

## **‘All present and accountable’**

‘Hundreds of thousands of millions of kalpas’ is a very long time. A kalpa doesn’t mean a lifetime or a moment or anything like that, or does it? It is said to be the amount of time it takes to wear down a great mountain if a butterfly alights on it once every, hmmm, thousand years, and brushes it with its wings.

You can think of that great mountain as some aspect of our obduracy...our amazing powers of resistance to the life we’re really in. The time it takes to wear down a great mountain... Is that how long it takes to get enlightened completely? Is there a ‘completely’? This is what Zhimen addresses in the koan known as ‘Zhimen’s Lotus Petals’. It’s a case about how we open, what this opening is, which kalpa it is to take place in, and how to see that each step of the Way is truly - and so luckily - equal in substance.

A monk asked Zhimen ‘What is it when the lotus blossom has not yet emerged from the water?’ This is like saying, ‘What is it before enlightenment, before the longed for transformation of all my suffering and extinguishment of all my impossible-to-manage desires, and my arrival home – at last. What is it before that?’ Zhimen replied, ‘Lotus blossom’. The monk then asked ‘Well then what about after it has fully emerged?’ This time, Zhimen replied, ‘Lotus petals’.

There is a phrase people use when they’ve completed a roll call, they say, ‘All present and accounted for.’ And we can be accounted for, we can be ticked off in all the boxes... birth certificate, tick, got out of primary school, tick, finally got out of high school, tick, marriage, put out the garbage bins on the right night, tick, children born and raised, tick, and eventually a death certificate, the final tick. Fully accounted for, but were we actually present?

We still may be not quite present, I think that’s what brings us here, the sense, the live fear, that we may not be quite present through all of these extraordinary moments. There are times when we really know there are extraordinary moments, the moments of our lives. And to be truly present and accounted for... Tomas Tranströmer’s long poem called ‘Baltics’ has this sequence in it:

Music comes to a person  
He’s a composer  
He’s played  
Has a career  
Becomes director of the conservatory [tick]  
The trend turns downward  
He’s blamed by the authorities  
They put up his pupil. K, as chief prosecutor  
He’s threatened, demoted, sent away

After some years, the disgrace diminishes  
He's rehabilitated  
Then comes the stroke  
Right side paralysis and aphasia  
Can only grasp short phrases, says wrong words  
Can as a result of this, not be touched by advancement or blame  
[Interesting] But the music's still there  
He still composes in his own style  
He becomes a medical sensation for the time he has left to live'  
[You can do the tick]

Then, says Transtromer,  
'He wrote music to texts he no longer understood  
In the same way we express something in our lives  
In that humming chorus of mis-speech'

The mis-speech, the great humming chorus of mis-speech. Music is coming to us all the time, nothing is held back, nothing can diminish it. I read recently of a very old priest who is now in a retirement home. He's lost almost all his faculties but he enchants everybody with the quality of his smile. The music still comes to him, his smile is radiant. The music comes to us, it is always coming to us, but we can spend a whole lot of our lives just seeing the trend turn downwards. Even though we make a valiant effort, for every human life is a valiant effort. Every human life succeeds against the odds, succeeds against the ongoing impossibility and unlikeliness of life, this life becoming ours. How unlikely it is, how extraordinary. But the great humming chorus of mis-speech that drowns out so much of the music... Strangely enough there will come a day when you will know that that was also 'lotus blossom', all the time lotus blossom. Even your most painfully misspoken or fumbling attempts to be here. Nothing but lotus blossom... 'What is it when the lotus blossom has not yet emerged from the water?' It is lotus blossom, lotus blossom.

You know the old Zen pop song, 'First there is a mountain, then there is no mountain, then there is.' From one point of view that's first of all mountain, all the effort of trying to wear down the resistance, there it is, the struggle. Then blessedly there is no mountain, just this wonderful lifting of all of the dividedness inside ourselves, all that is divided falls away and there is just the undivided, no mountain, and no-one to see a 'mountain'. Of course that mountain is walking about, eating porridge in the morning, sometimes its stomach rumbles. And so, mountain, then no mountain, then there is 'mountain' again. But *this* mountain is MOUNTAIN! It is Zhimen's lotus *petals*.

