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Two Sisters
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Sensei: There were once two sisters. They owned many things together. They did many things together. Their lives overlapped in many places. From the time they were little they had been side by side. In the time that passed and that brought them into adulthood, many patterns had developed – many habits in the way they related to each other. Many of these things were now beyond conscious reflection. Many other habits were addressed only by standing agreements the two had with each other – such as, “Please ask for permission before borrowing something.” On one day, a day like many others, the elder of the two borrowed the younger’s suit. While borrowing that suit, the elder stained the garment. Upon returning home, the elder clumped the suit on the floor in the back of her closet and made no mention of the stain that was now setting. Time passed – one week. An event came up where the younger sister was in need of donning her suit. Going to where she thought it was, she found it to be gone. Asking the elder sister if she had seen the suit, the elder sister replied, “Yeah, I think it is at the bottom of my closet.” Not having time to discuss any of the standing agreements that were supposed to be in place between the two, the younger sister went to find her suit. It was too wrinkled now to prepare for the night’s event. She held it up and noticed the stain that had now set on the front lapel. With no time to spare, the younger sister grabbed a suit of the elder sister’s off the closet rack. “My suit is ruined, can I wear this one?” she asked her elder sibling. “No, I’m afraid you can’t. I need to wear that suit tomorrow morning and I won’t have time to have it dry-cleaned and pressed between the time you get home and the time I need to leave,” answered the elder sister. “But you see, I would have a suit to wear tonight if you didn’t wear mine without asking that one time. Had you asked, I would have at least known to have it cleaned and pressed –that would mean that I could wear it now and not have to ask to wear yours,” said the younger sister. “I understand, but I have an early meeting and I need that suit to wear tomorrow. I cannot have it wrinkled, or worse stained. I am sorry that you are in this kind of position,” finished the elder sister. With no time to debate the morality of the situation, the younger sister left the matter for later.

Deshi 1: The elder sister was or is very selfish – very self-centered. She does not see her role in all that has happened, nor does she take responsibility for all that she has caused by both her actions and her non-actions.

Sensei: This is all true. But what could she have done differently?

Deshi 1: At every step she could have done something differently – something more of the Way.

Sensei: For instance?

Deshi: She could have asked in the first place if she could wear the suit. As she said, that would have given the younger sister the notice she would need to make sure the suit would be ready for her to wear when she needed it next. Without asking, the elder sister led the younger sister to believe that the suit was still in her own closet, ready to wear. In a way, the elder sister was being deceitful.

Sensei: Is there anything else?

Deshi 1: Having taken the suit without asking, she could have returned it with an apology for not asking. That too would have let the younger sister know that the garment was not like she thought it was, in the place she thought it was, in the state she thought it was. The apology would have also bore witness to their earlier standing agreement and that in turn would have remedied the earlier lack of consideration with an act of respect. By returning the suit in the proper way, by not throwing it in the back of the closet, as if she was hiding it from her sister and herself, she would have cultivated the level of respect necessary for the level of intimacy required by their loving relationship as sisters.

Sensei: Can you think of anything else?

Deshi 1: Having made the mistakes of not asking to wear the suit and of not returning it properly so that the younger sister could have her own suit to wear when she needed it, the elder sister could have taken full responsibility for the infractions she caused, for the lack of consideration she demonstrated, for the loss of respect she fostered, and for the diminishing intimacy she is cultivating between her and her sibling in showing herself to be untrustworthy and lacking in self-responsibility. She could have done all of this by forfeiting her own suit. Seeing all that she did, she could have owned up to the reactions of her actions – she could have shown some Karmic responsibility by letting her younger sister wear her suit, even if it meant that she would have no suit to wear the next morning.

Sensei: Can you think of one more thing?

Deshi 1: Yes, when she apologized at the end, she could have offered a true apology.

Sensei: What do you mean?

Deshi 1: It is not really an apology if one does not take responsibility for one's actions, nor if one does not see one's own actions as flawed in some way. A true apology would have been a forfeiture of what one is asking but seeking it instead through a grace one is requesting. That is to say, when the elder sister was saying she was sorry, she was not really sorry. She said she was sorry for the situation being thrust upon the younger sister. However, she is making it sound like the younger sister is a victim of circumstances. In that way, she is feigning responsibility. For the younger sister is not a victim of circumstances, she is a victim of the elder sister's egocentricism. In the end, her apology came from the position of the very standing agreement that existed between the two sisters that she threw away herself when it no longer met her own needs – now she is expecting that it stay in place. She lets the younger sister ask to wear the suit; she feels justified in saying “no” to the request – as if nothing relative had just occurred and as if this is just one more time that they were asking to borrow clothes from each other; and in the end her reasons for refusing the younger sister's request seem perfectly rational to her – as if she is merely dealing with the practical issue of “What will I wear tomorrow?” If she were truly sorry, she would have acted otherwise. She would have been saying in her sorry not “What will I wear tomorrow?” but “I know I did wrong, and I know I am asking you to do something for me that I failed to do for you, but please grant me the undeserved grace of letting me wear my own suit tomorrow.” She should have said that in complete

acceptance of the fact that the younger sister, with every right, may have refused her request for undeserved grace. That is an apology. That alone would have allowed her to have her suit, and to restore the intimacy that she earlier subverted and that should lay between family members.

Sensei: You have shown yourself to be truly insightful in your own practice. You have managed to shine the Way in a place where there was once no Way. (To Deshi 2) You are very quite – do you have a different answer?

Deshi 2: Yes, Sensei, I do. Your question was “What could she have done differently?” And to that question, I would say the answer is “Nothing.” The elder sister could have done nothing differently.

Sensei: Explain.

Deshi 2: With respect to my fellow-deshi, a person who could have apologized in such a heart-felt manner, with such understanding of all that truly happened and of all that was going to happen, a person who could have forfeited their rights to their own suit as form of justice for all that passed, a person who could have owned up to having worn the suit early on without asking permission, a person who could have asked in the first place to wear the suit, etc., is a person who is not capable of doing what this sister had ended up doing. Hence, inversely, a person who did what this sister actually did is not a person who can do any of the things my most insightful fellow-deshi has suggested she should do. She cannot do anything differently than what she first did because everything different, different in the sense of being more akin to the Way, is beyond the capacity of her being. She can only do more of the same – countless more, or other, manifestations of the egocentricism that had her acting in this way right now. With every action she carried out, even up until the end, she was true to her egocentric being. She remained consistent with herself. No matter how easy it would have been to act differently at each turn, no matter how much more blindly wrong she was at each turn, no matter how much more self-destructively (as far as negating the relationship she holds with her sister) she was acting at each turn, she remained consistently egocentric. In a way, to act differently is a “skill” she does not possess. She is no closer to acting outside of her ego and to following the wisdom and compassion my fellow-deshi has laid out before us than a pig is to flying. Hence my answer to your question, “Nothing, there is nothing she could have done differently in that case.”

Sensei: Is there anything she can do – to assist her with manifesting the Way?

Deshi 2: She must train in it. She must cultivate the wisdom and compassion she now does not have. She cannot just decide to have them.

Sensei: And how does she do this – how does she cultivate wisdom and compassion?

Deshi 2: In the same way that my fellow-deshi has done this for her own self. In that way, the elder sister too may come to see the truth of Love, Justice, Compassion, and Wisdom – as easily as they are to see for my fellow-deshi here.

Sensei: And as for you as well.