Objectivity

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Some people make a big deal out of the fact that the mind is never totally objective, never totally neutral. And from that they claim, “Well, since there’s no objectivity, everybody is entitled to their subjective opinion. Everyone’s entitled to do what they want to do.” To define happiness as they want, and to search for happiness in any way they want, because they say there are no objective standards. Well, the mind may not be objective, but there are objective patterns of cause and effect and experience. In other words, we all want happiness. But some forms of happiness are more true than others, more lasting than others. Some ways of looking for happiness work, and others don’t. So the Buddha took advantage of this discovery of cause and effect, and he learned to take our desire for happiness and put it to good use. In other words, every desire, skillful or unskillful, is aimed at happiness. So it’s on the basis of this that we can talk. You can point out to your unskillful desires, how they’re really not getting anywhere, how they’re not producing the happiness they promise. And in some cases you have to keep rubbing their noses in this before they’re willing to admit it, but eventually it has to get through. But for the message to really get through, you also have to offer other types of happiness to show that, yes, it is possible, working with skillful desires. To create a happiness that’s more lasting, that’s more satisfying, more gratifying. So you can’t just argue with your desires. You have to offer them evidence. This is what we’re working on as we practice. As we practice generosity, virtue, meditation, to show to ourselves that these activities really do provide a happiness that’s more lasting than anything else that unskillful desires can offer, particularly when you’re meditating. As the Buddha said, a major factor in the first jhana is pleasure and rapture, born of seclusion. Then, in the second jhana, you can offer a pleasure and rapture, born of singleness. In other words, in the first case, simply protecting your mind from all the unskillful chatter, isolating it from the pull of unskillful desires, that creates a sense of ease in and of itself. And you want to learn to be sensitive to it. It may not seem all that striking to begin with, but the longer you allow that space of isolation, that space of seclusion, the potential for ease, the potential for rapture there in the body, begins to grow, begins to show itself. So this requires patience, and patience requires conviction. This is why it’s important to associate with people who are well along the way in the path, so that your conviction has some basis, so that it has the power to ward off a lot of unskillful desires. If not permanently, at least give yourself some time so that you can work on the practice. Then, as you begin to see the results within yourself, you don’t need to depend on the outside example so much anymore. As you get more confidence, then the mind really settles in. That’s when you get the rapture and pleasure born of unification or unity, oneness. It’s this pleasure that gives force to the argument. You begin to have something to compare the happiness you get from other activities, other unskillful activities. Then your desire to cultivate skillful desires gathers more weight. Notice you’re still using skillful desires to overcome unskillful desires. The mind isn’t totally objective yet, not totally neutral yet. But you are making use of that one thing that every desire has in common, the desire for happiness. You’re simply taking time to take that desire seriously, to use it to good effect. And you’re also proving to yourself the worth of really looking carefully, with as much objectivity as you can. From there on in in the meditation, there on in in the practice, both as you develop tranquility and insight, it’s a matter of showing to yourself, when you do the meditation this way, what results come about. In particular, is there still some stress, some discomfort, some burdensomeness in this state of mind? In other words, is this happiness really pure yet? Again, you make use of the fact that you’re partial towards happiness, towards ease, towards pleasure and well-being. But you use that desire to make yourself more observant. You learn how to settle the mind, get it established, have it gain confidence. In a state of concentration, you use that desire to want to understand how this state of concentration is put together, and to what might be more subtle happiness in that, by looking for where the stress still is there. It’s usually in the way you put the concentration together. So it’s a matter of both of stilling the mind and of asking the right questions, and learning how to develop an all-around gaze, so that no matter what comes up in the mind, you’re more and more willing to look at it as an event, and less and less inclined to identify with it. You take your desire for happiness. This is essentially how you define yourself as a person. And as you refine it, you begin to learn that the refinement requires a non-self strategy as well, being very clear about what you don’t want to identify with, what causes suffering. Then you take your partiality for happiness and you turn it into a reason to be more and more objective, less inclined to side with one point of view over another, without good evidence. So even though the mind tends to be partial, you can find common ground among all its desires and use that common ground as a basis for becoming more impartial, more objective, clearer seeing. So you can bring yourself to the point where you let go of that last attachment, that last bit of ignorance. That stands in the way of total happiness. It’s only then you can say that the mind is totally objective, totally neutral, because it’s found the happiness it wants. From that point on, desire isn’t necessary anymore. And when it’s no longer necessary, it doesn’t have the power it used to have. So here we can see the Buddha’s skill as a strategist, his skill as a tactician. If you sit around and wait for a totally objective truth to come and hit you over the head, it’s never going to happen. You have to learn how to use your partiality. Combine it with as much honesty as you can muster. That’s how total neutrality, total objectivity can be found. Because it’s only when the mind has found the happiness that it really wants, that’s when it’s able to admit one hundred percent. Because it no longer has any hidden agendas. But that doesn’t mean that you have to wait until you get a hundred percent guarantee that you can trust the mind. You can trust it to a certain extent. Trust its desire for happiness. Take that desire seriously. And it’ll take you where you want to go.

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