

The Meaning of Yoniso Manasikāra

by Bhikkhu Anīgha

See also related essay by Ajahn Nyanamoli Thero:

<https://www.hillsidehermitage.org/peripheral-awareness/>

It's common knowledge that the literal meaning of "yonī" in "yoniso manasikāra" is "womb; origin; source". However, the Buddha's clearly nonaccidental use of the term is rarely thought to be of deep significance or to convey crucial nuances. Moreover, it seems translators almost always choose to disregard the literal meaning of *yonī* altogether and instead trivialize *yoniso manasikāra* by rendering it as "appropriate/careful/proper/thorough/prudent attention". If the Buddha truly intended to denote something this mundane, he could easily have employed an expression like "*sādhuka-manasikāra*" or "*sakkacca-manasikāra*", instead of using such an unnecessarily obscure adverb like "yoniso". What's more, the expression "*sādhukarṃ yoniso manasikaroti*" occurs in several Suttas (e.g. SN 12.37), which itself suggests that *yoniso* means something other than just "appropriately, properly, etc." Such renderings also water down what is undeniably an utterly central factor of the practice, effectively saying that by not being scatterbrained and by hearing the Dhamma, one possesses what is necessary to become a stream-enterer and thus acquire the Noble Eightfold Path:

"Bhikkhus, there are these two conditions for the arising of the Right View. What two? The utterance of another and 'yoniso manasikāra'. These are the two conditions for the arising of the Right View."

—AN 2.126

This is a tragic oversimplification. "Appropriate attention" does not tell us anything because, by definition, every unenlightened practitioner takes their attention to be already "appropriate" when in fact it's not so¹, and by not questioning that way of attending, they would not make the effort to understand what *yoniso manasikāra* is, which is by itself the first stage of enlightenment: knowledge-and-vision of the way leading to the cessation of suffering.

*"Bhikkhus, I say that the destruction of the taints is for one who **knows and sees**, not for one who does not know and see. Who knows and sees what? **Yoniso manasikāra and ayoniso manasikāra.***

—MN 2

"Bhikkhus, I do not see even a single thing that so causes unarisen unwholesome qualities to arise and arisen wholesome qualities to decline as ayoniso manasikāra. For one with

1 .*"Here, bhikkhus, an untaught ordinary person, who does not see the Noble Ones and is unskilled and undisciplined in their Dhamma, who does not see superior people and is unskilled and undisciplined in their Dhamma, perceives the cognized as the cognized. Having perceived the cognized as the cognized, he conceives the cognized, he conceives in the cognized, he conceives apart from the cognized, he conceives the cognized to be 'mine,' he delights in the cognized. Why is that? Because he has not fully understood it, I say.—MN 1*

ayoniso manasikāra, unarisen unwholesome qualities arise and arisen wholesome qualities decline."

"Bhikkhus, I do not see even a single thing that so causes unarisen wholesome states to arise and arisen unwholesome states to decline as yoniso manasikāra. For one with yoniso manasikāra, unarisen wholesome states arise and arisen unwholesome states decline."
—AN 1.66-67

"Bhikkhus, I do not see even a single thing that leads to such great good as yoniso manasikāra. Yoniso manasikāra leads to great good."
—AN 1.90

Fortunately, however, it is possible to come closer to what the Buddha meant with the term in a way that is consistent with its etymology and all its occurrences in the texts, and most importantly, tells us how and why it is the *one thing* responsible for the arising of those states conducive to freedom from suffering, and how we can practically go about developing it.

The first and most relevant distinction to make is that, based on the Pāli alone, *yoniso* means "*in terms of* the origin/womb" or "*by way of* the origin/womb". It could even be taken as "*from* the origin/womb". There is therefore not even a grammatical justification for taking *yoniso manasikāra* to mean attention *to* something, and there are very good reasons for this on the grounds of Dhamma as well. It's not only a matter of scholastic accuracy. If we investigate the general trend of what is presented as *yoniso manasikāra* in contemporary Buddhist discourse, it is evidently telling us to attend *to* something. To simply choose one *object* instead of another, with even the most nuanced mental reflections being objects just the same, pertaining to the sixth sense base. As it will be shown, this only serves to temporarily suppress the symptoms of the disease of being *liable* to suffering, and ultimately fails to tackle the root cause.

(From here onwards, text is colorized when it helps to illustrate the principle of yoniso manasikāra, with red denoting the domain of direct attention, and blue that which is more fundamental than it, the yoni]

The discernment that truly *uproots* the ownership of our whole experience² is that of the *paṭiccasamuppāda* principle: "with this, this is; without this, this is not"³. One has to see the present experience in its fullness, anything that *is* or *could* be attended to, leaving nothing out, as one thing, as "**this**". That "**this**" will inevitably be the place where one's sense of self and ownership is established, and includes **all** of one's present feelings, perceptions, thoughts, and intentions to do this or that. "**This**" is the five aggregates in their entirety —"past, present or future, internal or external, coarse or fine, lowly or sublime, far or near".⁴

² Which is to say, of the things our attention (*manasikāra*) can be directed towards taken as a whole. "All things exist due to attention". —AN 8.83

³ "But, venerable sir, in what way can a bhikkhu be called skilled in *paṭiccasamuppāda*?"

