

Profound Contemplation of the Dharma:

Yoniso Manasikāra

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When monastics are accomplished in profound contemplation,
it is to be expected that they will develop and cultivate
this Noble Eightfold Path.

Connected Discourses 45.50

The Buddha emphasized a form of generative thinking that he called *yoniso manasikāra*, which can be translated into English as “profound contemplation.” It is a type of Dharma reflection that brings wisdom and promotes maturation along the path of liberation. Such contemplation is not mere thinking; it is thinking “rooted” in inner intimacy, inspiration, calm, and capacity for observing our lived experience. It is a type of thinking free of compulsion, attachments, and anxiety, which arises out of the settledness and peace often associated with deep meditation practice.

One reason to translate *manasikāra* as “contemplation” is that the English word is derived from the Latin word *contemplari*, meaning “to observe.” In profound contemplation one thinks deeply, supported by observation of one’s own direct, personal experience. This combination can have a significant and wholesome influence, especially when reflecting on Dharma topics closely connected to our faith, purpose, and inner well-being.

Profound contemplation nourishes growth on the path of liberation. With the right conditions, our natural potential for liberation is “awakened” like the awakening of a sprouting seed. As this Dharma “sprout” grows deep roots, contemplating and observing from a deep source within can nourish the seed to grow into a great tree with abundant fruit. A significant landmark in Dharma practice is trusting our potential for liberation and knowing how to nurture its growth with wholesome thinking, reflection, and inquiry.

The Buddha frequently used metaphors from nature to illustrate growth on the path to liberation.¹ For example, the Buddha described a farmer who works hard to plant and water a crop but cannot simply command the plants to grow. Instead, "with the change of seasons, there comes a time when the crops grow, mature, and bear grain."² In the same way, a practitioner provides the conditions for maturing on the path of liberation but cannot command the mind to mature. That is, the role of a practitioner is to cultivate a natural process so that the path can grow and ripen on its own. Similarly, one can cultivate the inner conditions that support simple, natural thoughts and a contemplative interest in the inner ecology of suffering and its ending.

In another illustration of the naturalness of maturing in the Dharma, the Buddha describes how a hen's eggs will hatch when she sits on, incubates, and nurtures them. While the hen has a crucial role in providing supportive conditions for the embryos to grow in their shells, the hen is not willfully constructing the chicks. Provided the hen incubates the eggs, the chicks will naturally develop and break out of their shells even if—the Buddha says—the hen doesn't want her chicks to mature.³ Similarly, the Buddha states that anyone who practices well will ultimately "break out of the shell" and become enlightened.

Awakening is the maturation of a natural process "incubated" by Dharma practice and contemplation. It is not something one manufactures, crafts, or constructs. Rather, the Buddha explained that this occurs through tending the process of growth (*bhāvanā*).⁴

Like the hen's chicks who hatch without the hen's conscious intention for them to do so, the Buddha says that with the maturation of the Eightfold Path, a person will obtain "the fruit" of liberation even if they have no wish for it.⁵ The naturalness of this process is due to the fact that it is not the product of human desires or craftsmanship; rather, it naturally grows in the presence of supportive conditions. Elsewhere in the same sutta, a Buddhist monk named Bhūmija (literally, "Born of the Soil") claims that obtaining the fruit of practice is not dependent on having

¹ E.g., MN 10.46 (I 63)

² AN 3.51

³ MN 16.27 (i 104)

⁴ SN 22.101 (iii 154)

⁵ MN 126.14 (iii 142), Bodhi trans., p. 1000.

or not having an aspiration for it. On the contrary, he states that, regardless of one's aspiration, one "attains the fruit by living the holy life profoundly."⁶ "Profoundly" translates the symbolic meaning of *yoniso*, i.e., "of the womb," one of the most evocative metaphors for the source of human growth.

Yoni

Yoni, meaning "womb," has been an essential concept in India, including in surviving pre-Buddhist texts such as the *R̥g Veda*. In these texts, *yonī* can also mean "source, origin, spring, or fountain."⁷ The Pali-English Dictionary entry for *yonī* includes "a place of birth" and "matrix." Interestingly, "matrix," derived from the Latin word for "mother," means "an environment in which something develops."

In the suttas, *yoniso* functions as an adjective indicating possession. It is used to characterize effort (*padhāna*), reflection (*paṭisaṅkhā*), and entering the path of practice (*paṭipajjati*). The adjective suggests that these three come from a "profound" source within us.⁸ Its most significant and frequent use is in the expression *yoniso manasikāra* meaning "profound contemplation." In the *Abhidhamma*, this form of contemplation is the basis for "wisdom made by thinking."⁹

Literally *manasikāra* means "making in the mind" or "doing in the mind." In the teachings of the Buddha, it can refer to conceiving ideas about beauty¹⁰ or about purity and impurity.¹¹ All three of these are subjective experiences requiring subjective evaluation. They are conclusions constructed in the mind and then applied to whatever is considered beautiful, pure, or impure.