At first glance we think oh that's just lotus blossom all over again. But Zhimen says after it is out of the water, it is 'Lotus petals'. Lotus blossom all over again would be pretty damned

good, but is he pointing to something subtly different, that we need to look into? Same or different?

I'd like to introduce you to Mrs Okamoto. Mrs Okamoto was a woman who quit her job in education quite early, roundabout the age of 40 really, that's very young...as many of us know by now, it's actually extremely young. And she entered a temple as a disciple of Master Zigan. She trained as a lay person. She did not shave her head, she did not adopt robes. Apparently she wore baggy work pants and hurried around tirelessly but busily all her working day, and every day was a hard work day. She had no intention of becoming a great monk, far too much to do in any case. She was focused on training and she saw the training as being working hard to make life smooth for this great teacher, who was in her eyes a very fine teacher. She respected him immensely, so she washed clothes, she cooked, she raised fresh vegetables, she ensured that he would always be available to teach the dharma to others. Anyone who looked at her would see a thoroughly self-sacrificing person.

Now Master Zigan died at the age of 87, and Mrs Okamoto was then around 60 years old and after the final ceremony and bereavement period was over, she packed up her belongings and said she didn't want to be a burden to anyone.

Soko Morinaga writes about her. He was the monk who took over the temple, but she went off to live nearby under no-one's supervision, a rented cottage of a nearby temple, another temple. She got up every morning at 4.15 and cleaned the temple gardens around her rented room, just as though this was a temple. She cultivated land, she planted vegetables, she pickled them and offered them to novice monks who were training. He says, 'She was a little old lady, short, with a round boyish face but her exceptionally strict upright lifestyle had given rise to something forbidding in Miss Okamoto, and the young novice monks were never pleased when they were sent to her place on an errand.' We already know her now. Morinaga-san visited her monthly and took care to always keep close touch with her. He says she seemed eager for these visits but one day she says 'I am not doing very well, I think I have got to go and see a doctor. I don't seem to be getting any better'. She goes to see a doctor and comes back and says 'Although the doctor didn't say it in so many words it seems I have cancer. Since I found this out I have been very afraid of dying.'

She is of course actually saying, 'Help me, please.' Morinaga writes: 'What in the world is the problem with the way I have practised up until now that death could be this frightening. Please tell me how I have been wrong in my practice?' she beseeched, opening up as if I were her own son. Although she had led a commendably dedicated and a flawless life in many respects, it had always been done very stoically with gritted teeth in an effort to 'do good,

avoid doing evil'. Sharply distinguishing between good and bad, forever sizing up and passing judgement on the situation, she went about her endeavours to do better but with her teeth clenched fast.'

So this is the kind of effort in which one says 'That's good, that's not good, that's acceptable that's not acceptable, I choose that, I don't choose that...stacking up, so to speak, causes for positive results. Looking to see is there something else I can do to get a positive result. And this does not produce peace of mind or let your heart ever come to rest. It is in fact put yourself away from the intimacy that is beckoning at all times, the music that is always coming to us. Let me read on:

'As I explained to Miss Okamoto, you come out from your mother's womb and go into your coffin. That time in between you call life and perhaps you think of going into your coffin as death. But true existence is birth and death repeating itself instant by instant. You will get a flame that seems to burn continuously and give off constant life, but in fact the wick that blazes in this instant exhausts itself passing the flame further along, further along.'

So, he tells her, this is what you must do: 'When you go to the kitchen to prepare dinner, be born in the kitchen. When you finish there, die. Then be born at the dining table as you eat your dinner and when you finish eating, die there. Be born in the garden and sweep with your broom, when you get into bed at night, die there. And when daylight comes and you awaken to your bed, be born anew. If you have cancer, be born with cancer. Always now, just now, come into being. Always now, just now, give yourself to death. Practising this truth,' he says, 'is Zen practice'. And he's right.

