Letting Flowers Lead: The Way of Ikebana
by Awakin Call Editors

Below is the transcript of an Awakin Call with Mayuka Yamazaki, moderated by Pavi Mehta and hosted by Cynthia Li.

Pavi Mehta: It is my pleasure now to introduce our guest. In many ways Mayuka Yamazaki's life is a study in contrast: Her credentials in the business world are impressive: She sits on the board of three public companies, has worked as a management consultant with McKinsey and Company, and is backed by a decade of experience working as an executive with Harvard Business School at their Japan Research Center. During her time with them, she co-authored 30 Harvard Business School case studies about Japanese companies, business leaders, and societal issues. Mayuka is also the author of a book titled, Why and What Has Harvard Studied in Tōhoku Japan? All of this might seem to amount to a full life, but in Mayuka's case, it accounts for only part of the story.

Mayuka's journey has also encompassed decades of training in the formal Japanese art of ikebana, often translated as not simply arranging flowers, but “letting flowers live.” In 2011, she became a Shihan Master, an expert or senior instructor, of this form, and in 2017 she launched the IKERU Initiative, an effort to introduce the spirit and beauty of the ikebana tradition to businesses and an international audience.

At its core, I think the spirit of Mayuka's efforts has been about making this very traditional art form more accessible, more affordable, more transparent, and non-hierarchical. And there is a pioneering element to her work that combines both radical new ways of approaching this ancient art as well as a deep respect for the tradition and for the form.

There are many contrasts that come into play in Mayuka's life, and she really is a bridge builder and has this way, I think, of dissolving constructed barriers -- the barriers between doing and being, between head and heart, between business and nature, between life and death.

So it is such a gift to have her here with us today. And this is very unusual ... not every day that we get to sit with someone who has sat so deeply with flowers. So thank you, Mayuka, for being with us. Welcome.

Mayuka Yamazaki: Thank you so much, Pavi, for such a beautiful introduction. I wish I could just keep listening to your talking. That would be very nourishing to me. But it's an honor and pleasure to be here and be allowed to speak to those who are

sitting .

Pavi: Before we go any further into our conversation, could you just give us a little sense of where you're sitting right now? What's outside your window? What is your experience of where you are in this place, in this season, and in this moment?

Mayuka: Yes. It's actually a very important part of my story right now. I'm now in the area called Karuizawa. It's a small town in the mountains, but I was born and brought up in the big city, Tokyo, although it only takes an hour by bullet train. By the way, I live in Japan, and Japan has a very rigid, sophisticated train system, so it only takes an hour from Tokyo to Karuizawa.

But we moved to Karuizawa two years ago, and it's a little bit like moving from New York, Manhattan, to, I don't know, Colorado or Vermont, although it takes just an hour and a half. So now I'm sitting in my house, made of basically trees, and also I have this natural heater here. And outside it's right after dawn, so it's getting brighter and brighter. It's seven a.m. here in Japan, and I see trees, and I see snow, and I see dried plants, basically. So it's really in winter here in Karuizawa.

Pavi: Mm-hmm. Beautiful, beautiful. Thank you for giving us a little bit of a setting. And I know you were telling me yesterday that, when we had a little prep, just a check-in call before this conversation today, something you said struck me so deeply. You said that winter in Karuizawa brings you back to almost your animal nature in terms of ... The way you put it is, "If you wander outside without being alert, you could lose your life. It's that the survival instinct kicks in."

Mayuka: Yes, exactly. Exactly. As I said to you yesterday, this place is basically for summer. It's a beautiful place for summer, and it's very comfortable and people come here basically during summer because winter is too cold. I don't know the Fahrenheit system very well, but it's mostly below zero, the highest temperature is below zero, during the winter and it's long. It's mostly from the end of November to the early April. It's a really long winter. But, having been immersed in this really real winter, I feel like I have to live. I feel like I have to mobilize the sense of being an animal, a sense of being a person, a sense of being a living thing here in order to really be with nature in this part of the region. It gives me strength. It gives me gratitude to everything we have, and it gives me gratitude to nature as well, although it's very cold, we know that spring comes after this long winter and it's just a miracle that during the winter, you feel like this winter never ends but it actually does end every year.

That circle itself is like a miracle. It's been only three years since we moved here and everybody says, “Oh, why were you here in the winter?” It's not for the winter, but I feel like that's why the winter is the reason why it's worth living close to nature.

Pavi: Yeah. The word that's coming up as you're speaking is contact. It's like you're in deep contact with not just what it means to be human, what it means to be alive, but in deep contact with your environment. Usually we have such a big buffer between ourselves and nature. When you take that buffer away, there is a deep contact with reality, I guess in a more immediate way that connects to your work.

Before we go there, I was thinking it would be lovely to have you do a little bit of a basic introduction to ikebana, what drew you to it. But before that, maybe you could share a little bit about your formative years, your childhood, and maybe what are the people,

places, experiences that really shaped your heart and mind, and maybe eventually drew you to ikebana.