"Here, Ānanda, a bhikkhu knows thus: 'With **this**, **this** is; when **this** is manifested, **this** is manifested. Without **this**, **this** is not; when **this** ceases, **this** ceases.' —MN 115

⁴ "Therefore, bhikkhus, **any** kind of [matter, feeling, perception, intentions, consciousness] whatsoever, whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near, all form should be seen as it really is with correct wisdom thus: 'This is not mine, this I am

The goal is then to see that whole "**this**", which is, again, one's entire world, not just one thing, as *within*, as being fully dependent on, secondary to, simultaneously **originated from** (*paṭīccasamuppāna*) another "**this**". This will automatically prevent you from assuming **yourself** as the origin, the owner, the master of this experience—of this **attention/manasikāra**. It will truly prevent assuming as yours *anything* that you can attend to, as opposed to fruitlessly denying that *this or that* is yours... using the same **attention** that you still take as yours. This is because the assumption of “mine” is not a matter of choice, it's a matter of simply not being presently aware of something more fundamental than your own attention, which causes the "I" to become that fundamental thing automatically. Awareness of this **more fundamental phenomenon** is the *yoniso* aspect in **yoniso manasikāra**.

Bhikkhus, do you see: 'This is'? —“Yes, venerable sir.”—“*Bhikkhus, do you see: 'It exists with this nutriment'?*”—“Yes, venerable sir.”—“*Bhikkhus, do you see: 'With the cessation of this nutriment, that which is subject to cessation'?*”—“Yes, venerable sir.”
—MN 38

Failing to correctly see that "**nutriment**" as that which is more structurally fundamental than "**this**" (the experience as a whole) is *ayoniso manasikāra*, and it is what maintains the deepest unwholesome, the fetter of self-view/*sakkāyadiṭṭhi* (cf. AN 1.66 above), *regardless* of how much one tries to tell oneself that things are "not mine". In other words, *a-yoniso manasikāra* is not some specific mistake you are doing or thinking—it is the **absence** altogether of the awareness of that *yonī on the right level*. This is also why in MN 2 it is said that the *puṭhujjana* lacks even the correct understanding of what *yoniso manasikāra* is—*ayoniso manasikāra* is the very reason for his self-view. Self-view cannot possibly remain once *yoniso manasikāra* (i.e. *paṭīccasamuppāda*) is correctly understood.

Paṭīccasamuppāda is in fact said by the Buddha to be the “noble method”⁵ (namely, for the uprooting of craving and appropriation). It's not, contrary to popular belief, an esoteric insight that comes out of a “meditation experience”. It *is* what meditation (i.e. *yoniso manasikāra*) is. This is why correct meditation is not possible unless a person has the Right View and is accomplished in seeing *paṭīccasamuppāda/yoniso manasikāra*.⁶ Before that, the effort is to *learn* what *yoniso manasikāra* is, and keep taking one's present understanding of it with a pinch of salt.

It is also the discernment of *yoniso manasikāra* that caused Ven. Sāriputta to enter the stream upon grasping the meaning of the well-known verse:

not, this is not my self.’ —SN 22.59

⁵ “And what is the noble method that he has clearly seen and thoroughly penetrated with wisdom? Here, householder, the noble disciple attends properly in terms of the *yonī* [*sādhukāṃ yoniso manasi karoti*] to dependent origination itself thus: ‘With this, this is; when this is manifested, this is manifested. Without this, this is not; when this ceases, this ceases. —SN 12.41

⁶ “*Bhikkhus, this is the forerunner and precursor of the rising of the sun, that is, the dawn. So too, bhikkhus, for a bhikkhu this is the forerunner and precursor for the arising of the Noble Eightfold Path, that is, accomplishment in yoniso manasikāra. When a bhikkhu is accomplished in yoniso manasikāra, it is to be expected that he will develop and cultivate this Noble Eightfold Path.* —SN 45.55

Whatever **things are dependently arisen**—
That which they depend on has been told by the Tathāgata
As well as the cessation of those things,
Such speaks the great ascetic.
—Mahāvagga 1.23

Yoniso manasikāra is not about **what** your attention is directed at, it's about discerning the **container** (yoni, the "womb") that your **attention** depends on, as the verse says. Only then can one abandon the ownership of attention itself. Nothing less than this can contribute to the cessation of suffering, nor reveal the path towards it. Merely replacing the **things** one attends to with other **things**, the "good" **things**, will not bring the unwholesome to decline and the wholesome to increase. Whatever is wholesome, being non-greed, non-aversion and non-delusion, always comes from correctly discerning the **simultaneous basis** for **whatever your attention is directed** at, so that you can surmount the *possibility* of lust and aversion, instead of just abandoning particular *things* that entice you or bother you, which would evidently be an interminable endeavor.⁷

For instance, the practices of *asubha* and *mettā* are often misinterpreted as "replacements" for the attention towards beautiful and disagreeable people respectively. But this teaches us nothing whatsoever about our appropriation of *attention itself*, which is where the true lust, aversion and delusion find their footing. The appropriation of attention induced by lack of *yoniso manasikāra* **is** what lust, aversion and delusion are, based on whether the attention is directed at pleasure, pain, or neutral feeling respectively. And this is, ironically, what this manner of practice increases further: the tendency to be fully identified with one's attention (*ayoniso manasikāra*), just now involving a different object—often mistakenly taking that to be the fulfillment of the Dhamma to boot, simply because it offers a seemingly special sort of peace—a sort which is clearly temporary, just like managing the symptoms and not the cause of an illness.⁸

Now, the question arises: what exactly is that **broader phenomenon** that one must discern *in regard* to one's **attention**, so that **attention itself** will be seen as "not mine" even if I *wanted* it to be mine, rather than just *telling* myself that it's "not mine"... with **another attention** that I still take as mine? This is where the **four satipaṭṭhānas** come in, or really any correct way of regarding our **experience** found in the Suttas.

