

Impulsive or Spontaneous

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Tips of the Day · 1 min read

When we act impulsively, we do so out of habit. A thoughtless reaction. There's no reflection involved. And the word impulsive suggests that it is not skilful. We often regret what we have done. Somebody asks us to come and help in the garden. And we find ourselves saying, 'Yes, I'd love to!' And immediately comes that sinking feeling that we really didn't want to do it. And that we don't have the time. We would prefer to be doing something else. It scratches on the mind and we think of excuses. It can lead to fibbing. 'Woke up feeling terrible. I've got a job to do. Someone I must see. Forgot all about it.' Of course, we are prolific in our apologies. But it leaves an uncomfortable feeling. That's the dread of being found out. The shame of it. There's a Mullah Nasruddin story. He is tired of his neighbour asking for the use of his donkey. So on the next request, he tells him the donkey is being used by someone else. Just then the donkey brays. And when his neighbour raises his eyebrows, he asks, 'Who are you going to believe? Me or my donkey?' We all want to be spontaneous. It suggests skillfulness and joy. And we think that spontaneity should arise spontaneously! But it's hard work to train ourselves towards a genuine, unaffected naturalness about what we do. Consider sport! How many times do tennis players practise their shots? And in the immediacy of the game their strokes are spontaneous. Not that they are always as accurate as they would want them to be. Consider performance artists whether actors or musicians. Although their performance seems so natural, there has been an enormous amount of practice beforehand. So it is with virtues. We need to consciously develop them – goodwill, generosity, patience and so on. And then every so often we shall surprise ourselves at our spontaneous, wise and joyful response.

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