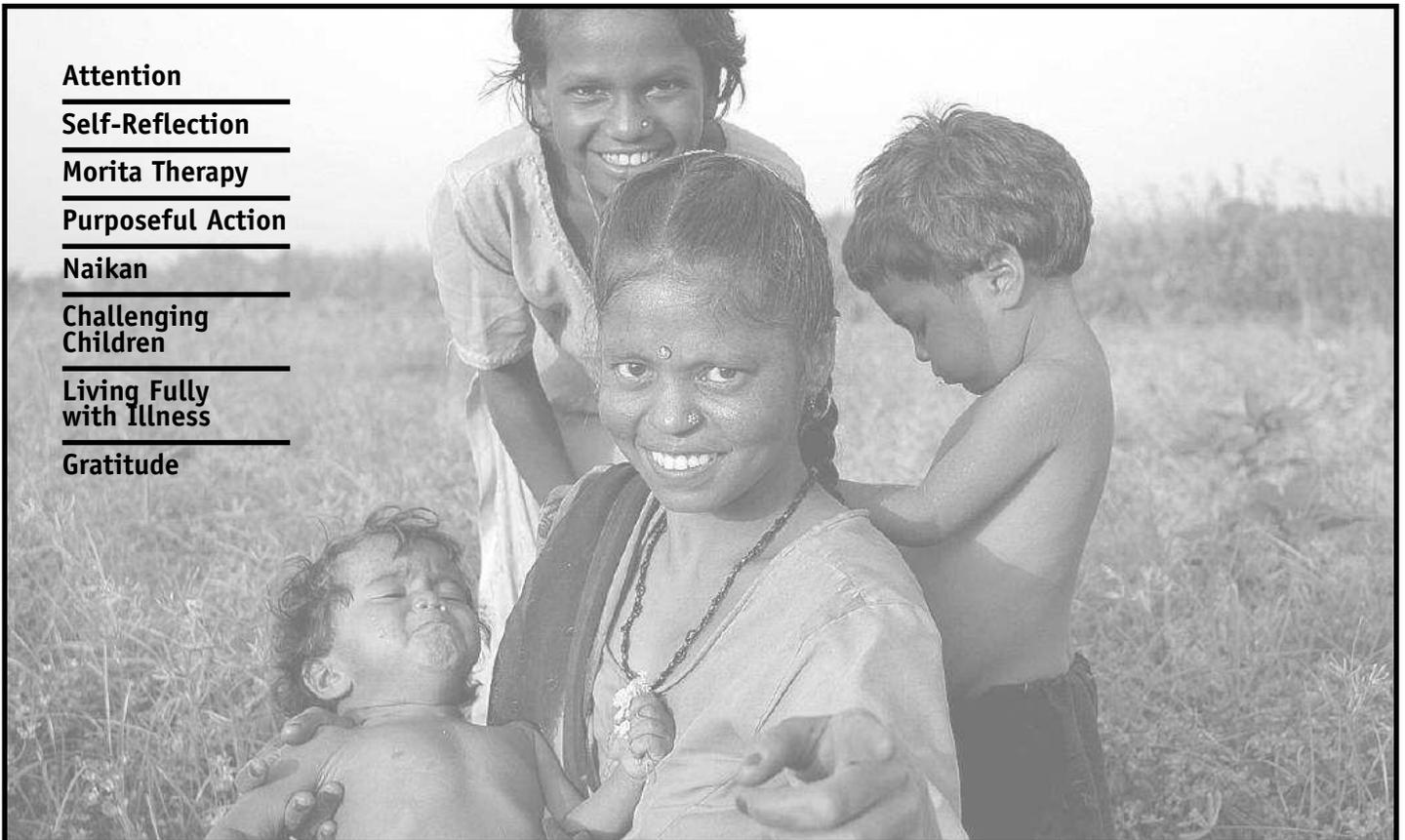
**Purposeful Action**

**Naikan**

**Challenging  
Children**

**Living Fully  
with Illness**

**Gratitude**



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According to the Zen scholar and teacher, D.T. Suzuki,

*“Soft-heartedness” is tender-mindedness and means “gentleness of spirit.” Generally we are too egotistic, too full of hard, resisting spirit. We are individualistic, unable to accept things as they are or as they come to us... When there is no self, the heart is soft and offers no resistance to outside resistances.*

Many people struggle in their relationships – with spouses, parents, children and colleagues – because they have a hard heart. But how do we soften our heart? We must always begin with introspection. This means we must look directly into our heart and see how hard it is. Of course, we don't really want to do this. Instead, we want to look directly at the hard heart of the other person. Why can't he be more understanding? Why can't she be more sensitive to my suffering? Why can't he be considerate instead of so selfish?

Can you see how these questions are a distraction? They distract us from seeing ourselves clearly. The questions which will ultimately serve us better – in our relationships and spiritual practice – are:

*How am I failing to understand others?*

*What are the ways in which I am insensitive to others' suffering?*

*What are the examples of my selfishness and ego-centeredness?*

These are questions of sincere self-reflection that come from a Naikan perspective. Naikan is a method of self-reflection from Japan which is built on the simple foundation of three questions:

**What have I received from \_\_\_\_\_ ?**

In Naikan, the first question reminds us of the support and care we have received from the other person. This is something we easily forget in the midst of a conflict where our heart is hardened. We forget the support we have received, even over a period of many years, because our attention is riveted to what we are upset or angry about.

**What have I given to \_\_\_\_\_ ?**

The second question allows us to look honestly at the give and take in the relationship. When we believe that we are the giver and the other person is mostly selfish, that generally hardens our heart. But, in many cases, the other person has given us more than we have given in return, or perhaps more than we have really given them credit for.



In this case we must acknowledge our debt to the person – an acknowledgement which may help to soften our hearts.

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## Seeing Through One's Blindness: The Enlightenment of Mr. Tagara

BY GYOMAY M. KUBOSE

**W**hen I was living in Oakland, I had a friend, Mr. Tagara, who was a very capable man, a very learned person, a community leader. He was a poet, a leading poet, and was able to compose beautiful haiku and waka. He was an able speaker and the whole community looked up to him for leadership and admired him. He and his wife had three children, his business was very good, and they bought a house in Berkeley.

Everyone thought that Mrs. Tagara must be the most fortunate wife to have such an able and good husband. But Mrs. Tagara was not happy. She was also sickly, somewhat neurotic. Why was she not happy despite everyone's guess? Mr. Tagara was a very able man. He was not only very intelligent and a community leader, he was even a very good cook. If she knew one thing, he knew two or three. How could even a very intelligent wife match such a husband? She had done her best to make him happy, but he was never satisfied. "You are clumsy; you could do better," he would say. So through all their marriage, the wife suffered from feelings of inferiority.

One summer, Mr. Tagara unfortunately had eye trouble. All that summer he went to the doctor, but his eyes became worse and worse. That fall, he finally lost his eyesight. He became blind. You can imagine what a change this was to such a man. He had been so able in every way, but now he could not read a newspaper or go for a walk or even go to the bathroom without asking his wife or daughter to take him. Mr. Tagara had never bowed his head before. Now he had to beg, to ask everything from other people.

Being such an able man, Mr. Tagara had never had good friends. He felt that all his friends were inferior, and he could not appreciate their friendship. He had a very close friend called Yamada, who often came to visit him. But Mr. Tagara would say, "Oh, that Yamada comes again and talks nonsense. I wish he wouldn't come, as I have many books to read." He never appreciated Yamada's visits because Yamada never talked on the same level as Mr. Tagara. Mr. Tagara wanted to read books rather than have mediocre friends come to waste his time.

But when he became blind, he could not read a book. When he heard footsteps on the front porch: "Oh, it is Yamada. I am glad he is coming." And before Yamada could knock on the door, Mr. Tagara would

call, "Is that Yamada?" "Yes," Yamada would answer. "I'm so glad you came. What's the news in the world?" Mr. Tagara would exclaim.

Yamada had not changed, but Mr. Tagara had changed. A 180 degree turn.

One day, Tagara called his wife, Yoshiko-san, "Yoshiko, come here." Yoshiko-san thought that she was to be scolded again, so she rather hesitated. "Do you want something?" she asked. "Sit here," her husband said. She sat down. "Sit closer. Sit next to me." Yoshiko-san did not understand why he wanted her to sit close to him. Tagara took Yoshiko-san's hand and all of a sudden there were tears in his eyes.

"Yoshiko," he said, "I realize for the first time what you have suffered for so many years. We have been married almost 20 years. I was so stubborn; I had such a superiority complex. All your years of ill health were caused by my stubbornness. For the first time I understand real kindness, the many services you did for me which I never appreciated before." Both of them hugged each other and cried, a cry of joy. It was the first time the two of them understood each other.

Since then, new life came into their home, her health started to improve, and he became very humble, yet he did not lose his dignity and superior quality. Friends meeting him on the street would say, "Tagara-san, I am sorry you have lost your vision." "Oh," he would answer, "don't say you're sorry. You should congratulate me on the loss of my eyesight." Everyone was dumbfounded when he said this. "I have lost my physical eye, but I have found my mind's eye. Now I am able to understand what love is. For the first time I notice what friendship is, what sympathy is. You know, a stubborn guy like me, unless my eyes are crushed, is unable to find this new world. I wish you would congratulate me that I lost my vision but found my mental eye."