The four satipaṭṭhānas are four general aspects that can be interchangeably discerned as the "womb" (yoni) or "container" of this experience as a whole, so that I can no longer assume that experience as within **me**. The most practical example would be in terms of the body.

⁷ Which is indeed how the practice is almost always done, due to not knowing how to go *beyond* the domain of unwholesome, but instead playing the game of "whack-a-mole" with specific things within it.

⁸ This is the critical difference between "Management" of the unwholesome and "Uprooting" of the unwholesome—knowledge-and-vision of which would *have to* give rise to the Right View, since it is nothing other than the Middle Way or 4th Noble Truth, which boils down to *yoniso manasikāra*. (cf. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zndwMKAszWM>)

If I just try to discern it, it is evident that anything I have attended to, am attending to, or will be attending to, has this body, this lump of flesh as its fundamental container. Even me now attending to the idea of “this body is the container” has this body as its container. Any pleasure or pain that I might experience, and try get more of, get less off, accept, deny, deal with, is enclosed by the “womb” which is this body.⁹ And, quite importantly, whatever *views* I may have about anything at all whatsoever, even the “correct” views I could have acquired face-to-face with the Buddha himself—I can *attend* to them only because this body is still there. This body is the simultaneous “**nutriment**” for my **entire world**, and without that nutriment, that world cannot remain.

*“Bhikkhus, while a bhikkhu dwells thus, recollected and clearly comprehending, diligent, ardent, and resolute, if there arises in him a **pleasant feeling**, he understands thus: ‘There has arisen in me a pleasant feeling. Now that is dependent, not independent. Dependent on what? Dependent on **this very body**. But this body is impermanent, conditioned, dependently arisen. So, when the pleasant feeling has arisen in dependence on a body that is impermanent, conditioned, dependently arisen, how could it be permanent?’ He dwells contemplating impermanence in the body and in pleasant feeling, he dwells contemplating vanishing, contemplating fading away, contemplating cessation, contemplating relinquishment. As he dwells thus, the underlying tendency to lust in regard to the body and in regard to pleasant feeling is abandoned by him.”*

[repeated verbatim for painful and neutral feeling, resulting in abandonment of aversion and delusion respectively]

—SN 36.7

But one can also alternatively take the *most general* present feeling as the “womb” of one’s attention, whether it’s overall “pleasant”, “unpleasant” or “neither”. One’s whole world of the five aggregates—matter, more specific feelings, perceptions, intentions or consciousness—is enclosed within the “womb” of a general pleasantness being felt right now, for instance. Even if one chooses to think about the past, e.g., if yesterday there was pain or neither pleasure nor pain, those thoughts can only be had on the basis of *this feeling* that is here now. All of one’s actions in the present will also be by necessity subordinate to that feeling. This means also that whatever **intentions infused with craving** to get “more” of this feeling which one might engage with now will be *secondary* to the fact that this **broader feeling** is there *first*.¹⁰ One can certainly go and *try* to get pleasure out of particular objects, but that pleasure will always remain secondary to the more general feeling one is presently enclosed in, through which all other “lesser” feelings are felt.

This is why, as everyone has no doubt experienced first-hand, when there is a very unpleasant feeling as the “womb”, no amount of agreeable things one seeks out—nice food, company, distractions—can truly usurp the throne of that broader pain. Conversely, when a very pleasant feeling just so happens to be there as the container of everything else, even meeting with upsetting circumstances does not shake the primacy of that overall

⁹ “However, friend, I say that without having reached the end of the world there is no making an end to suffering. It is, friend, within just this fathom-high carcass endowed with perception and mind that I make known the world, the origin of the world, the cessation of the world, and the way leading to the cessation of the world. —SN 2.26

¹⁰ *vedanāpaccayā tañhā*: with feeling, there is craving.

pleasantness. This means that whenever you suddenly find yourself within a different **overarching feeling**, it's not because *you* brought about change through your **actions**. The fact that your attempts sometimes succeed and sometimes don't means that ultimately you are like a subordinate submitting proposals, and the feeling is the boss having the final say. In truth, it changes on its own, and you cannot even know "when" exactly that background feeling became different: trying to figure out "when" will be a thought that is already totally enclosed within the "new" general feeling you are now within. You can only pinpoint the changes of specific feelings, which corresponds to changes in **attention**, not of that **greater feeling** which precedes the movements of attention.

'Now, Ananda, one who says: "Feeling is my self" should be told: "There are three kinds of feeling, friend: pleasant, painful, and neutral. Which of the three do you consider to be your self?" When a pleasant feeling is felt, no painful or neutral feeling is felt, but only pleasant feeling. When a painful feeling is felt, no pleasant or neutral feeling is felt, but only painful feeling. And when a neutral feeling is felt, no pleasant or painful feeling is felt, but only neutral feeling. [This refers to that "general feeling"]

'Pleasant feeling is impermanent, conditioned, dependently-arisen, bound to decay, to vanish, to fade away, to cease — and so too are painful feeling and neutral feeling. So anyone who, on experiencing a pleasant feeling, thinks: "This is my self", must, at the cessation of that pleasant feeling, think: "My self has gone!" and the same with painful and neutral feelings. Thus whoever thinks: "Feeling is my self" is regarding as self something that is here-&-now impermanent, mixed up with pleasure and pain, and is subject to arising and passing away. Therefore it is not fitting to maintain: "Feeling is my self."

'But anyone who says: "Feeling is not my self, my self is impercipient" should be asked: "If, friend, no feelings at all were to be experienced, would there be the thought: 'I am'?" [to which he would have to reply:] "No, Lord." Therefore it is not fitting to maintain: "Feeling is not my self, my self is impercipient."