Mayuka: Yes, as I said, I was born in Tokyo and grew up in Tokyo, so I was a city girl. I really loved the flowers that I found on the streets. You know, even if you live in the city, you can find small grass rags, small glasses and small flowers through the crack on the street or in the parking lot – and nature is actually everywhere. I really loved finding this nature, pick them up and put them into a small glass.

I really loved that when I was a child. And, we lived two years outside Tokyo. At that time, that the place was much closer to nature than Tokyo. Even though we can find nature in Tokyo, it is still limited. But since I lived there, I lived in a place called Hachijo-jima. It was close to the mountain and I was surrounded by rice paddies, mountain, and there were so many flowers and that green was everywhere.

So I remember I went to the rice paddy before the seeding started and there were some red flowers, and I picked so many red flowers and created a wreath of red flowers and I put it on my neck. I collected leaves on the street and I put the leaves on the streets and put them in a book.

Sometimes when I pick up my childhood books, I can still find these leaves that I collected when I was six years old. It was a totally unconscious play for me when I was a child.

But I really loved getting these connections with nature and I really loved playing with nature because I just didn't just see the nature, but I picked up and collected the flowers and created something beautiful.

Other than that, I live in the city and you may know, but Japan has a very high pressure study culture. I studied very hard at the age of ten. So, other than school, I studied for a few hours every day, and during the weekends I basically only studied. That kind of life continued from ten to eighteen years old until I went to the University of Tokyo.

Other than the very fond memory of being very playful and being very joyful with nature, my dominant memory of my childhood is study – studying very hard. It is really not about using your brain, but more like memorizing everything you were taught. It's a very passive way of studying and there's always an answer to a question. I still have that way of thinking that there's always an answer to the question that I face. And if I work hard, I will get it through. You know, that kind of mindset and mentality really stuck in me very strongly because I spent most of my younger years, the early part of life, in that kind of environment.

Pavi: And you were very good at it. You mean you got very good at it?

Mayuka: That's also like a curse. That was a gift but also that was a curse. If I was not good at it, I may have found another path. But I was so good at it and I excelled. I went to the best junior high and I went to the best university, and I didn't notice that. I didn't even notice that there was possibly another path for me or another way to expand myself but just really in that system.

Pavi: Yeah and that's so interesting because it sounds like when you first came to ikebana, it was as a hobby, was it?

Mayuka: Exactly.

Pavi: Maybe as you describe your first entry into the world of ikebana, maybe this is a good place for you to give us all a little introduction.

Mayuka: Ikebana is one of the Japanese traditional arts along with tea ceremony, Japanese traditional calligraphy. Back in the 10th or 11th century, there were writings that said people enjoyed collecting flowers and tree – tree branches from nature and putting them in a vase. People only did this kind of practice from very old times. But around the 15th or 16th century, ikebana started to become formalized as an art of art.

Textbook was published and there were famous ikebana artists who were usually kids, but it's all male, quite male dominated, but there are principles and techniques for other people. Formally, ikebana is said to have a history of five hundred years.

During these five hundred years, there are lots of theories and definitions of ikebana and what it means to do ikebana and lots of formulas and how to do ikebana.

At the core of ikebana, as explained at the beginning, it's about letting flowers live. It's not about us humans make something that we want to make using flowers. We humans listen to their voice of flowers and let them be who they are, let them be as beautiful as they are. It's a more nature centric way of practice, way of art, other than we humans who can make great things. So that's at the core of ikebana even if different people say different things about ikebana.

Then, during the early 17th century, it became a practice, which was enjoyed by merchants and normal people. When Japan started to westernize, modernize, in the late 19th century, people started living in more western housing and people started to change as well, from things which really fit into the traditional Japanese lifestyle to something, which could also fit into a more western type of lifestyle. People started to use more vivid, beautiful flowers that you could put in the western style house and it doesn't look odd. Ikebana is always changing its form according to the changes in time.

After World War II, around the mid 20th century, ikebana was redefined as something that all girls should do before they got married. So there are three things that we have to learn, practice and train in, to become a great wife. First is ikebana, a flower arrangement; second is tea ceremony; and third is cooking. All the girls are forced to learn ikebana. So at that time, many people did ikebana. I once read in a book which said that almost 30 million people were practicing ikebana. It's a huge number.

But since people and society have changed, the notion that girls should be trained in becoming good wives had become mostly obsolete, and had actually started to decline very rapidly.

Even today, when I go to a typical ikebana gathering, I see only people above 70 years old – ladies, who were young girls and were kind of forced to learn ikebana. If you're 60 years old, you're still young. I've been practicing ikebana for more than 25 years, but I am still young, so young, all the time, and I don't know whether I can "be" senior until I die.

When I studied ikebana, I was in college. It was just by coincidence that I met ikebana and I found it fascinating. I started to practice and learn it. I was like a rare species, a rare animal. I loved the concept of letting flowers lead. In order for us to let flowers lead, we have to calm ourselves and empty our mind. Otherwise, we cannot hear, listen to the

voice of the flowers. And if you can listen to the voice of flowers, you just know where you should put your flowers. It's like you just know it. Your body spontaneously starts moving. It's beyond our head, and I really love that. But on the other hand, I really struggled with all the rules, norms, of the existing industry, which was built during an era where it was supposed to be something that you had to practice and learn, if you wanted to be a good wife.

For me, I didn't see it as a tradition. It was just something that was created during that specific era. So this is a brief history of ikebana – how I met ikebana, struggled with it, and came to enjoy it. At the same time, I struggled with the system and the institution of that given industry.

Pavi: It sounds like the vast majority of practitioners are women?

Mayuka: Yes, almost all women except the headmasters. yeah.

Pavi: So the heads are men, but the students and the practitioners are mostly women. so interesting.

Mayuka: Because the headmaster has to come from a certain family. Of course there are female headmasters, plenty of them. But the biggest form of ikebana was formalized as a form of art years ago. It's the oldest and it's the biggest, most respected action in Japan and for a long time, almost 500 years, only sons were allowed to become a headmaster. The girls could practice ikebana but could not be a headmaster. But I think the next headmaster, for the first time in years, is going to be a woman.

Pavi: I'm curious. I know you have some pictures that you can show people, so they have a clearer visual understanding about what you're talking about when you describe, listening to the voice of the flowers and what that results in how it is different from, say, how we might think of flower arranging in the West.

But before that, I find one element of your story really fascinating. You studied economics in Tokyo, and then you came to Georgetown, here in the U.S. You studied, got a master's there, and then joined Harvard Business School. And were in the thick of things: doing this really intensive work, writing case studies, and helping with these collaborations. Somewhere in that process, I think it was at Harvard? The Doing, Being, Knowing Effort that came through as an awareness of something that was missing in your own sense of yourself. Could you describe that experience a little bit?

Mayuka: Yes. so, for me, ikebana was just a hobby. Even though ikebana was very important to me, I couldn't imagine myself becoming a master teacher in the existing ikebana in the world. So it was just a hobby. It was totally separate from my career. At the time, I was working at Harvard Business School around 2006. When I joined, it was really very much “Western Capitalism” at Harvard Business School. It was called the “Capital of Capitalism.” So it was mostly about how to maximize shareholders' value. And the purpose of the company is about making profits, and the professionals or the manager's job is to basically maximize the profit of the company. Again, you just work hard to get those financial results.

But, around 2008, when the financial crisis happened in 2008, it really shocked the Harvard Business School and it really brought them into a deep self-reflection. We believe that we are making leaders, and we are educating leaders who are going to make a difference in the world.

But something went wrong. And that's why we created business leaders who did something without knowing or with knowing, which put the world at crisis, at the edge of a collapse in order to just gain profits, in order to satisfy their ego of getting more money, and doing the very bad thing on the society as a whole.

So the school started to self-reflect and it came out with this new framework for the direction of the education for the next hundred years, which was, as you pointed out, a knowing/doing thing. So knowing is about knowledge, your head, brain. And doing is practice, implementation, and learning from doing, learning from making failures, and it's about the body. And then being is about knowing yourself, so it's soul or heart.

What the school said at the time was that we just put too much focus on knowing/our head and put little focus/attention to our doing/body and also being or soul. And we have to restore the balance between this Knowing, Doing, Being. And when the school came up with this framework I was so astonished. I was very inspired and also surprised. Surprised that this capital of capitalism was starting to say, "Being, knowing yourself, being true to yourself is very important." That was like a revolution. It was so beautiful and so powerful and so shocking.

Also I started to talk to myself and ask myself, "Do you know yourself? Do you really try to be true to yourself? Do you know your being, and are you honest to your being, your true self?" And the answer was actually, "No." I didn't know who I was very much. I was trying to but not as deeply as I should be. Also, working as an executive director at the Harvard Business School was very exciting and rewarding, but it was not really connected to my soul. It was something that I was good at as a professional, but not something that I could devote myself to as a whole person.

So two realizations: the shocking part, the revolution part was that, oh, being true to yourself, knowing yourself is exactly the same thing that ikebana has taught me. Becoming yourself and just being yourself, being as a whole person and then having conversation with the flowers. And if you're not true to yourself, you cannot listen to the voice of flowers. It's really the same between what the Knowing, Doing, Being framework says and what the spirit of ikebana was teaching, had tried to teach me. And then the second is that still there is a huge gap between my doing and my being. There is still a huge gap.

