

## 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.