'And anyone who says: "Feeling is not my self, but my self is not impercipient, my self is of a nature to feel" should be asked: "Well, friend, if all feelings absolutely and totally ceased, could there be the thought: 'I am this?' " [to which he would have to reply:] "No, Lord." Therefore it is not fitting to maintain: "Feeling is not my self, but my self is not impercipient, my self is of a nature to feel."

'When, Ananda, a monk no longer regards feeling as self, or self as being impercipient, or as being percipient and of a nature to feel, by not so regarding, he clings to nothing in the world; not clinging, he is unperturbed; being unperturbed, he is personally extinguished, and he knows: "Birth is finished, the holy life has been led, done was what had to be done, there is no more partaking of this."

—DN 15

The same principle extends to the other 2 satipaṭṭhānas. It is particularly relevant to note in reference to the contemplation of the mind that the Buddha instructs us to *know* a lustful, averse, or deluded mind for what it is. That alone would result in "abiding independent, not clinging to anything in the world", as the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta says. This is because, by knowing that state of mind as the *yoni* of one's present attention one will, if doing it correctly, become incapable of *taking up* that lustful mind and acting out of it. Therefore, the former lust ceases to be lust, and it simply becomes a mental state that is clearly known as unownable and arisen on its own, without needing to act on account of it on any level. In fact, that mental state was "lustful" and caused suffering solely *because* one was unwilling to see it as the present "womb", and instead wanted to break out of it in one way or another.

Seeing it correctly would allow one to endure it just like heat, cold, and the harsh words of others, and it would cease to be a problem altogether and to require any kind of "response".

Yoniso manasikāra, seeing oneself as enclosed within that present mental state (which could last for days), would also allow one to recognize that acting out of lust is falling for a deceitful trap—pain that invites you to regard it as pleasure and seek more of it.¹¹ Whatever pleasure could be sought after will be limited to the **domain of attention**, which is now seen to be *enclosed* in the pain of that **oppressive mental state**, and one sees that seeking **pleasure** to gratify that **mental state** would be like applying medicine **on the skin** to cure **a digestive issue**. The result of this is dispassion towards both the mental state and whatever experiences are secondary to it—and these two together comprise one's entire world at any given time, which is now truly "not clung to". Note how *none* of this would have been seen if one had automatically jumped onto other *objects of attention* in the name of "practice" to wriggle out of the unpleasant pressure as quickly as possible, thereby dismissing the very basis where insight into the drawback of lust would take root.

If attention to specific things were what liberates the mind, the Buddha could have used terms like "kusala-manasikāra" (wholesome/beneficial attention) or similar, or even "yonimanasikāra" (attention *to* the womb), which would make it clear that the *object* of attention is what makes the difference. But this is not the case. Attention alone will always be *ayoniso* for an unenlightened mind, and thus it will bring unwholesome states (i.e., the ownership of attention) to increase or at least be maintained—even if the attention is directed towards the "good", like the four satipaṭṭhānas. If they are attended to as objects to replace all others, and not discerned as the "*womb*" of the experience, as the context behind any and all objects whatsoever, they do not address the root cause of suffering, and they do not constitute establishments of *sati* to begin with. So, while one may temporarily suppress states of lust and aversion, and get some temporary peace out of that, one has not truly addressed ignorance/delusion, and potentially made it even harder to overcome later by forming attachment to such quick-fix practices.

The true wholesome is always about *concurrently* knowing the *yonī* while *manasikāra* is taking place. This is the only way out. Attention by itself is still within *the All* (it's an aspect of *nāma*¹²), and thus it cannot provide the escape from **the All**—the escape from **viññāna-nāmarūpa**.¹³

A few additional points that emerge from all the above:

11 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y5_57craC

12 "And what, bhikkhus, is name-and-matter? Feeling, perception, volition, contact, **attention**: this is called name. The four great elements and the matter derived from the four great elements: this is called matter. Thus this name and this matter are together called name-and-matter. —SN 12.2

13 "To this extent, Ānanda, is one born, ages, dies, falls, or arises. To this extent is there the sphere of designation, of expression, of description, of discernment. To this extent the round goes on so that this existence can be discerned, that is to say, name-and-matter going on together with consciousness, both supporting each other." —DN 15

1. There are several practically useful implications of the imagery of "womb" or "container" to describe the nature of what needs to be discerned for the right practice:

- A fetus is completely and utterly dependent upon his mother's womb. It would be plainly ludicrous for it to entertain the notion of being the ultimate master of his body, when every little cell that he calls "me" or "mine" has been provided and is at this very moment kept alive only thanks to his mother's womb, and he didn't even get to decide the arrangement of it all. To boot, he can't even procure his own food; it's provided to him by the womb as well.

We have all come out of the womb already, but the situation is ultimately the same. Our body, the basis of even our most abstract ponderings, is still inseparable from the food we eat, and we don't even have a say on how and *whether* it is nourished by that food. It could stop being so any time. Furthermore, all our internal life, feelings, memories, desires, hates, habits, are there only because the "womb" of the body—which itself has physical food as its sustenance and is therefore impermanent per se—is there enabling it. Without that body, even that inner life, this "being" that we are, however special it may feel, would not be.¹⁴

- Another aspect of the fetus in the womb metaphor is that no matter how close the fetus may stare at and examine any given particulars of the womb it's within, this alone would never allow it to *discern* the situation of "I am enclosed within this". That takes a subtler form of knowing, *peripherally* to what it's directly experiencing—peripheral to his *attention*. What it would see, observe, and feel (hypothetically assuming it would open its eyes and be able to see) is colors, shapes and bodily sensations, none of which reveals the true *significance* of that which his attention is directed at and thus allows him to discern the womb as his container.

