

Question 40:

According to Buddhist philosophy, is there a difference between the Mind and the Brain? Is the mind located in the heart or in the brain? Sometimes you can use your 'brain' to 'think' and sometimes thoughts will automatically come to your 'mind', hence this is very much difficult to understand the difference between the brain and the mind.

Answer: The brain is the physical vessel of the mind. We know that persons who suffer injury and disease of the brain can experience serious effects on the mind, so the mind is intimately connected with the brain. Certain mental impairments are correlated with shrunken areas or other differences in certain parts of the brain, and certain mental strengths are associated with development of certain parts of the brain. But the mind can separate from the body. In modern times, this is evidenced by those who have had out-of-body experiences and near-death experiences. The Buddha was able to visit other realms, such as heaven-worlds, with his mind, and to speak with devas and other subtle beings, while his body remained on the Earth.

Devas, brahmas and other celestial beings, which do not have a physical brain, are mentioned in the Suttas, and they communicate, reason and learn as they interact with the Buddha. So a physical brain is not necessary for reasoning, communication and learning.

So if the mind can be severely damaged by injury, disease or malformation of the brain, then is the damage permanent? Or is the mind “restored” upon death? Does the mind survive death? There is rebirth into a new body (either physical or subtle/ethereal) such as a human, deva, or preta (ghost), and the reborn being is not the same as the one that existed prior to rebirth. But there is transmission of some part of the mind, such as intellect, skills, habits, tendencies and some memory. The mind is essentially renewed or reborn, and thus does not carry on the damage from the previous brain. However, there could be a karmic effect on the brain that carries into the next life, if the results of the karma were not exhausted in the previous life.

The heart is often mentioned as the seat of emotions, as evidenced by the fact that we clutch our heart in times of emotion. The heart area is associated with emotional energy, but the brain also has areas that are associated with emotion. In addition, we also store negative emotional energy in various places in our bodies which then become agitated and sore – such as our solar plexus, shoulder muscles, neck and jaw muscles. The mind therefore is closely connected with our whole body, but it concentrates and operates primarily in and through the brain.