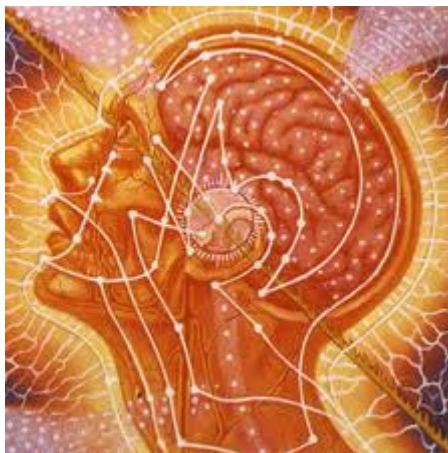


Yoga Wisdom: Your Mind Is More Than Your Brain.

by Ramesh Bjonnes

The gray, tofu-like substance of our brain is busy all day long firing off billions of neuron-messages to thousands of neuron-connectors. This neuron-firing brain is inside our organism, inside our body—but according to Yoga philosophy, the brain is still exterior to the mind. Something objective.



We can cut open our brain, we can examine all its parts and chambers, we can touch it, we can analyze its molecules. But we still cannot touch or see the *mind*. Because the mind is an interior level of our being. And interiors cannot be cut open with a knife. Interiors must be interpreted. If you want to know what my mind is like, you must communicate with me. Poking my brain won't do much. Hook my brain up to an EEG machine can tell you many things about my brain activity, but nothing about how I feel. You, a human being, not a machine, must ask me how I feel.

Reality is not just objective. It is also subjective. Yes, our heart rate goes down when we meditate. And that can objectively be registered on a machine. But this tells us nothing about what we subjectively feel when our heart rate goes down. In order to know that, we talk to each other. We empathize. And talking and empathizing is what the yogis have done for thousands of years. Talking about their inner world, what they experienced, what they realized. And they realized, for example, that garlic did not do their minds, their interiors, much good on meditation.

The yogis are therefore scientists of both the exterior and interior realms. They noted down very systematically all their observations. That is why the yoga system is so systematic. That is why the great yogis are scientists in their own right. And that is why we listen to them, not just the Western material scientists. That is why we use terms like “objective and subjective” realities. In yoga this means that the objective reality is the outer reality and the mind is the inner reality. In a manner of speaking, the brain is enveloped by the much subtler and larger mind....

The best way to explain this in yoga terminology is through the kosha system, which is universally accepted within the yoga community. The five koshas, or layers of the human being are: Annamaya (body and brain), pranamaya (energetic body: nadis, kundalini) Manomaya kosha (mind body) Vijnanamaya kosha (wisdom level), Anandamaya (bliss level).

The human being is thus like a banana flower, the yogis used to say. One layer envelopes the other, one layer subtler than the other—first the crude anatomy of body and brain, then the subtle anatomy of nadis and kundalini, then the mind and its ever-increasing subtle layers of mind, wisdom and bliss. The brain is thus the outer layer of the mind. But it is not synonymous with the mind.

But according to most neuro-scientists, the brain and the mind are synonymous. Our mind, our consciousness is nothing but neurological interactions in the brain. To these scientists, if there is a Divine Intelligence at all, He or She is simply an image or an idea conjured up by the neurological fireworks behind the walls of our bony skull. In reality, the brain is an interactive tool of the mind, but the mind is much larger and subtler than the brain. Some scientists, like biologist Rupert Sheldrake, maintain that the mind is an “information field” that is connected to but extends far beyond the periphery and function of the physical brain.

Another way of explaining the mind/matter conundrum is offered by a range of thinkers and scientists through the theory of panpsychism. This idea, which is remarkably similar to Tantra,

is advocated by both theologians and scientists, from David Ray Griffin to David Chalmers. Panpsychism asserts that consciousness, as is explained in Yoga and Tantra, is found everywhere and is a fundamental property of the universe—all the way down to atomic particles. Thus rocks and salt crystals have what Chalmers call “protoconsciousness.” But perhaps the new science of complexity explains all this even more “scientifically” by stating that, yes, consciousness does arise from the brain, but it simply cannot be reduced to the brain.

As in Tantra, the science of complexity acknowledges the biological roots of the mind, but it also maintains that we are more than our neurons. In other words, the complex and subjective experiences of our thoughts and emotions when we make love, read or listen to music cannot simply be reduced to neurological patterns in the brain. For, the human mind has a unique, interior experience all of its own. This becomes especially clear in regards to the realm of spirituality. Because it is universally accepted that people with mystical experiences report that these occurrences are “more real” than anything else they have experienced. In other words, the experience of spirituality cannot merely be triggered by sensory or neuro-chemical pleasures. These experiences are of a higher or deeper nature than that which we ordinarily encounter every day.

Philosopher Jan Smuts reminds us that nature, and thus evolution, “is an interlacing network of *wholes*.” Both the brain and the mind are perfect examples of these interlacing wholes, but the mind’s whole is much larger, much broader in scope than the brain. Therefore the brain is enveloped by the mind, not the other way around.

In the book *The Mind and the Brain*, Jeffrey M. Schwartz, M.D., and Sharon Begley actually documents how the mind is more expansive, powerful and creative than the brain by illustrating through PET scans that willful meditation practice can actually alter the brain’s physiology. They have proven that we can—as in fact Yogis have maintained for thousands of years—will ourselves to become better human beings. Not only that, we can, in effect, even alter brain function through the use of mindfulness, through the practice of spiritual intention.

According to Yoga philosophy, the brain and the mind are both exceptional and mysterious expressions of the cosmic unfolding of Consciousness, of Brahman. The brain and the mind are also perfect examples of nature’s duality of Brahman’s Oneness, of the interlacing relationship between Matter and Consciousness, between what Tantra calls Shiva (Consciousness) and Shakti (Energy/Matter). Throughout evolution, on both the grand cosmic scale, as well as on the minutest micro-cosmic level—the expressions of consciousness and matter, of Shiva and Shakti—are but two expressions of the One Universal Being, of Brahman, God, the Divine, or whatever your chosen name for this cosmic intelligence may be.

About the Author

Ramesh Bjonnes was born in Norway and lived for nearly three years in India and Nepal learning directly from the masters of tantric yoga. Before he became a yogi, he studied agronomy and co-founded an organic farm with other yogis in Finland. Bjonnes co-founded and is currently Marketing Director of the Prama Institute (www.pramainstitute.org), a holistic retreat center outside Asheville, NC. He has written extensively on tantra, yoga, culture and sustainability, and his articles have appeared in books and numerous magazines and newspapers in Europe and the US. He is currently contributing editor of *New Renaissance* and a columnist for *Fredrikstad Blad*, a Norwegian newspaper. He lives in an eco-village in the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina.