

Extending the Limits of Good-Will

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Extending the limits of good-will.

People who push my buttons show me the limits of my good-will and I find this very humiliating! For example - good-will suggests that I visit an elderly neighbour. It's a lovely day, I just know she would appreciate being taken for a drive and walk, maybe lunch in a café. (In retrospect I might see that I didn't know this at all – I just assumed so!) Instead I find her morose, not particularly welcoming, and am quickly saddled with sheets that needed washing and ironing. Into the heart of good-will, irritation insinuates itself quietly.

Oh that I could simply be aware of the irritation, or that my heart would go a step further and choose compassion instead! Compassion for myself, in my disappointment and injured pride. Compassion for my neighbour trapped in bad humour. From that a gracious willingness to help may emerge, and in all likelihood we would both cheer up naturally.

But what if irritation sets itself up as master without my noticing? A supposedly helpful suggestion comes out as a barked order: „Don't do it that way“. My neighbour snaps back: "You're doing it all wrong, let go and I'll show you" and we both tighten into our respective knots of „my way“, glowering at one another. The kamma of ill-will has been set in motion and how hard it is to stop! Angry, self righteous thoughts storm through "She has no right to make me do this work... no wonder she gets so few visitors ... she hasn't a clue how to look after herself..." Somewhere in the midst might be a sinking shame for having let the visit deteriorate into a dog-fight. A recognition that I have let myself be caught in the powerful bind of self-centring. Once caught, how much effort it can take to refuse to tighten the smug binding of my way, my opinions versus her ridiculousness, her hopelessness. By comparison, shame's suggestion feels humiliating: that my neighbour is simply someone who I am rejecting in anger?

Sitting in meditation, memories like these come up. Letting go of thoughts, the body finds it easier to relax into shame than to tighten into self-righteousness. Perhaps that's what we mean by „body wisdom“ – our body can lead us to truth which our logic can deny. In time shame eases into forgiveness and a deeper commitment to good-will. Then, when it comes to neighbourly visits that degenerate into dog-fights, I can no longer pretend there is no option but to stew in self-righteous anger. Eventually I might summon the energy for an embarrassed smile and an apology for having made a fuss.

Very often this is rewarded by a kindly response, and we might both be relieved to find ourselves back in the happier, easier realm of friendliness.

Three ways I can extend the limits of good-will: Spot the untested assumptions which so easily creep into the heart of good-will, skewing thoughts towards my happiness rather than my neighbours. Strengthen mindfulness so that I spot irritation before it creates a tight familiar world of my way, my opinions etc and from which all intruders must be repelled. Turn away from that familiar world whenever I find myself defending it, groping my way towards an unfamiliar freedom where there are no intruders and nothing to defend.

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