I realized that and around that time, I had this vague notion that maybe I could bridge ikebana, or more Japanese Asian teaching (the wisdom) to the capitalistic business world. Because the capitalistic western world started to say the same thing with what this Asian knowledge had kept saying for hundreds of years. And then, also, if I can bridge these two, that would be exactly doing something, what my being tells me. So those two things, they took years. It's not like just instant inspiration and the next day I started doing it. It took me almost six or seven years, since the school's framework of doing-being, until I actually started to devote myself to the Ikebana Project Institute. That was like the beginning of my realization and my sort of rebirth, just being me and doing what I'm supposed to be. The purpose of and the reason why I'm put on this earth.

Pavi: It strikes me as extraordinary that very early on in your life, you found yourself in that path of studying hard, focusing on outcomes and performance. And you really followed that track. And like you said, you were successful at it. And so there's a certain security that comes from that, right? You've built a career, you've built

a reputation, it's all going in what seems like the right direction. Was it scary to step out of that, to let it go? And if it was frightening, what actually gave you the courage to take that step?

Mayuka: Yes, it was scary. And although there are many people who are doing it, who are teaching it -- ikebana -- what I was trying to do was something that nobody had ever done. So I had no idea whether my hypothesis would be accepted by society or not. Yes, it was scary. Yes, it was threatening, but at the same time – it's a bit contradictory, but I was not also scared at all. It was more scary to stay in the world where I have to keep performing as a professional. I have to keep achieving the expectation that others set on me. It was like no ending. If I achieve something, the higher goal is set and then when I achieve it, another higher goal is set. It was actually very scary. I didn't even know it was a scary path.

But once I realized it was a pretty scary path and there was no ending and it was always that I gave more control of my life to somebody else. Believing in myself and going into the world that I believe, where there's no question, there's no answer and there's no previous path. It's far less scary than staying on the path that I have no control over. So, did I answer your question? It was scary, but it was not scary at all.

Pavi: You say in one of your essays that you wrote about your approach with IKERU, "I did not want to be a disruptor. I wanted to be a pioneer who is also respectful to the existing system."

You also mentioned that doing something new in things that have a long history can be a unique challenge, and that there is this tussle, this struggle between your vision for the future and your obligation to the past. And that you chose not to just reject the past, but to actually find that delicate balance between future and past, between the new and the old, and the innovative and the traditional.

Which I think is such a remarkable testament to the kind of person you are, in that it wasn't about just riding off on your own and creating something from scratch, but building on, honoring, and bringing a new variation to something. And there is gentleness in your approach that really strikes me and maybe this is a good time to actually walk us through some of what IKERU creations are.

Mayuka: Thank you. I have been doing this for quite a long time and before I started my own initiative IKERU, these are the photo examples of my work at an existing, a very typical ikebana exhibition, hosted by the ikebana industry.

I use very colorful, beautiful flowers and I love these beautiful flowers, but as you can see, the materials that we use in ikebana may not be so different from the materials that are used in the Western flower arrangement. I keep saying letting flowers sleep, but in order to let the flowers sleep itself, it needs to have enough space so that the flower can breathe.

One of the features, a characteristic of, is that there is a space in the work and a space is also a part of the work, because without the space, without a blank, without nothingness, the flowers cannot be lived. You see lots of space in the work. Also you always have to think how I can make each flower look the most beautiful. It is about a conversation between you and each flower, but you also have to have a flow in the whole and in the work.

In order to create a whole and the flow in the work, flowers also have to talk to each other. It's not like, you are the center, and you talk to each flower. The talk is more like a web of communication. There is also a conversation between flowers. I think that's also a little bit different from the western flower arrangement, the space and the communication between flowers and among flowers.

This is the photo of ikebana, after I started to do my own ikebana, in Ikeru. I was asked to decorate the stage of a very beautiful and inspirational business conference, about chi organization. I'm not explaining what chi organization is. It's an organization which adapts to the new way of managing people and not managing. It is about the organization to let people live so that the organization can perform better. There is a very similar concept between this field called organization and ikebana. That is why I was asked to do ikebana on the stage. You can also see the space and energy and the flow in ikebana .

Pavi: Are you using different kinds of materials there than the usual in this one?

Mayuka: For this, I was still in Tokyo, so I still used flowers from the market. All these flowers I bought from the flower market were basically grown by people, cut by people and then delivered to the market. They were flowers that were sold and transacted in the market that you can find in flower shops. And, that is also after I started Ikeru, my ikebana project and I hosted our own exhibition at the Confucius shrine. Eighteen people participated in this exhibition and on the left is my work and on the right is other Ikeru members and it requires special experience.

Then I moved to Karuizawa. I moved to a town close to nature, and that's when I started to arrange, not only flowers from the market, not only the flowers that were grown by people, but also flowers, plants, and trees in the field, because they're everywhere and there are very few flower shops in Karuizawa .

It was more natural to use flowers there than going into the flower shops and buy flowers, and then arrange them. When you are using flowers directly from nature, basically you are arranging according to nature and the season.

We have four seasons in Japan. We have flowers in the spring and you arrange for spring flowers. In the spring, it is green and yellow and a little bit white and soft pink. In the summer, the colors get more and more vivid and green and strong. During autumn, they start to dry and plants start to get dry and red. In the winter, it's basically all dry and there are only pine trees. Some of the evergreen trees are green. But other than that, all the colors are brown and green…

Of course you take a walk, you can feel the changes of nature, changes of seasons and you can feel the nature in you. But by trying to arrange them in a vase, you feel really close to nature. You feel like nature, the season around you becomes a part of you. Although I do the same ikebana whether I use flowers from the market or whether I use plants and flowers from nature, the experience is quite different. It's deeper. It's more subtle.

With the flowers from the market it is much easier to do ikebana because they're beautiful themselves. Even if the angle is a little bit off, it still looks beautiful, but we have to be in tune with, for example, a dried plant. The voice, it's very subtle and you really have to listen to that subtle, small voice. Otherwise, you cannot let it live. It's

more concentration. That's why it becomes a much deeper experience.

Pavi: I have a question. It strikes me that if you're going to the market to buy flowers, your original question can be like what do I want to buy? And whereas when you go out, it's almost like I'm wondering, is it more like what wants to come home with me or like what?

Mayuka: Exactly, you cannot choose. Nature is just there. Even though you think that the flower is beautiful, if the flower is in somebody's garden, you cannot take it back with you. And even though it's something just on the side of the road and it's clear that you can take it with you. But if you feel, "Oh, this plant would be happier to stay here", you don't bring it back with you. You just bring something that you feel like, "Oh, maybe these flowers will allow me to play with them, but these flowers may want to stay." So you don't really have a choice [laughs]. It's like the nature outside that is telling me what I should bring home and what I shouldn't.

Pavi: That's profound.

Mayuka: But the conversation actually starts when I collect flowers from nature.

Pavi: Beautiful. And it brings up the question of what stands in the way of us listening to flowers? Like what is it that makes it hard to hear?

Mayuka: Yeah. One word -- our ego, our desire to be good ikebana practitioners or our ego that says, "Oh, this is the work that I wanna create." So if we have that desire or the vision that this is what we're going to create, it means we listen to our head, not to the voice of the flowers. And that vision, the picture in your head, prevents you from really having the true conversation with the flowers and you start to use flowers to complete the picture, the vision that you have in your mind.

But of course, we're humans and it's just natural to have that kind of desire – and I do too. And after twenty five years of practice, I do have that ego all the time. But it's important to first be aware that, "Oh, now I have that ego. Okay. Okay." And accept it. Don't feel like, "Oh, I have that ego. I'm the wrong person. I'm such a bad person." Not that. Just accept it calmly and then take a breath and just look at the flower again. Since a flower has power and it's beauty, if you ask your flower, it tells you. So rather than try to remove that ego from the head, just see the flower and the ego would start to dissolve.

Pavi: That's so beautiful. Looking at these pictures that you have, I'm realizing how you're expanding the definition of beauty. I don't know if expanding the definition of beauty is right or you're returning things to the definition of beauty that in modern life we've parked outside. Like withered old age is not beautiful. That's the assumption, right? Things that are dying are not beautiful. Things that are vibrant, young are beautiful and there's something that you're bringing back into the understanding of beauty here. Does that make sense?

Mayuka: Exactly. Exactly. For example, now I have this very dry branch, and if you just sit there, it is just dead tree parts, but if you put it in your hand and look at it really seriously and attentively, you start to see the beauty of the flow, you start to see the moss on the branch and moss or fungus is not something that you usually think is beautiful, but it's actually very beautiful if you open up your eyes and your heart. And once you realize that even that seemingly dead tree branch is beautiful, everything starts to look

actually beautiful. And particularly during the winter, there are no flowers and the plants are all dried out.

It's old, withered and dried and -- they're dead. So what you do in ikebana is to literally let them live again, let them be born again. And through that act of trying to let dead dried tree branches and plants live again on the vase that you have -- a small universe of sorts -- it's like working with the trees on the journey of rebirth. So, as you said we then change the definition of what is beautiful in that something which is dead can be reborn and it is beautiful. And it is actually very beautiful.

Once you start to see the world with those eyes, you cannot stop seeing the world in that way -- and your world actually expands and your world gets richer and your world gets more beautiful. So it's not that there's not that many beautiful things in the world. If you have that sense of beauty, an expanded sense of beauty in yourself, the world becomes really beautiful because the world is beautiful. [laughs]

Pavi: We're getting very close to the time where I am going to hand over the baton to Cynthia, but are there more slides that you wanted to show or should we stop screen sharing?

Mayuka: Yeah. I will stop.

Pavi: Okay. Just one question, before I hand over, and that is, as you're speaking, I'm beginning to see more and more how you might bring this into corporate teams and like the way you work with flowers is maybe the way you work with people.

And like you just said, "once you open your heart to that beauty, you see it everywhere." And I'm wondering, when you, when you do these Ikeru workshops with people, what is the role of your vision? In that communication, right? What is the part that you are bringing to the relationship?

Mayuka: So when you are doing the ikebana, you have your own conversation with the flowers and it's your thing, and nobody can interrupt. Nobody can disturb that conversation. So when I'm at the workshop, that's like the first baseline in respect and knowledge and treasure and value that conversation that each participant has with each flower.

But sometimes I see people are just stuck in their head. It's okay to get stuck in their head, but I intervene if I find them just stuck, unable to move from there. That's when I know and I say something to help them come down from head to their heart and their body. When I do that, they are able to restart the conversation with the flowers.

But I do another challenge in that I have my own ego that wants the workshop participant to think that I'm great. I'm a great ikebana practitioner. I try to be honest about it. I try not to be just, "I'm a very well established, very well trained ikebana monk who has no ego and has no desire. I'm like the Buddha." I don't do that because I'm not.

I share that struggle – my internal struggle. I share my sometimes not so beautiful ego, and my very noisy chat in my head with the participants. I share my journey with them so that they think, "Oh, of course, having that internal noisy chat is natural and Mayuka has it." And so just being true to myself and being true to people who participate in the

workshop, including my vulnerabilities and my struggles and my pains. I think that's still a challenge. [Laughs] But I try to.

Pavi: Thank you and I'm sure, like you said, it's a lifelong journey, but you seem such a beautiful vehicle for these learnings and experiences. Cynthia, over to you.

Cynthia: Thank you, Pavi, and thank you, Mayuka. That was so powerful. I just want to remind the listeners that we invite you to submit your comments and questions via the webcast form on our livestream page, or you can email us. I'll just share some reflections that have come in, Mayuka, and some questions. In the meantime, I just want to say that, when Pavi introduced you, she was speaking about your life in contrasts and the "wild" ikebana really struck something in me, and it was such a good example of that – how you allow the wildness to come into harmony which is really what creates this natural sense of order and true beauty and healing actually, because it's nature's sense of order in each of these expressions. I just found myself wanting to almost receive them as transmissions, like they were speaking to me through your creations. I want to really thank you for that.

The other thing that really struck me was the art of letting flowers live. It is the same as letting the souls of people live. So powerful. Some questions that have come in, I'm going to lump these together because they have to do with your practice of entering the space that you do.

Kathy is asking, "Can you speak to the state of your being when you walk out to gather and when you dispose of the plants? What role, if any, does gratitude play in the entire process?" And let me just ask Teresa's because it's very similar. Teresa asks, "Is the listening to flowers about honoring the flowers or are these two separate ideas in ikebana? And thank you so much for the lovely talk."

Mayuka: Thank you so much for your questions. Yes, honoring. It's quite similar, but I think it's a little bit different. Honoring is just listening. Honoring implies a meaning that the flower – that you believe flowers are great. The flowers are something which we should learn from and that's true. I honor flowers, but when I teach ikebana, I feel my relationship with the flowers are quite equal and I'm quite neutral and I just listen to the flowers.

I cannot explain the role, but it's more like accepting flowers as they are than honoring flowers. By accepting and seeing the real beauty in flowers, you start to feel like you and the flowers are the same. You are part of nature; flowers are part of nature. There are actually not that many differences between you and the flowers. Does that make sense?

It's not like flowers are better than humans and we learn from flowers and that's why we have to honor flowers. We are just part of the bigger nature, something great and we play together just for a while.

The first question is about when I dissolve, when I finish the work and I put the work off for a while, but of course I dissolve the flowers. It's a deep gratitude, "Thank you for giving me the opportunity to play with you." And I have to throw them away actually.

If I use things from nature, I just put them back in nature and maybe they decay and they become a part of earth and that would create another plant afterwards. But I use flowers from the markets. They use lots of chemicals and I cannot put them back in the ground, in nature. I have to throw them away as garbage. It's actually very painful, but it's an

act of play, and I'd just say, "Thank you for letting me play with you," and say goodbye.

Cynthia: Beautiful, thank you. And Teresa says she really appreciates the explanation, and it makes perfect sense. Is it accurate, what I was hearing from you, is it accurate to say that in the honoring there's a certain separateness between you and the flower and in the listening, you merge together, there's no separateness anymore?

Mayuka: Yes, exactly.

Cynthia: And speaking of process, also a question about the importance of emptying the mind. It sounds like, first of all, as a young child, you naturally had this inclination to merge with these flowers, even the ones that were sprouting in the sidewalks. But is there a practice that allows you to deepen into the silence or the emptiness? And does the practice of ikebana itself bring you deeper into that? What is your practice?

Mayuka: Yes, for me of course, meditation is one of the very important practices, to allow us to calm our mind, empty our mind. I personally struggle with meditation. If I'm alone with myself, I think that's the whole point of meditation, but meditation is very hard because you only have yourself and your body and your mind.