What happened next? Well, Mrs Okamoto apparently complied with this as docilely as a lamb. Morinaga writes: 'It wasn't even ten days before her rigid countenance had softened into a baby face, into the face of a sweet old lady.' [As you are listening to this, listen for lotus petals, please, try to hear what they may be.] 'She had left behind the lifestyle in which she had to grit her teeth and try to live 'right'. Her disease progressed, became worse, she finally had to be hospitalised. I remember when I called on her the doctors and nurses all remarked that though they had worked in the hospital for many years, they had never encountered a patient like this. By the time Miss Okamoto entered the hospital she was greeting everybody, everything, every scene in the spirit of *one chance, one encounter*.

This is not referring to special, once in a lifetime encounter. 'One chance, one encounter' might take place when you encounter a stone, when you come upon a weed, when you are cleaning the toilet or cooking rice. It refers to a state of mind in which one makes no projection of favourability or adversity, in which there is no notion of escape into something

preferable. To practice one chance, one encounter, is to wholly melt within each one occurrence, and this is just the way Miss Okamoto saw her life out. He had to go overseas at the moment when she was really entering her final moments but when he came back he talked to his oldest disciple, the monk who had last attended her, about the moments of her death. Although this was a man who seldom allowed any expression to cross his face, tears streamed from his eyes as he told the story.

Before Miss Okamoto died she said to him ‘Looking back I have led a pretty stuffy life all these years. So I think I’ll just take a ball and go out and play in the woods now.’ And these were her last words.

Morinaga said, ‘When I heard what she had said at the last I felt joy from the bottom of my heart. Joy because I was confident that in her living and in her dying Miss Okamoto had literally reached a state we can call the Samadhi of play.’

So, lotus petals, what is this Samadhi of play, this melted broken-open state of lotus petals? Notice that lotus petals brings us closer in than lotus flower, more intimate still...and more keenly aware of each thing, each thing in its particularity, and its ephemeral fragility, to the point where it’s so tender it almost hurts. Remember what Jenna Jordison said, the woman who went to Grenada to meet the man who had murdered her father. She said ‘The stretched heart hurts but can hold it all’.

Lotus petals is that stretched heart. After expanding it so wide there is no mountain, then we come back to our lives. The heart is stretched and learns to stretch more and more - that is lotus petals. The flower, lotus flower, lotus blossom, breaks open to just this, this one encounter, one chance, in your meeting with your life, just like Miss Okamoto. Each thing cleaner, closer, more tender and particular. So lotus petals is saying each thing matters, and is at home in its circumstances. And all things pass quickly away so the time they matter is now.

Some Buddhist schools and teachers teach detachment as though lotus flower can and must be held and preserved carefully intact, well away from life. But lotus flower *is* life, lotus flower is life and it is death. And Zen teaches the stretched heart that holds it all, the whole is the healing. The very words whole and healing come from the same root. So realization is the healing of the world, realization really is the waking up, the liberating of the many beings. When you wake up a little, everything, everyone, everywhere, is a little more freed. Everyone you encounter will taste freedom, that’s what the word ‘save’ is pointing to.

It is very clear from the Miss Okamoto story of lotus petals that we can trace a little of our own mortality in lotus petals. The flower blooms and then it falls, the petals separate, they

fall away. No petal can ever be the same as any other. And yet all is lotus blossom, undivided, from the beginning. Once humans were called mortals, and I really think we should bring the word back. So much of our culture is so intent on turning away from this matter, which is the very *quick* of living as though others really exist, living as though we were really here. So lotus flower, lotus blossom. Realization looks with eyes of no time, of all the time in the world, of vast emptiness, nothing holy, as Bodhidharma says. That's where we can see into 'No old age and death, and also no ending of old age and death'.

And then it is our job to live by that and really live by that in a mortal body, with somewhat dirty feet and hands and eyes, sesshin eyes, so that's really good. Emptiness needs our hands and feet, dirty as they may be, and our eyes. Without death life dies, even though it is also very hard, and indeed strange, that we die... There's a wonderful song by the McGarrigal sisters, 'Why Must We Die?' It's a great lament and it breaks at a certain point into 'I'm a man of constant sorrow, I've seen trouble all my life' and it goes back to this very plangent refrain, 'We are fire, we are air, we are spirit, we are body, we are mortal, why must we die?' Well without our mortality how could we ever dream of the infinite significance of this moment? How could we be reached by the force of the creativity of each moment?