This is why meditation techniques involving **observation, focused attention and concentration** upon *things*, be they physical or mental imagery or concepts of any kind, are the epitome of *ayoniso manasikāra*, while claiming to be the opposite. They entail doubling down even more in the direction of the *attention*, the very grasping to which keeps beings bound to *saṃsāra*. Just like if the fetus would use a magnifying glass in hopes of it revealing to the truth of his enclosure, and thus lose even the chance of recognizing the wider context, these practices distract one even more from discerning the *yoni* of attention so one can finally abandon the mistaken notions of ownership of the latter.

It's also why **intellectualizing and psychologizing** the Dhamma as a means of practice is wrong, because it equally involves putting all the weight on the *attention* (in this case to thoughts and ideas) and thus overlooking the **foundation** of it all, just like when observing bodily sensations as a practice. It doesn't matter *what* those thoughts are, even if they are the loftiest Dhamma, verbatim from the Buddha's mouth—the actual Dhamma is always about the discernment of the broader context

14 'There is one thing that was perfectly proclaimed by the Lord who knows and sees, the fully-enlightened Buddha... 'What is this one thing? All **beings** stand upon **nutriment** (*āhāraṭṭhitikā*);' all **beings** stand upon **foundations** (*sankhāraṭṭhitikā*) —DN 33

behind your thinking, the womb which your attention ("you") sits in. The root of suffering and agitation is therefore never the *thinking*, it's the fact that it's being done *ayoniso*.

"Meditate like a thoroughbred, Sandha, not like a wild colt. And how does a wild colt meditate? When a wild colt is tied up near the feeding trough he meditates: '**Fodder, fodder!**' For what reason? Because when a wild colt is tied up by the feeding trough, he does not ask himself: '**Now what task will my trainer set for me today? What can I do to satisfy him?**' Tied up by the feeding trough, he just meditates: 'Fodder, fodder!' So too, Sandha, a person who is like a wild colt, when gone to the forest, to the foot of a tree, or to an empty hut, dwells with a mind obsessed and oppressed by sensual lust¹⁵, and he does not understand as it really is the **escape** from arisen sensual lust. Harboring sensual lust within, he **meditates, cogitates, ponders, and ruminates**. He dwells with a mind obsessed and oppressed by ill will ... by dullness and drowsiness ... by restlessness and remorse ... by doubt, and he does not understand as it really is the escape from arisen doubt. Harboring doubt within, he meditates, cogitates, ponders, and ruminates.

"He meditates (1) in dependence on earth, (2) in dependence on water, (3) in dependence on fire, (4) in dependence on air, (5) in dependence on the base of the infinity of space, (6) in dependence on the base of the infinity of consciousness, (7) in dependence on the base of nothingness, (8) in dependence on the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception, (9) in dependence on this world, (10) in dependence on the other world, (11) **in dependence on what is seen, heard, sensed, cognized, reached, sought after, and examined by the mind**. Such is the meditation of a person who is like a wild colt.

—AN 11.9

- The relationship between the fetus and the womb is a simultaneous one; it does not involve time. Similarly, the relationship that must be discerned between attention as a whole and its yoni is timeless. It is simply *paṭiccasamuppāda*, which literally means "dependent-manifestation-**together**", not "one first and the other 'comes to be' later", as it's often translated and interpreted.
- Lastly, just as coming out of the womb is the usual meaning of "birth", failing to see your attention ("yourself") as enclosed by the metaphorical *yoni*, e.g. the body, is what "being" (*bhava*) is. This is the only way that one can truly conceive an "I" who is the master of the five aggregates—a true "master" cannot be enclosed within something else which he cannot control. And if there is that *being*, that "I" born of *ayoniso manasikāra*, there is birth¹⁶: the entire past, present and future of that experience, the five aggregates, now belong to that "I" that has been conceived outside of the "womb" through *ayoniso manasikāra*. Thus, the inevitable deterioration

15 With being, there is birth. *Bhavapaccayā jāti*.

16 "When there is birth, there is aging-and-death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and despair. Such is the origin of this whole mass of suffering." —SN 12.1

and destruction of those aggregates is now the manifold types of suffering and the death that this born "I" will undergo.¹⁷

Consequently, if *yoniso manasikāra* is fully developed, it will become *impossible* to conceive of an "I" outside of its "womb", hence there will be no birth here-&-now. This fully unshakable *yoniso manasikāra* is precisely the destruction of ignorance, and it's also the reason why an Arahant knows with total certainty that "birth is destroyed".¹⁸

2. The practice of sense restraint should also be understood as not losing the perspective of the "womb" while sense objects present themselves. As its common description goes, sense restraint prevents unwholesome states from arising, which means it *has to be* about *yoniso manasikāra* by definition.¹⁹ So, on one level, sense restraint is a preliminary practice in the sense of simply not engaging with certain things that are *always* unwholesome, i.e. things outside the boundaries of the precepts.. But if one refines sense restraint up to the level of never overlooking the "womb" of one's attention regardless of what it's directed at, as opposed to just an avoidance of specific things, it's the entire practice, culminating in full non-ownership of the senses.