But when you teach ikebana, you have flowers and just by trying to listen to the birth of flowers. It's not like you have to empty your mind and then you can listen to the flowers. If you try to listen to the voice of flowers, you naturally start emptying your mind. So, even though when you start ikebana, when you start to do ikebana, you have a noisy mind, through just being with flowers, having conversation with flowers, your mind naturally, eventually starts to calm down.

For me, ikebana is a practice of the mind. I am so grateful that I met ikebana. I couldn't imagine my life without ikebana. I would have become a perverse person, human being, if I had not met ikebana

Cynthia: Thank you. And a very practical question, just how long does it usually take to create one piece of floral art?

Mayuka: It depends, really. It first depends on the vase. For example, I have this vase right now, it's like a small to medium size. So the size of the vase defines the size of the universe that you want to create. If the vase is smaller, the universe gets smaller. And if the universe is small, you need much less flowers. So it takes less time. So the size of the vase defines the time that that would take.

Also, you can decide whether you do this ikebana very quickly or if you want to do this very deeply and take your time. So if I use a small vase and if I do it quickly, it's just a few minutes. It's very short and quick.

But if I use a bigger vase and if I think, "Oh, maybe today I will do it as long as it takes." It takes three or four hours. And if it's a really big ikebana, which will be exhibited at a big exhibition, we use an entire day to create this one ikebana. So, from a few minutes to a day.

Cynthia: From Philomena just a few comments, just thanking you for your beautiful wisdom. And she also mentions that she continues to enjoy the vibrant autumn leaves she has brought home.

One question is: you sit on the board of three public companies. Are there any biases or resistances you have to navigate being young and being a woman in this space? The spirit of ikebana seems so quiet and gentle. How do you prevent it from getting drowned out in the boardroom?

Mayuka: Thank you for the question. Yeah, that's my everyday challenge. Out of the three companies, in one company I'm the only female executive. I do have two on the board and all the others, like from the president to the board are men. I'm like the only woman during the whole meeting, and I got really exhausted. I once was really exhausted and I thought maybe I should quit. Even though I try hard to be myself and try to convey the importance of being gentle, the importance of taking care of people, the importance of having that kind of mind and the importance of being like a whole person for the company, I felt like I got silenced…I got canceled. I felt like I was treated like nobody. So the question, the answer to your question, yes, I had that challenge. And I still, even at the other companies, we have more female and younger directors on the board, I had this similar challenge.

But actually from this year -- so it's been only like two weeks -- I started to change my mindset. So when I got really exhausted and when I thought, “Oh, maybe I should quit because I had no value and I was no use in that kind of environment, I didn't see these male directors as the flowers I treat in ikebana. So I switched my perspective. Before, I saw them as something that I have to fight with. I have to convince them that my way of thinking is right. I want them to listen to me.

But now, “Oh, maybe the first thing that I should do is to just accept them and see them as they are.” And when I change that perspective, now they look really… I feel something precious in them. I feel like they're like small boys trying very hard to do good things even though they make mistakes. So I feel like I'm becoming like a mother of these sons.

Once I changed my perspective, the energy between me and these male directors started to change and they started to treat me in a different way. So now we have more authentic conversation, communications. Now I see my value and now I see how I can make my own contribution to this company. And not through just my doing, but through my being. And so, sorry for a long answer, but yes, I had the struggle and I got really… I was hurt and I'm still hurt, but I changed my way of seeing them and my way of seeing the world, and the world started to change. So I’m in that transition period right now. I'm experiencing that transformation right now.

Cynthia: Wow. Thank you for sharing that. It's so powerful and fresh. It's very new for you, but clearly, very, very transformative and a real testament to changing your inner experience to really transforming your relationship with the group. Thank you for that.

A couple of questions actually about this in the corporate world. Kathy asks, "What do corporate participants get from the process? How do they apply it? And thank you and the flowers for bringing such beauty to the world." There's a related question: “I'm wondering if you can take us into the corporate setting or maybe if you've worked with families who might be having some conflicts. What does the actual process look like when you introduce ikebana with them? And is there perhaps a story of how this transformed the team or a family?”

Mayuka: So, usually when I do ikebana at the corporate setting, I offer a three hour

workshop, like as a part of their leadership development program. One thing which is unique about a corporate workshop is that while usually we do ikebana by ourselves -- one person creates one ikebana work -- in the corporate setting, I ask them to do ikebana as a team of usually three to five people. So, for example, one person is designated like a branch arranger and then the next person puts the bigger flower, and then the third person takes a smaller flower.

So each has its own role and you have to do it as a team. In that workshop the participants learn the basic spirit of ikebana which is to empty our mind. And then we start listening to, hearing the birth of flowers and what is about letting flowers live. But also, as you have to do it as a team, you have to let other team members live as well in order to create a team ikebana. So you not only let flowers live but other human members live.

By doing that, people start to realize, "Wow, I thought the way that she put the branch, I first didn't agree with. I thought that was ugly." But once I accepted and once I started to see her way of seeing the world, now the branch looks really beautiful. So by letting other team members live, the way that other people see the world becomes a part of the way that you see the world. So it's like expanding your inner world, expanding the way that you see the world through working with your team members to create ikebana.