How could we be 'we', or 'you' or 'me', without the defining blessing of our own mortality? Of course death itself is the very motor of creativity, even right down at the level of evolution and how it depends upon birth and death, in order to constantly sculpt all these extraordinary life forms out of the most unpromising looking material. When you look back we see our ancestor - a single cell organism, a minute prokaryote, bless its tiny heart.

Lotus petal sees a depth of satisfaction in things just as they are with that fire of our own mortality blazing away at the heart of it all. And how could the universe feel its own staggering value without our unsteady human awareness made keen by death? Turning again to 'Baltics':

'Every day is the last, tomorrow we die.'  
Every summer is the last  
These are empty words to the creatures at late summer midnight  
Where the crickets sew on their machines as if possessed  
And the Baltic's near  
And the lonely water tap stands among the wild rose bushes  
Like an equestrian statue [can you see it?]  
The water tastes of iron

I don't know why I love that verse so much, perhaps it's the crickets sewing on their machines as if possessed... Apart from us, most, all of life as far as we can tell, goes at it, just goes at it as if possessed. It's almost as if we are trying to get fully possessed again. And

from the point of view of that ‘possessed’, anything, indeed everything, is a genuine marvel, and an old water tap sticking up is an equestrian statue. And the water tastes like iron, that’s lotus petals, how wonderful, so particular, so tender.

So lotus petals also know no ending of old age and death, right inside old age and death. Lotus petals are both, both and, these two things are not two, they are even less than one. When you look into it from the point of view of physics, of quantum fluctuation, does anyone know about quantum fluctuation? It’s very interesting. What it’s saying is more mysterious even than cause and effect, far more mysterious. It’s not like one thing happens and leads to another as we’ve been exploring here, it’s saying that elementary particles fluctuate in and out of existence. One moment they’re not there, next minute they’ve just somehow snuck into reality, just like you and I managed somehow to do. Who can say how we did that, and then how we go on doing it! And then elementary particles just pop out of it all again.

What an extraordinary universe! It’s almost like at that point we’re looking towards the kind of ultimate mystery that the fireball itself is. I can’t say was – Is. It’s like the Dreaming here, we can’t say ‘was’ about the dreaming, it simply constantly is. And that fireball, it popped into existence, there was no fireball, then there was – is - something that can hardly be dreamt of. And all of being, every single thing that makes us up, every particle of matter, each moment is no other than it erupted out of nothing into this shining existence made up of what was in that fireball. So there’s a glimpse of the original emptiness that permeates you and me, just as Buddha Nature pervades the whole universe existing right here, now. And as you know, we’re made up of atoms, and the atom is an equally great creation of emptiness, it possesses only the most minute amount of form. An atom has been compared to a huge football field: the nucleus is the ball, right in the middle. And protons and electrons are just like occasional gnats, floating and fluctuating somewhere out above the back bleachers.

And if we were just reduced to those constituent parts of the atom, our body would be less than a millionth of a grain of sand in mass. This is an amazing business. It’s kind of nice in a way because it’s saying this emptiness is our source, it’s very intimate with us already, it is totally interwoven with everything that we are. The put-togetherness of things is completely arising all the time from the not put-togetherness of things in a wonderful creative Samadhi of play.

So our existence really is an extraordinary gift, a pure gift and it’s the gift of a quite terrifyingly beautiful and extraordinary universe that we’re in, and that composes all that we are. And of an Earth that for no apparent reason made certain shifts happen, in its unfolding, in its evolution that made it so prolific in bearing life, in bringing forth life just as if it was

going out of fashion – which it seems to have done on other planets in our solar system by the way.