*"And how, bhikkhus, is there restraint? Here, **having seen a form with the eye**, a bhikkhu is not intent upon a pleasing form and not repelled by a displeasing form. He dwells having set up **recollection of the body**, with a measureless mind, and he understands as it really is that liberation of mind, liberation by wisdom, wherein those evil unwholesome states cease without remainder. Having heard a sound with the ear ... Having cognized a mental phenomenon with the mind... he understands as it really is that liberation of mind... It is in such a way that there is restraint.*

"Suppose, bhikkhus, a man would catch six animals—with different domains and different feeding grounds—and tie them by a strong rope. He would catch a snake, a crocodile, a bird, a dog, a jackal, and a monkey, and tie each by a strong rope. Having done so, he would bind them to a strong post or pillar. Then those six animals with different domains and different feeding grounds would each pull in the direction of its own feeding ground and domain. The snake would pull one way, thinking, 'Let me enter an anthill.' The crocodile would pull another way, thinking, 'Let me enter the water.' The bird would pull another way, thinking, 'Let me fly up into the sky.' The dog would pull another way, thinking, 'Let me enter a village.' The jackal would pull another way, thinking, 'Let me enter a charnel ground.' The monkey would pull another way, thinking, 'Let me enter a forest.'

17 *"But with the remainderless fading away and cessation of ignorance comes cessation of activations (saṅkhāranirodho); with the cessation of activations, cessation of consciousness; ... with the cessation of being, cessation of birth; with the cessation of birth, aging-and-death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and despair cease. Such is the cessation of this whole mass of suffering." —ibid.*

18 *"The catch is in persistent effort of repetition of learning how to attend to things peripherally, without having to "directly" look at them. **For a mind affected with avijja, the "direct look", the "ayoniso manasikara" always involves appropriation and the Self-view.**" (<https://www.hillsidehermitage.org/peripheral-awareness/>).*

cf. quote from MN 1 in footnote #1 above.

19 The measure of which is nothing less than *intentional* delight and aversion towards things in one's experience.

“Now when these six animals become worn out and fatigued, they would stand close to that post or pillar, they would sit down there, they would lie down there. So too, bhikkhus, when a bhikkhu has developed and cultivated recollection directed to the body, the eye does not pull in the direction of agreeable forms nor are disagreeable forms repulsive; the ear does not pull in the direction of agreeable sounds nor are disagreeable sounds repulsive; the nose does not pull in the direction of agreeable odours nor are disagreeable odours repulsive; the tongue does not pull in the direction of agreeable tastes nor are disagreeable tastes repulsive; the body does not pull in the direction of agreeable tactile objects nor are disagreeable tactile objects repulsive; the mind does not pull in the direction of agreeable mental phenomena nor are disagreeable mental phenomena repulsive.

—SN 35.247

Note how the man in the simile does **not** try to forcefully *stop* the animals from pulling towards their respective domains (as the practice of restraint is often carried out), **nor** does he cut them any slack and encourage them to keep pulling on the rope.²⁰ He has simply established the **recollection of the body** as the anchor for the **six animals** until they tire out and settle down *by themselves*. This connects to the following point:

3. The Dhamma is timeless and visible here-&-now precisely because it's solely about discerning that *yonī* that is already there and always has been. "Management", the opposite of the Dhamma, is whatever you do by controlling the attention itself, and that takes *time*, and its result is only visible later, if at all. Because of this, it always involves anticipation and expectation of a future result, i.e. craving. It's also why the correct practice cannot possibly give rise to frustration, *nor* complacency on the other extreme, because even if your *attention* is directed towards **frustration or complacency**, your sole task is to discern its simultaneously present **background**, so that you are unable to take the ownership of those mental states and act out of them. It is only through *ayoniso manasikāra* that those arisen mental states become unwholesome, and it is what enables you to succumb to them in any way:

*“And what, bhikkhus, is the nutriment for the arising of unarisen ill will and for the increase and expansion of arisen ill will? There is, bhikkhus, the basis of resistance/repulsion/opposition (paṭigha). **Cultivating ayoniso manasikāra** towards it is the nutriment for the arising of unarisen ill will and for the increase and expansion of arisen ill will.”*

—SN 46.2

20 “The eye, bhikkhus, is the ocean for a person; its tide consists of forms. One who **endures that tide consisting of forms** is said to have crossed the ocean of the eye with its waves, whirlpools, sharks, and demons. Crossed over, gone beyond, the brahmin stands on **high ground**. “The ear, bhikkhus, is the ocean for a person.... The mind is the ocean for a person; its tide consists of mental phenomena. One who **endures that tide consisting of mental phenomena** is said to have crossed the ocean of the mind with its waves, whirlpools, sharks, and demons. Crossed over, gone beyond, the brahmin stands on **high ground**.” —SN 35.228

See also: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qJMDsnQ79Cc>

Yoniso manasikāra is the way to abandon hindrances and unwholesome states. Therefore, as already explained, one must not expect a solution to those states to come from changing the *content* of manasikāra (e.g. directing the dog towards the forest instead of the village, in the above simile); The solution is knowing the womb of manasikāra *while* it's taking place, while the dog pulls on the rope. This is what leads to the mind becoming "quite secluded from unwholesome states" in the first jhāna, while the senses are still very much still operational. You don't run away from the enticing or irritating **things that pressure you** and towards "**thoughts of Dhamma**"—how will you *understand* the gratification, danger and escape from those pressures by burying your head in the **sand** when they arise? This is not even a true escape. Rather, it's precisely by not losing the **context** (the "strong pillar") *while* the **pressure** is there that one gets to understand and become dispassionate *towards* the pressure correctly—one gets to abandon the appropriation and delight in the *senses* (the core of the issue), not only their objects. ²¹

Even when the Buddha spoke of "attending to a different sign (*nimitta*)",²² this should be understood as re-establishing the context or *yonī*—a context is what a "*nimitta*" is, it's not a mystical vision or some specific thought. This is exactly why the Buddha here employs the simile of a **subtler peg** to knock out a **coarser one**, not a new **coarse peg** to replace the old **coarse peg**.