⁶ "Living the holy life profoundly" translates *yoniso brahmacariyaṃ caranti*; see MN 126.4 (iii 138-9), Bodhi trans., pp. 997-8.

⁷ Monier-Williams *Sanskrit English Dictionary*, p 858.

⁸ For these see DN III 214 (*padhāna*), MN I 9 (*paṭisaṅkhā*), and Tha 2.19 (*paṭipajjati*), respectively.

⁹ *yoniso manasikāra cintāmayī paññā*; see the *Nettipakaraṇa*, chapter 4, section 1 (PTS page 8).

¹⁰ *subha*; MN 5.6 (I 26). "Idea," here translates *nimitta*, often rendered as "sign," refers to a signifying characteristic of an object.

¹¹ AN 5.162 (III 187)

Yoniso Manasikāra

Yoniso manasikāra refers to a type of profound and generative thinking about the Dharma represented by the concept of “profound contemplation.”¹² The Buddha repeatedly emphasized the inner nature of *yoniso manasikāra* when he described it as an internal support for practitioners of the Dharma, comparable to the outer support of good friendship (*kalyāṇamittatā*).¹³ Its inner nature is also emphasized when the suttas describe *yoniso manasikāra* as nourishment for the seven factors of awakening.¹⁴ When one “abounds in profound contemplation, the Eightfold Path grows.”¹⁵ With “profound contemplation,” one attends to the liberation of the mind by loving-kindness.¹⁶ With such profound functions, perhaps it is no surprise that *yoniso manasikāra* is said to be the forerunner of awakening,¹⁷

Its strong connection to a practitioner's inner maturation gives *yoniso manasikāra* a critical role in Buddhist practice. That it is linguistically connected to the “womb” suggests that *yoniso manasikāra* is a deep somatic core or source within a practitioner that operates independently of clinging, selfishness, and delusive ways of thinking. It is a natural process from which wholesome states associated with the Buddhist path are born and grow.

Profound Contemplation and the Buddha’s Enlightenment

Just before his awakening, the Buddha asked himself “Where indeed will one discern an escape from suffering [and] aging-and-death?”¹⁸ He followed this with the more specific question, “Where, indeed, will one discern an escape from aging-and-death?” He then realized the answer, “With birth, aging-and-death occur; dependent on birth, there is aging-and-death.” The Buddha followed this with a series of similar questions that traced backwards another ten conditions, each requiring the preceding one, ending with ignorance. In this way the Buddha is

¹² See appendix for a discussion of other translation choices by well-known translators.

¹³ SN 46.48

¹⁴ SN 46.23

¹⁵ SN 45.55; *yonisomanasikārasampanno ariyaṃ aṭṭhaṅgikaṃ maggaṃ bhāveti* (SN V 31)

¹⁶ AN 1.17

¹⁷ SN 46.13

¹⁸ SN 12.10 and 12.65

said to have discovered that suffering depends on the presence of particular conditions and that suffering ends when these conditions are no longer present.¹⁹

When he realized the answers to his questions, the Buddha described this as “a breakthrough to wisdom,” and explained that it occurred “through *yoniso manasikāra*.” *Yoniso manasikāra* here refers to a cognitive process of asking profound questions. Elsewhere the Buddha explains that his breakthrough to awakening occurred in the fourth *jhāna*, a deep state of peaceful meditation. From this, it would seem that this profound contemplation was not a type of discursive thinking; rather, it was a peaceful and quiet form of generative thought that enables penetrative insight.

The way in which “profound contemplation” can lead to liberation is well depicted in the following sequence, where gladness is “born” from the “root” of *yoniso manasikāra*. What stands out is that the practitioner is not depicted as *doing* anything other than contemplation. From this “root,” the process evolves naturally:

Nine mental activities are rooted in profound contemplation. When there is profound contemplation, gladness is born; from gladness, joy is born; from joy, the body calms; when the body is calm, happiness is felt; when there is happiness, the mind becomes unified; with a unified mind, one knows and sees things as they are; knowing and seeing things as they are, one becomes disenchanted; a disenchanted one becomes dispassionate; and a dispassionate one is liberated.²⁰

This quote suggests that “profound contemplation” is an inner source or fountain from which flow the most beautiful qualities of Dharma practice. As the womb nurtures human life, *yoniso manasikāra* fosters a dharma life in an organic way. Profound contemplation nourishes the natural processes that ultimately lead to liberation. An important part of this process is contemplating or reflecting on something inspiring.²¹ Inspiration can awaken and nourish growth in the Dharma. Among the inspiring subjects that begin the process of gladness, joy,

¹⁹ The commentary to this account of the Buddha’s enlightenment explains *yoniso manasikāra* as “skillful *manasikāra*” and “*manasikāra* of the path.” (SA 2.21)

²⁰ DN 34.2.2 (1)

²¹ SN 47:10 (V 156: *pasādanīye nimitta*).

tranquility, happiness, and concentration are one's own virtue and absence of regret,²² one's own confirmed confidence in the Dharma,²³ knowing one's hindrances have been abandoned,²⁴ and appreciative joy.²⁵ All these involve some inspiration and contemplation of the value and wonderfulness of these subjects.