Mr. Tagara was a completely changed man. He was enlightened. He was enlightened to a completely new world. He had transcended his small petty individualism and was able to see and join in a greater world and oneness of all life. He found himself in a world of love, of friendship. This kind of experience is called enlightenment.

*Reprinted from the book, Everyday Suchness by Rev. Gyomay M. Kubose (1905-2000) with permission from Bright Dawn: The Institute for American Buddhism. Rev. Kubose's books can be purchased from the Bright Dawn website: [www.brightdawn.org](http://www.brightdawn.org)*

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## What troubles and difficulties have I caused \_\_\_\_ ?

Finally, in the third question, we look at how we have caused trouble, difficulty or even harm to the other person. If we are honest, we will see the specific examples of our own selfishness, mistakes and ego-centered actions—not just against this one person, but against others as well. This is humbling encounter with our conduct towards others. It may even be painful, as our self-image—of a kind, loving person—is chipped away to reveal the more realistic karma we have left behind. Though this process may be emotionally challenging, even painful, it is also the process by which our heart is softened. It is difficult to have a hard heart when we are truly humbled by the selfishness of our own life. We can no longer see the other person from a position of arrogance or superiority. Instead we recognize our own weaknesses and faults and we find it easier to empathize with the other person.

It is helpful to look at examples of a person whose heart has changed from soft to hard. Rev. Kubose's story

about Mr. Tagara (see page 11) is an example of such a person. If we examine our own lives it is likely we will find personal examples, as well. If you have ever experienced yourself in a situation where you went from being extremely angry to seeing your own culpability and feeling remorse and sadness about what you did, then you have experienced a "softening of the heart." In this New Year you may wish to commit to maintaining your body's strength and fitness. So please consider the needs of your heart—the heart that has served you reliably from even before you were born. Notice when your heart has hardened towards another and take time for self-reflection, which may allow your heart to soften—a state in which you, your heart, and the people you love will probably get along much better.

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*Additional information on Naikan reflection can be found at: [www.todoinstitute.org/naikan.html](http://www.todoinstitute.org/naikan.html)*

## At the Movies

There are two very dramatic films in which we can witness the softening of a person's heart. The first film is called **The Lives of Others**. The main character is D, a middle-aged man who is committed to communist ideals in East Germany before the Berlin Wall came down. He is not only a member of the East German secret police (The Stasi), but he teaches trainees the diabolical art of interrogation in a classroom setting. He is intelligent, sinister, and has an eye of suspicion towards anyone who might be hiding his true feelings against the communist government. He receives an assignment to bug the apartment of a well-known East German playwright because his superiors hope to get information that will discredit the playwright and reveal his disloyalty. The apartment is secretly wired with microphones and D takes the job of monitoring the conversations and activities of the playwright. The playwright's girlfriend is a famous actress who is being pressured into having sex with a high-ranking member of the Communist party under the threat of having her career destroyed.

As D continues his surveillance of the apartment something happens to him. He begins to see the suffering of the playwright and the actress created by corrupt government officials. He gradually, slowly, starts to develop a sense of compassion for the couple. When he hears the first evidence of a conversation that could implicate the playwright as disloyal, he falsifies his notes to protect him. As the movie progresses, we see his heart softening more and more until he reaches the point where he must choose between jeopardizing his own career and or the arrest of the couple.

The second film is called **Tsotsi** and takes place in a tenement city in South Africa. The main character, Tsotsi (which means "thug") is a juvenile who leads a small gang of thugs. In the opening scenes of a movie we see a face with such icy, unfeeling eyes that it is frightening just to see the image on a TV screen. He proceeds to supervise the cold-blooded murder of a middle-aged man on the subway and then subsequently beats one of his own followers bloody because the young man showed regrets about what they had done. Tsotsi's heart is solid stone and we have no hope that he could ever be anything but a selfish and cruel criminal. He wanders into an affluent suburb of the nearby city and steals a car after shooting the woman who was driving it. In the events which unfold, he finds that he unknowingly has kidnapped an infant.. When he is forced to abandon the car he stole, he can't seem to leave the baby, so he puts the baby in a paper grocery bag with handles and walks away, heading back to his shack made of corrugated metal in the ghetto city where he lives.

For some reason, Tsotsi seems driven to try to care for this baby and we watch his clumsy efforts to do so as the movie progresses. But as he is caring for this little child who is totally dependent on him for life, Tsotsi's heart begins to soften. This icy-eyed murderer has found a spot in his stone heart for compassion and it is melting his sinister, ego-centered view of life.

Watch these films and see whether something can be learned about how a heart is softened.