This peripheral context, the "subtler peg", is a **thought of Dhamma** on the right level, not rooted in impulsive aversion towards the pressure of that which is attended to. In another simile, it's how you get to see "**the drink**" as deadly poison correctly, without anxiously denying its pleasantness, which is precisely what would abolish any chance of seeing what the true poison is and escaping it... apart from drinking it of course.

"Suppose, bhikkhus, there was a bronze cup of a beverage having a fine colour, aroma, and taste, but it was mixed with poison. Then a man would come along, oppressed and afflicted by the heat, tired, parched, and thirsty. They would tell him: 'Good man, this beverage in the bronze cup has a fine colour, aroma, and taste, but it is mixed with poison. Drink it if you wish. If you drink it, it will gratify you'²³ with its colour, aroma, and taste, but by drinking it you will meet death or deadly suffering. ' Then the man would think: 'I can quench my thirst with water, whey, porridge, or soup, but I should not drink that beverage, since to do so would lead to my harm and suffering for a long time.' Having reflected, he would not drink the beverage but would reject it, and thereby he would not meet death or deadly suffering.

*So too, bhikkhus, whatever ascetics and brahmins in the past ... in the future ... at present regard **that in the world with a pleasant and agreeable nature** as*

21 Such a person is "oppressed by hindrances" **because** the hindrances arise from the tendency to be absorbed and "dependent" on one's **attention**. The hindrances are not specific thoughts that come up every now and then that you get rid of just by attending to **something else**—they are simply caused by the absence of *yoniso manasikāra*, which manifests in 5 ways. cf. point #4 below.

22 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EwxRFPkurhl>

23 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_ttVxzlj0

*impermanent, as suffering, as not-self, as a disease, as fearful*²⁴: they are abandoning craving. In abandoning craving ... they are freed from suffering, I say.”
—SN 12.66

Namely, those who liberate themselves do not *deny* the pleasantness and agreeability of things (by means of management of their *attention*), but instead see the danger (by means of *yoniso manasikāra*) in *accepting* that agreeability, in *drinking* the beverage. They see the danger of *ayoniso manasikāra*. This may sound obvious, but the only reason a person does not already see the Four Noble Truths is because this is still not correctly understood, and on some level they still either overly accept or overly deny the poisonous beverage. It takes much more to see the Middle Way than just a theoretical agreement with the Suttas.

4. "Attending to that which is pleasant and agreeable" is in a way not a matter of choice. **Whatever** you choose to **attend to**, that's what you regard as beautiful and attractive at the time, *including your contemplation of Dhamma*, when it's taken as a **foreground** to *replace* what bothers you and not a **peripheral context** to be *unmoved* by what bothers you. Hence, one would automatically be meditating on the danger of lust or asubha in a lustful manner for instance, i.e. *ayoniso*, simply by doing it with the *direct attention* which is always in itself "pleasant and agreeable" (because it's always regarded as "mine").²⁵ This will still be rooted in craving against pain, just like acting out of desires is always rooted in craving against the pain they cause when unfulfilled. The way is to see the danger and lack of satisfaction as the surrounding "*womb*" of that pressure *while* it is present. This is the level where the true "contemplation of danger" occurs:

“Herein, what are the six kinds of equanimity based on the household life? On seeing a form with the eye, **equanimity** arises in a foolish infatuated ordinary person, in an untaught ordinary person who has not conquered the **boundary** [of the domain of attention], who has not conquered the result of actions, and who is blind to danger. Such **equanimity** as this **does not transcend the form**; that is why it is called equanimity based on the household life.

“On hearing a sound with the ear...On smelling an odor with the nose...On tasting a flavor with the tongue...On touching a tangible with the body...On cognizing a mind-object with the mind, **equanimity** arises in a foolish infatuated ordinary person, in an untaught ordinary person who has not conquered the **boundary** [of the domain of attention], who has not conquered the result of actions, and who is blind to danger. Such **equanimity** as this **does not transcend the mind-object**; that is why it is called equanimity based on the household life. These are the six kinds of equanimity based on the household life.

“Herein, what are the six kinds of equanimity based on renunciation? When, by **knowing** the impermanence, change, fading away, and cessation of **forms**, one sees as it actually is with proper wisdom that forms both formerly and now are all impermanent, suffering, and subject to

24 “Here, bhikkhus, when a bhikkhu is giving attention to some sign, and owing to that sign there arise in him evil unwholesome thoughts connected with desire, with hate, and with delusion, then he should give attention to some other sign connected with what is wholesome. —MN 20

25 Bhikkhus, if there were no gratification in [sense objects], beings would not become enamoured with them; but because there is gratification in sense objects, beings become enamoured with them. —SN 35.18

change, equanimity arises. **Such equanimity as this transcends the form**; that is why it is called equanimity based on renunciation.

“When, by knowing the impermanence, change, fading away, and cessation of sounds...of odours...of flavours...of tangibles... of mind-objects, one sees as it actually is with proper wisdom that mind-objects both formerly and now are all impermanent, suffering, and subject to change, equanimity arises. **Such equanimity as this transcends the mind-object**; that is why it is called equanimity based on renunciation. These are the six kinds of equanimity based on renunciation.”

—MN 137

Replacing **attractive mental images** with **repulsive ones**, as the practice of asubha is often done, is a perfect example of equanimity that does not transcend sense objects. It simply involves changing one appropriated object with another, and if one stops doing it, the lust will return unchanged.²⁶ Same goes for covering up **disagreeable experiences** with **thoughts of "loving-kindness"**. One must rather see *through* the **attractive/irritating** things by discerning the **simultaneous context** which is larger than them, which results in the correct asubha/mettā, the *inability* to be lustful/angry even when beautiful/angering things arise.