Conclusion

In sum, the Buddha's teachings often use references from nature to illustrate the path to liberation, portraying it as a natural process and not as the result of the human capacity to artificially manufacture or think about something that doesn't exist in a natural form. The role of a practitioner is to nurture and nourish this natural unfolding so that it can ripen and grow. One way to do this is through calm, relaxed contemplation free from the influence of the hindrances, of reactivity, and of self-preoccupation. In this way contemplating the Dharma nourishes growth on the Dharma path.

“Friend Upavāna, can monastics know for themselves: ‘By profound contemplation the seven factors of enlightenment have been fully perfected by me in such a way that they lead to dwelling in comfort?’”

“A monastic can know this for oneself, friend Sāriputta. When arousing the enlightenment factor of mindfulness, friend, a bhikkhu understands: ‘My mind is well liberated; I have uprooted sloth and torpor and thoroughly removed restlessness and remorse. My energy has been aroused. I attend as a matter of vital concern, not sluggishly.’... When arousing the enlightenment factor of equanimity, one understands: ‘My mind is well liberated; I have uprooted sloth and torpor and thoroughly removed restlessness and remorse. My energy has been aroused. I attend as a matter of vital concern, not sluggishly.’”

“It is in this way, friend, that monastics can know for themselves: ‘With profound contemplation, the seven factors of enlightenment have been fully perfected by me in such a way that they lead to dwelling in comfort.’”

²² AN 10:2 (V 2-3).

²³ *Aveccappasāda*; SN 55:38 (V 396).

²⁴ DN 2.75 (I 73).

²⁵ AN 3:95 (I 243).

Appendix

Standard English translations of *yoniso manasikāra* in the suttas include "wise attention," "proper attention," and "appropriate attention."²⁶ These neither convey the natural, somatic functioning implied by the symbolic reference to the womb nor the generative mental activity indicated by *manasikāra*. In his recent work, Bhikkhu Bodhi has rendered *yoniso manasikāra* as "careful attention," perhaps suggesting that this attention involves some care.²⁷ Using the vague word "attention" to translate *manasikāra*, however, does not give the English audience much understanding of what type of mental action the Pali word suggests. When translators do not provide a detailed definition, the word "attention" can be suggestive of such concepts as mindfulness (*satī*), clear comprehension (*sampajāna*), cognition/consciousness (*viññāṇa*), or conception/perception (*saññā*). Readers might assume that *manasikāra* is a broad umbrella term inclusive of some or all of these "attentional" abilities. However, none of these imply the creative meaning of *kāra*, i.e., "making" or "producing."

Maurice Walshe translates *yoniso manasikāra* as "profound consideration." In using "profound" for *yoniso*, he approaches the idea of a womb-like source.²⁸ Translating *manasikāra* as "consideration" suggests it is a form of careful and deliberate thinking. Walshe's choice also matches well the Buddha's description of the kind of thinking he used to realize the breakthrough insights that led him to his full awakening.

Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli, in his translation of *The Guide*, one of the seven books of the *Abhidhamma*, translates *yoniso manasikāra* as "reasoned attention" and describes it as "a technical term which means thinking in terms of the specific conditionality of existence."²⁹ His reference for this is the Buddha's description of his enlightenment described above. Ñāṇamoli describes *yoniso* as "the 'reason' from which an idea is 'born'."

²⁶ These three are translations by Bhikkhu Bodhi, Bhikkhu Sujato, and Thanissaro Bhikkhu, respectively, translating MN 43.13 (i. 294).

²⁷ See, for example, his translation of the *Anguttara Nikāya*, e.g., AN I 5

²⁸ In his translation of the *Long Discourses*, e.g., DN 34.2.2 (1) p. 519.

²⁹ *The Guide* (London: Pali Text Society, 1977) p. 17

One benefit of translating *yoniso* as "profound" is that two English meanings apply to *yoniso*: 1) characterizing a profound subjective feeling or experience, and 2) a deep insight or objective understanding of something. In the suttas, "profound contemplation" (*yoniso manasikāra*) can arise as something felt or known deeply within oneself, i.e., what might be described in English as "heartfelt" or "known to one's core." Secondly, "profound contemplation" sometimes refers to a practitioner's deep, thorough, or penetrative understanding of what is known. These two attentional processes are closely related—perhaps even inseparable—and contemplation and attention rooted in feelings from our depths enable penetrative insight.