So mainly those two things, the importance of having the inner calmness, inner stability, inner quietness, but also -- and then the important thing, which I forgot to say, is that by letting other members live, by accepting the way that others see the world, you end up having a much better work as a team, as a collective effort, which you wouldn't imagine when you start doing ikebana.

The result, the performance itself, it's far better than you originally expected or you originally imagined, or the thing that you can create by yourself. You learn the real power of teamwork, but teamwork not only means just bringing in each one's expertise or knowledge, but becoming one, having a real oneness, by allowing other members to be who they are.

Those things people do and feel and are amazed by this workshop. People say that they want to bring that feeling, that experience, the physical, the bodily sensation of this, the true collaboration to their daily team management. But since it's usually only a three-hour workshop, like a one time training program, There's actually one example… I don't really have for these companies because I only offer workshops. I did not do a long, continuing follow-up of the ikebana workshop. So I cannot really answer the question whether there are any teams or organizations which have transformed thanks to the single three-hour ikebana workshop. So the answer would be no.

The three-hour workshop is not that powerful to change the entire organization. But there was a Japan branch of an international organization. There are only 10 people in the office. The 10 people who attended the workshop were the entire staff of the organization. There was this very powerful director -- and of course male, his leadership style actually started to change after the ikebana workshop. Because of that, the atmosphere of the office started to get better. If I can have an opportunity to really let all the members or most of the members of the organization experience ikebana, it may have an effect on the organization as a whole.

Cynthia: Great and one last question from the listeners. What wisdom would you share for

someone who's feeling distanced from their heart, whether both in their work and in their lives in general?

Mayuka: I hear you. I do know what it feels like feeling distanced from your heart and -- because I was there for a long time, actually most of my life, I felt like that way. I think what saved me was that I had this practice of ikebana, which I somehow continued, despite so many obstacles or so many struggles and the pains that I had with the ikebana system, the ikebana institution, I somehow just continued.

I just love flowers and that's always with me. When I started to tune myself to that small point of my life that I really feel precious, that's when I started to get back to my heart. And it was just a coincidence that what is in my heart now becomes my career. But it doesn't have to be that way, you know, ikebana could be just my hobby. If I do ikebana as my hobby, it doesn't mean that I do things -- even if I do ikebana as my hobby, I can still stay with my heart.

What is important is to just keep coming back to that small spot that you have, you already have in your life, in yourself that you feel is very important. It's very precious and don't lose it. Just keep doing it, even though you don't know whether that will lead you -- where it brings you to. So just find it, keep it and treasure it.

Cynthia: Thank you. One final question before I turn it over to Pavi for closing remarks. We ask all of our guests; how can we, in the Awakin Calls community and the broader ServiceSpace ecosystem, how can we support your vision and work in the world?

Mayuka: That question, sorry, it’s asking me the question or was it for everyone?

Cynthia: Oh, oh. To you, Mayuka. How can we support your work and your vision in the world?

Mayuka: I really hope that one day, not in the distant future, I can have a real ikebana workshop or gathering with people who are in your community. Yes, I think that's it. And then get connected to you in a more intimate way, just like a friend and be part of your community as well. I really want to be (inaudible) and get involved. That’s my request and that’s my only wish.

Cynthia: Thank you. Pavi?

Pavi: Oh, my goodness. What a beautiful presence you've brought to this call Mayuka. And as I've been listening to you and Cynthia, the word that's kept coming up in my mind is balance. There's such a balancing, a balancing force that your life seems to represent. And it feels like you're connecting your efforts to a universal energy of balancing. Nature has a balancing force of its own.

If we're trying to do our individual balancing, that feels very different than being part of nature's way of balancing. And I just wanted to share this short excerpt. It's from a book called The Japanese Way of the Flower.

In the book it says, “According to an old Japanese legend, a young girl came to her local well to draw water, only to discover that a trailing vine had wound itself around the rope that pulled the bucket. Baking in the sunlight, a single blossom had opened itself to the day. The girl savored the flower's beauty for a few moments. Then, in order not to disturb the plant, she walked out of her way to the next well to draw her water”.

And this is an example of the union with the flower heart. I feel like this is what you have given us is. Looking at that story from one mindset, you can see the inconvenience, the inefficiency. But what's invisible is the gain, right? Like when you carry a heart like that, when you carry a presence that's attuned like that, you can't put a price on what you receive. I think you're pointing through your work, through your presence, to that invisible pricelessness of attunement and a deep listening. So thank you so much for your way of being and doing and knowing in the world Mayuka.

Mayuka: Thank you so much, Pavi and Cynthia and everyone. What a beautiful, what a precious time that I was allowed to have with you, and I cannot thank you enough. Truly, I am deeply grateful.

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This weekend join a special ikebana workshop with Mayuka: "Letting Flowers Lead." More details and RSVP info here.