One who has **abandoned** greed,
is not greedy **amidst that which incites greed**
greed just slips off from him
like water drops from a lotus.

[...]

One who has **abandoned** aversion,
is not averse **amidst that which incites aversion**,
aversion just slips off from him,
like a palm nut from its stalk.

—Itivuttaka 3.39

5. The reason why samādhi is always compared with “immovability” is not because attention has become fixated on one thing and all mental movement has grinded to a halt. It's because, by sufficiently having discerned the *yoni* of your attention, you are incapable of overlooking it, incapable of *ayoniso*, and thus all attention will take place within a wholesome background (*yoniso*), even attention towards the things that used to induce unwholesome. This is because they did so due the *ayoniso* way of attending them, not in themselves. This is the reason why samādhi is essential to fully develop *yoniso manasikāra* and become an Arahant.

Furthermore, the term “*ekaggatā*”, being one of the factors of samādhi and usually interpreted due to Commentarial influences as “one-pointedness”, is actually closer in meaning to “having one peak, one foremost part”. It is obvious that, even in a mundane sense, in order to distinguish something as a “peak”, it must be surrounded by other features that are lower than it. In the same way, *yoniso manasikāra*, which *inevitably*

²⁶ These are examples of wholesome nimittas that need to be peripherally *discerned*, not directly *attended to*.

leads to samādhi when cultivated correctly, entails seeing that “womb” of whatever peripheral context one takes as a practice, as the “peak” in comparison to whatever is taking place in the domain of attention. The unshakable prominence of that “peak” in regard to **all else that arises** is what gives rise to “imperturbability”, not the *absence* of other things arising through concentrating on one thing alone.

6. It is essential not to fall into the attitude that more attempts at *yoniso manasikāra* automatically constitute higher quality of effort. The whole point is that we *are* within that “womb” whether we see it or not, and have been so always. So by anxiously trying to see it all the time, the value gets placed on the content of *attention* again. That which needs to be known as the **basis** for all objects of attention gets turned into another **object of attention**.

So, one has to remind oneself and re-establish recollection only when the context has clearly been lost²⁷ not all the time neurotically. Then you also get to see that “losing the context” is a choice, because you *are* within that container, you *are* within the body even if you don’t think about it, so only ignorant *choices* by which the primacy of the “womb” is clearly disregarded and ownership is implied, can actually make you believe that you are the first, the master, and the womb is second. For example, it is impossible to seek pleasing experiences for the sake of sensual gratification or act out of indignation towards disagreeable experiences without tacitly assuming that you *are* the owner of the six senses and body. This is how you would automatically ignore, through your superficially unrelated actions, that this notion of “I” and “mine” is actually *within* that body and thus cannot truly possess it—and this is how *yoniso manasikāra* would be forsaken and *ayoniso* become established.

The foremost obstacle to *yoniso manasikāra* is nothing other than one's own lack of restraint and unwholesome choices:

Bhikkhus, without having abandoned six things, one is incapable of [practicing the four satipaṭṭhānas]. What six? Delight in work, delight in talk, delight in sleep, delight in company, not guarding the doors of the sense faculties, and being immoderate in eating. Without having abandoned these six things, one is incapable of practicing the four satipaṭṭhānas.

— AN 6.117

Thus, if you simply recollect the context and *know* that the yoni is there, and doesn't become overly engaged with whatever comes within that “womb”, including thoughts, you have *not* lost the recollection, even without actively thinking about it. Even if your mind is trying to hinder you and cause you doubt to revisit and rehash all your Dhamma knowledge, that's still not an excuse to put the doubt first and the *yonī* second. If the context is there, the discomfort of whatever perceptions and mental states come within

²⁷ “What taints, bhikkhus, should be abandoned by restraining? Here a bhikkhu, reflecting “in terms of the womb” (*yoniso*), abides with the eye faculty restrained. While taints, vexation, and fever might arise in one who abides with the eye faculty unrestrained, there are no taints, vexation, or fever in one who abides with the eye faculty restrained. —MN 2

that needs to be *endured*—not wanting to endure it would put you "outside of the womb". You would willingly delight in "birth" again, and further sustain ignorance.²⁸

You *shouldn't* have to be thinking about the *yoni* constantly because that would again be "yoni-manasikāra" and not "yoniso-manasikāra": attending **to** the womb instead of "from" or "in terms of" the womb. If you don't *choose* to ignore it, the *yoni* will stay there because it *can't* not be there. You can't *actually* be outside of it even if you want to, and this is essentially why there is suffering: our attitude contradicts the true state of affairs. The more you regard yourself (your attention) as *first* and the fundamental container of it as *second*, the more you will suffer. The Dhamma is the invariable nature of things, and ignorance is an *inversion* that stubbornly ignores that nature, while the nature itself remains unchanged:

“Bhikkhus, there are these four inversions of perception, inversions of mind, and inversions of view. What four? (1) The inversion of perception, mind, and view that takes the impermanent to be permanent; (2) the inversion of perception, mind, and view that takes what is suffering to be pleasurable; (3) the inversion of perception, mind, and view that takes what is non-self to be self; (4) the inversion of perception, mind, and view that takes what is unattractive to be attractive. These are the four inversions of perception, mind, and view.

—AN 4.49

These inversions are the corollaries of *ayoniso manasikāra*, and *yoniso manasikāra* is the only thing that can undo them.

28 This is the Middle Way. See SN 1.1.