Then how can we hold back from this, how could we dream of holding back from giving all that we are back, and giving all that we are back? *That's* lotus petals. Life will not flourish as long as we cling to the kind of magical thinking that so much of our culture does, 'If I don't think about my death, it can't touch me yet', which is like my old Aunt Kay who was a very dear person to me, but we found at her death that she had failed to write a will. She had always promised my father with whom she was co-owner of a very important property that he had worked on tirelessly in order simply to support my other aunt who was hospitalised for years with Parkinson's disease. But it turned out my Aunt Kay had never written her will, which led to some crushing difficulties for my dear father, in the end badly hurting his own health. The kind of thinking that our culture indulges in by turning away from the death that arrives with birth and hoping instead for magic to appear in all sorts of other fundamentally ridiculous places – as someone said, 'It's Disneyland really, just Disneyland.' And Disneyland doesn't turn out to be so very magical after all, and the music doesn't reach us there, where we are so emphatically turned away.

I've spoken at different times during this session about rigour and love. It takes some rigour to truly see love. And then a point comes when we really need some love to begin to truly see what rigour really is. You'll find this happening if you continue to come to session, you will find rigour and love are so much each other. It comes down to the way you hold yourself, open, accountable, present. Is that rigour or love? Who can say?

So we must learn to forgive ourselves and also those we love for their mortality and our own mortality. And there you will find the first great out-breath of 'May all beings be at peace'. There we find the power to accept suffering and to refuse to pass it on to another, which is often our wont as human beings, but also to accept kindness and to remember to pass it on. We find the power to forgive and to end the needless torment and even to transmute harm into something more vital, something more creative and alive.

This is urgent, it's urgent to know how to transmute harm into more vital energy. We are at a time in the life of our Earth where all of us are suffering the death of species. Even if you're not thinking about it, cannot bear to think about it, you too are suffering this mass extinction that's going on. Even the death of the planet as a whole is now a haunting possibility for us to face. And just as when we take our mortality deeply to heart, when we learn it by heart the way a poet learns all things by heart, artists learn things by heart, that's a great guide to how to practice by the way. Leonardo da Vinci would see a certain face in the street and he would

have to go after that person and find different ways to study, learn and absorb that face until he knew it by heart and could just draw it from heart... a beautiful thing.

When we take such a dark vision as the death of the planet to heart, oddly enough it can become a kind of guiding dark vision, taken to heart it can become exactly what guides us, however frightening and terrible and properly horrible that vision is. Just as our mortality can ignite real life in us, this is exactly what has the power to ignite the deepest response within us if we can be awake enough.

Lotus petals: It's not how well we are loved that counts, it really is how well we love. And how well we love every single moment. Lotus petals is taking this into your life and playing with it, it's the Samadhi of play. It's not how beautifully we may practice here on retreat, it's how we dare to take that into our lives. Lotus petals means intimate, it means constantly giving away freely all that we do, bringing it forth as whatever we do, caring and respecting with the natural reverence that emerges from paying attention, with nothing pious about it at all.

Lotus petals: Cold morning, an ache in my toes this morning, steaming porridge, and then a moment of deep sadness... the first birds, and then 'effective in 10 ways'. And then walking in the dew as the sun came up... All present and accountable.

So please don't be too concerned with before and after enlightenment, or even *whether* enlightenment... that's putting yourself far too much in the picture so to speak, right in front of everything, it is treading on petals, and not even noticing. Lotus petals is this moment, the only moment there is to live our lives, it's the real deal already. Becoming authentic does not wait upon realisation. It has no expectation of realisation. This moment, minus our opinions about it, that's lotus petals. There's a tiny poem, by Judyth Gong which says (words to the effect of) 'Poor Shakyamuni, poor Shakyamuni, off he went leaving his wife and sleeping newborn baby, he practiced so hard, travelled so far, suffered so terribly, went *so* far afield to see the morning star, and all the time there it was it was shining in the steam off the porridge, shining right there in his baby's eyes'.

So - morning star, what is it right now, look inside yourself for a moment, what is there right now?

And there it is, morning star.

Thank you for all your trouble.

**TEISHO 7 SPRING SESSHIN 2009**  
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